

Social Work 8820  
Three Credits  
Action Research, Evaluation, and the Case Study Method in Social Work Inquiry

Scope and Aims of Course

While this course is an offering of the Concentration on Community Practice and Social Action, MSW students from the interpersonal concentration are welcome as well as those students who come from other graduate degree programs. Annually, I change the course to capture a new theme but dominant within the course are perspectives I derive from action research and evaluation. The methodology of case study is one of the central themes within this year's course since it offers students a flexible way of undertaking research in action settings. The case study helps students learn how to integrate practice and research and to link research to action learning within their practice or work settings. All of these ideas—case study, action research, evaluation, practice research and action learning—give the course considerable scope.

Ultimately, the purpose of the course is to strengthen the competencies of students to undertake research on their own practice and, as a result, improve their practice mindful that any form of social work is a complex undertaking. Practice is a form of action as we will conceive of it this semester and through our learning experience we need to build an appreciation of how to enact and create practice simultaneously aided by research that is fluid and flexible. It is this fluidity and flexibility that will help us tailor research (through the case study, in particular) to our own aims and designs. Related here is the idea that research and practice are expressions and/or products of culture, and so we will link the nature of inquiry to organizational culture, and bring the appreciation of culture into most of the action steps.

For the purposes of this course we will come to think of research as a way of understanding how social work is embedded in the world (particularly the world of culture relative to communities, organizations, and systems) and how it interacts with this world to create its distinctive properties. Research as a way of understanding yields inquiry, a concept I prefer to use. Understanding requires witnessing, interacting, experiencing, documenting, deciphering, analyzing, synthesizing, and interpreting. Understanding requires deconstructing and constructing. Understanding is an advanced cognitive operation, but we often take it for granted because we engage in it effortlessly. From the standpoint of inquiry, we want to engage an object that we derive from our practice, appreciate this object from some perspective, come to understand it as an expression of culture, and then come to engage it from the perspective of learning. Thus, the selection of an object for the purposes of inquiry is a fundamental aspect of this course. A principal aim of the course is to learn how to select this object and to learn how to better understand it so we can *engage it with purpose and with intention*. I place this phrase in italics since it is an operative idea of the course.

Within this course, we will seek to move from the “object” as phenomenon to a grounded understanding of the object. By grounded, I mean that the object sits within a context of forces and factors that influence and shape. Often the object derives meaning from its context. Understanding the manner in which the object is grounded in context is a critical aspect of inquiry. Given the idea of object as an aspect of practice by moving from phenomenon to grounded understanding we gain insight and wisdom.

Inquiry therefore opens us up in a manner few other activities possess the power of doing. This opening up process enables or otherwise fosters action. Thus, when we combine action and research we produce action research, which involves a powerful engagement with a phenomenon and through this engagement we come to better understand the object—the manner in which it is constructed, the manner in which it behaves, its dynamics, and its purpose and, most of all, how it is an expression or a product of culture. Action research requires us to engage, to cross boundaries, to get close to, and to experience directly. In this sense, the social worker is not only the researcher or investigator but also the instrumentality of the research. The social worker is the method and in some cases the social worker may be the very subject of his or her inquiry making inquiry reflexive. Reflexivity is an important outcome of inquiry.

So how does the case study come into play? Earlier I noted the fluidity and flexibility the case study introduces into inquiry. Cases are readily accessible to the social work investigator. We are familiar with cases and they play an important role within our practice. For example, the clinical or interpersonal social worker often speaks of his or her cases that together form a caseload. The group worker may identify a special kind of group as an important case while the community practitioner may do the same with a particular type of community situation. For the policy analyst or practitioner, the case may be a particular piece of legislation. Defining a case is a critical boundary setting act and then linking action research to the case is an important methodological strategy. Treating the object as the case creates considerable opportunity for exploring, describing, illuminating, explaining, and ultimately theorizing.

Action research through the case study opens up opportunities for the consideration of evaluation. Often times social workers cannot get away with merely appreciating an object, they often have to judge it, particularly when the object is something like a program of service, an organization, or some kind of social entity. Evaluation is *judgment in action* and as professional social workers we should be mindful of how and when to judge the object. Thus, evaluation purpose and method is central to what we will study this semester.

And, one final idea. We must be comfortable judging our own work and so I will introduce the idea of meta-evaluation into the course. Meta-evaluation involves the consideration of the quality of inquiry. The concept of meta-evaluation possesses considerable utility for us, particularly when our work involves inquiry, action research, and evaluation.

So there are six aims of the course:

1. For students to come to appreciate inquiry into their own practice as a source of cultural knowledge.
2. For students to understand the power and requirements of action research and action learning, particularly in how action research helps students to move from an object as phenomenon to an understanding of an object that is central to their practice.
3. For students to understand the basic parameters of case study research and how the careful selection of cases can serve as a way of situating inquiry within a particular object of interest.

4. For students to link evaluation to practice research using the methods of action research and case study research.
5. For students to understand how the change process emerges from understanding as a product of inquiry into social work practice.
6. For students to add evaluative action-oriented, case study research to their professional tool kit.

### A Note on Writing

Quality of writing is an important competence students refine during their graduate education. To facilitate the refinement of writing, this is a writing intensive course. In grading papers I will take into consideration:

1. The student's organization of their papers.
2. Writing quality.
3. Articulation of content and development of themes.
4. Continuity of thought.
5. Coherence of expression.

I offer page lengths for each assignment and students are required to fulfill these expectations. Margins of all pages are one inch with 12 CPI. Please ensure that your papers are presented mindful of the importance of professional communication.

### Textbooks

The textbooks are available at Marwil's Bookstore located at Cass and Warren. The following textbooks are required for the course:

1. Stringer, E. T. Action research. Sage.
2. Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation. The Program Evaluation Standards. Second Edition. Sage.
3. Stake, R. The art of case study research. Sage.
4. Yin, R. K. Case study research: Design and methods (3<sup>rd</sup> Edition). Sage.
5. Fetterman, D., & Wandersman, A. Empowerment evaluation principles in practice. Guilford.

### Assignments, Due Dates, and Weights

Students have an opportunity to earn a total of 1500 points for all assignments and another 150 points for attendance for a total of 1,650 points. I will factor in bonus points for those students who demonstrate improvement over the course of the semester.

Assignment #1: Concept paper

In a one page single spaced statement the student will provide an overview of the project through three well-developed interrelated sections: the object of inquiry, the organizational setting of the object, the aims of the inquiry, and the bias of the investigator. The purpose of this assignment is to help students initiate their projects. **50 points.**

Assignment #2: Description of the object in context

Following guidelines outlined in class, the student will prepare a rich portrayal of the object and incorporate preliminary observations of the object and of the context making explicit the perspective from which the object is observed. The assignment is three pages, subheaded, and single-spaced. **50 points.**

Assignment #3: Framing the preliminary research strategy

Following guidelines outlined in class, the student will present and develop a preliminary conception of the action research strategy. The assignment is three pages, subheaded, and single-spaced. **50 points.**

Assignment #4: Reframing the research strategy

The student will enrich the previous research strategy and develop the rationale for the type of case study he or she is undertaking using language derived from Stringer and Stake. This assignment reflects a substantial elaboration and refinement compared to the previous one. The assignment is three pages, subheaded, and single-spaced. **50 points.**

Assignment #5: Rich description of the object

This is a benchmark assignment. In a three page, subheaded, and single-spaced paper the student offers a rich portrayal of the object by coalescing, converging, and synthesizing experience, observation, and interaction data. The structure of this paper communicates the depth and richness of action with inquiry into the object. **100 points.**

Assignment #6: The First Portraiture

This is another benchmark assignment. In a three page, subheaded, and single-spaced paper the student extends the portrayal of the object by communicating in rich and descriptive ways 1) why the object exists; 2) how the object works; 3) what makes the object “good”; and 4) whether and to what extent the object is effective. In a fifth point, the student will incorporate into the portraiture the challenges the object faces in the fulfillment of its potential. The structure of this paper expands depth and richness of action and inquiry that the student achieved in the previous assignment. **150 points.**

Assignment #7: Statement of Assertions about the Object

Based on the previous assignments, students will prepare three-page, subheaded, single-spaced statements of their assertions or claims about the object. These assertions may be

about the distinctiveness of the object, the utility of the object, the value, merits, or worth of the object, the quality of the object, the effectiveness of the object, and/or the inherent goodness of the object. Students organize evidence (and the source of evidence) to support each assertion or claim. **50 points.**

Assignment #8: Interim Report

Students will organize interim or preliminary reports of their projects integrating the previous assignments and highlighting the object, the purpose of the inquiry, the aims of the inquiry, the strategy of inquiry, findings and preliminary assertions (i.e. claims and interpretations) about the object. Each student is responsible for making tactical decisions about the length, attributes, format and structure of the interim report. **200 points.**

Assignment #9: Reframing the Case Study Strategy

In this assignment students will extend their case study strategies in a three page, subheaded, single spaced paper in which they will incorporate best practices they derive from Stringer, Stake, Fetterman and Yin. Students will act on this strategy to extend the evidence relevant to the aims of the case study. The student will enhance the strategy by increasing the utility, feasibility, propriety, and accuracy of the case study. **100 points.**

Assignment #10: Augmentation of Evidence

Students will capture additional data and evidence about the object through the implementation of the new case study strategy, or aspects of it. In three page, subheaded, and single spaced papers students will organize this evidence and present additional findings. **100 points.**

Assignment #11: Interpretation of Findings

Students will reflect on the entire project and bring together the findings and principal interpretations about the object including claims and assertions regarding the distinctiveness of the object, the utility of the object, the value, merits, or worth of the object, the quality of the object, the effectiveness of the object, and/or the inherent goodness of the object. The student extends assignment #7 into new assertions or claims and organizes the evidence to support these interpretations. **100 points.**

Assignment #12: Enriching the Case Study

In this assignment students expand, enrich, and deepen the case study of the object that they offered in assignment #6. This is another benchmark assignment. In a three page, subheaded, and single-spaced paper the student extends the portrayal of the object by communicating in rich and descriptive ways 1) why the object exists; 2) how the object works; 3) what makes the object “good”; and 4) whether and to what extent the object is effective. The student will demonstrate deep appreciation for the challenges the object faces in the fulfillment of its potential and will communicate (empathically) insight into paradoxes, contradictions, ironies, or inconsistencies. The student will show in graphic detail the strengths and limitations of the object and ways the object can improve along

some kind of criterion (e.g. performance or effectiveness). The assignment incorporates substantial evidence. The content of this paper expands depth and richness of action and inquiry that the student achieved in assignments #10 and #11. **100 points.**

### Final Report

The student will organize a final report that is a summative presentation of the case study. The final report integrates all previous content in a coherent manner by integrating the previous assignments and highlighting the object, the purpose of the inquiry, the aims of the inquiry, the strategy of inquiry, findings, defensible assertions and interpretations (i.e. claims and interpretations), and conclusions. In addition, the student completes a meta-evaluation of the project and flags the strengths and limitations of the case study. Each student is responsible for making tactical decisions about the length, attributes, format and structure of the final report. **400 points.**

### Grades and Percentages

A.....	95.0-100.00
A-.....	90.0-94.9
B+.....	87.0-89.9
B.....	83.0-86.9
B-.....	80.0-82.9
C+.....	77.0-79.9
C.....	73.0-76.9
F.....	Below 73.0

### Attendance Policy

Students will attend all sessions and there are few situations in which an absence will be excused (severe illness, illness of a family member, death of a family member). Attendance is weighted 15% of the final grade and so it will carry considerable weight. An unexcused absence will result in a loss of 25 points (a significant forfeiture of points). I will ask students who miss over two sessions to drop the course. Prompt arrival for each class session is expected and students who are late for the start of a class will forfeit 10 points, although consideration will be given for weather and other exigencies. And, I expect all students to remain for the entire period of the class. Early departure will result in the loss of 10 points. I will take roll at the start and end of each class session.

### Course Sessions and Topics

#### **Part I:**

Orienting to the Object and Framing Strategy through Stringer's Action Research Model

#### Session 1:

Theme: Getting Started with Action Research.

Reading: Stringer, Preface, Chapters 1, 2, 3, 9; Stake, Chapters 1, 2, Joint Committee, Preface, Introduction, and Applying the Standards; Schein, Chapters 1 and 2.

*Section 1:* Introduction to the course and discussion of the nature of inquiry into social work practice. The distinctiveness of action research within the context of practice. Action research and organizational culture.

*Section 2:* Discussion of student projects. The investigator's bias and the idea of the object as the focus of inquiry. The aim of inquiry.

*Section 3:* Guidelines for the preparation of the concept paper as the first assignment.

### Session 2:

Theme: Expanding the Action Research Framework.

Reading: Stringer, Chapters 9, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7; Joint Committee Standards, Applying the Standards, Accuracy Standards, pp. 125-190; Schein, Chapters 5, 6, 7, 8, 9.

*Section 1:* Principles of community-based or practice-based action research. Application of the principles to social work practice; setting the stage for action research. The importance of perspective and position within an organizational or community context.

*Section 2:* Discussion of student projects. Expanding the concept paper. Delineating the object and appreciating its context.

*Section 3:* Guidelines for the description of "the object in context" as the second assignment.

### Session 3:

Theme: The Action Research Process—Looking, Thinking, Acting.

Reading: Stringer, Chapters 5, 6, 7; Stake, Chapter 6; Joint Committee, Utility Standards, pp. 23-62; Accuracy Standards, 125-190.

*Section 1:* Looking at the object and building the picture; thinking in action; and Acting.

*Section 2:* Discussion of student projects. Looking, thinking, and acting in action research.

*Section 3:* Guidelines for framing the preliminary research strategy as the third assignment.

## **Part II:**

## Engaging the Object through L-T-A and Stake's Case Study Model and Testing and Incorporating Empowerment Strategies

### Session 4:

Theme: Appreciating the Object as Unique Intrinsic or Instrumental Case

Reading: Stake, Chapters 6, 1, 2, 3; Joint Committee, Utility Standards, pp. 23-62; Schein, Chapters 10, 11, Reading from Fetterman.

*Section 1:* Clarifying the nature of the case: instrumental versus intrinsic and thinking through research questions; thinking about the role of the case researcher.

*Section 2:* Discussion of student projects. Nature of the student's case study and criteria for selection of the case.

*Section 3:* Guidelines for reframing the research strategy as the fourth assignment.

### Session 5:

Theme: Engaging the object and producing a rich description through action, particularly through experience, observation, and interaction. Identifying opportunities for empowerment.

Reading: Stringer, Chapters 4, 5, 6; Stake, Chapters 4, 5, 7; Joint Committee, Utility Standards, pp. 23-62. Schein, Chapters 10, 11, 17, Readings from Fetterman.

*Section 1:* The idea of engaging the object. The nature of qualitative research in action, and data gathering.

*Section 2:* Discussion of student projects. Engaging in data gathering within the boundaries of the case and within the context of case study purpose. Incorporating experience, observation, and interaction. Data gathering and data organization. Engagement and empowerment of stakeholders.

*Section 3:* Guidelines for the rich description of the object as the fifth assignment.

### Session 6:

Theme: Continued engagement of the object and producing a rich description through experience, observation, and interaction.

Reading: Stringer, Chapters 4, 5, 6; Stake, Chapters 4, 5, 7; Joint Committee, Utility Standards, pp. 23-62; Schein, Chapter 17, Readings from Fetterman.

- Section 1:* The idea of engaging the object. The object as case, portraiture, and focus of evaluation. Ways of thinking about the object as portrait and criteria for the portraiture. Rich, deep, and thick description.
- Section 2:* Discussion of student projects. Crafting the portraiture and appreciating the aesthetic, authenticity, and utility of the object.
- Section 3:* Guidelines for the “case study as portraiture” as the sixth assignment.

### Session 7:

Theme: Making assertions about the object within context.

Reading: Stake, Chapters 1-7; Yin, Chapters 1-6. Joint Committee, Utility Standards, 23-62; Schein, Chapters 11, 1; Readings from Fetterman.

- Section 1:* Identifying and understanding assertions and claims, formulating assertions and claims about the object. Engaging and empowering others to frame and make assertions. Assertions as products of the research. Implications of assertions and claims for the design of the inquiry and case study.
- Section 2:* Discussion of student projects. What assertions are emerging in your mind? Look at them. Think about them. Act to use them.
- Section 3:* Guidelines for the statement of assertions as the seventh assignment.

### Session 8:

Theme: Looking, thinking, and acting and drawing implications for next steps.

Reading: Stringer, Chapters 4, 5,6, 7; Joint Committee, Feasibility Standards, pp. 63-80; Readings from Fetterman.

- Section 1:* Rethinking the case study and reexamining aims and strategy of the inquiry. Looking at the object now given what you know and understand. Thinking about action and plans. Acting to reformulate the strategy of inquiry using an empowerment lens
- Section 2:* Discussion of student projects. Interpreting the portraiture and thinking about how to deepen the case study. Objectives and properties of the interim report. Structuring the interim report.
- Section 3:* Guidelines for preparing the interim report as the eighth assignment.

### **Part III:**

Engaging the Object through L-T-A and Yin’s Case Study Method

### Session 9:

Theme: Yin's case study approach.

Reading: Yin, Chapters 1, 2, 3; Joint Committee, Feasibility and Propriety Standards, pp. 63-124.

*Section 1:* Yin's case study approach. Comparison of Yin's and Stake's conceptions of case study. Distinctive features of Yin's approach and how to incorporate it into your strategy of inquiry. Making the case study systematic.

*Section 2:* Discussion of student projects. Using assertions and claims about the object as advanced organizers of the case study. Structuring the case study to explore, illuminate, describe, or explain relative to assertions and claims.

*Section 3:* Guidelines for reframing the case study strategy as the ninth assignment using perspectives from Yin.

### Session 10:

Theme: Expand the case study through specification of design and systematic data collection.

Reading: Yin, Chapters 3, 4. Joint Committee, Propriety and Accuracy Standards, pp. 81-190.

*Section 1:* Consideration of design alternatives at levels of exploration, illumination, description, and explanation. Examination of evidence and the selection of sources of evidence.

*Section 2:* Discussion of student projects. Design considerations and making data collection more systematic. Augmentation of evidence.

*Section 3:* Guidelines for the augmentation of evidence as the tenth assignment.

## **Part IV:** Appreciating Findings

### Session 11:

Theme: Examining data relative to advanced organizers I

Reading: Yin, Chapters 3, 4, 5; Stake, Chapters 4, 5, 7. Stringer, Chapters 4, 5, 6, 7; Accuracy Standards, pp. 125-190; Schein, Chapters 10, 11, 17.

- Section 1:* Examining data relative to questions, objectives, assertions, claims, hypotheses. Appreciating the form of data you captured and ways of analyzing it. Strategies of interpretation.
- Section 2:* Discussion of student projects. What is the nature of your data? How can you analyze and present it? Drawing conclusions. Looking, thinking and acting relative to findings.
- Section 3:* Guidelines for organizing and interpreting findings as the eleventh assignment.

### Session 12:

Theme: Examining data relative to advanced organizers II

Reading: Yin, Chapters 3, 4, 5; Stake, Chapters 4, 5, 7. Stringer, Chapters 4, 5, 6, 7; Joint Committee, Accuracy Standards, pp. 125-190; Schein, Chapters 10, 11, 17.

- Section 1:* Examining data relative to questions, objectives, assertions, claims, hypotheses. Appreciating the form of data you captured and ways of analyzing it. Using findings to refine or alter the portraiture.
- Section 2:* Discussion of student projects. How do the findings contribute to your understanding of the object?
- Section 3:* Guidelines for enriching the case study of the object as the twelfth assignment.

### **Part V:**

#### Report Preparation and Meta-Evaluation of the Inquiry

### Session 13:

Themes: 1) strategies for the development of the final report; and 2) overview of meta-evaluation standards.

Reading: Stringer, Chapter 8, Stake, Chapter 8, Yin, Chapter 6. Joint Committee, Applying the Standards, pp. 8-20.; Schein Chapter 2.

- Section 1:* Structuring the final report. An examination of the meta-evaluation standards in the areas of utility, feasibility, propriety, accuracy and their use to evaluate the report and project.
- Section 2:* Discussion of student projects. Capturing the character of your project in the final report. Structuring and crafting your final report and evaluating the quality of the project and report. Incorporating the meta-evaluation into the report.

*Section 3:* Guidelines for the development of the final report and completion of meta-evaluation as final assignment.

Session 14:

Theme: Sustaining inquiry in social work practice.

*Section 1:* Bringing action research, case study, and empowerment evaluation into your practice and sustaining inquiry. Reflection on what was learned during the course.

*Section 2:* Discussion of student projects and examination of several final reports.

*Section 3:* Students will submit their final reports.