

# BUILDING GENERAL COMPETENCIES OF SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS THROUGH EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING PROCESS

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## **Abstract**

The article deals with the building of general competencies of social work students during the process of experiential learning. The article presents the analysis of qualitative structured written reflections of social work students (N=11) and reveals which instrumental, interpersonal and systemic competencies of social work students were built while participating in the experiential learning activities for one week.

*Keywords: general competency, experiential learning, reflection.*

## **Introduction**

Modern higher education schools aim to meet the evolving needs of the knowledge society. Its proactive position in terms of these changes and improvement is an important guarantor of the advancement of society. Modern societies require fully educated specialists, consequently, the development of general competencies is an integral part of the study programmes (Bulajeva, Jakubė, Lepaitė, Teresevičienė, & Zuzevičiūtė, 2011). According to Gedvilienė, Bortkevičius, Tūtlys, Vaičiūnienė, Stancikas, Staniulevičienė, Krivickienė, Vaitkevičius, & Gedvila (2015), education is gaining an increasing influence on society by affecting new and significant areas. Political, economic, social and cultural changes in the life of society have a profound impact on the management and use of general competencies, which are needed in new activities at some point. The developed general competencies create a solid foundation for students' continuous development in both professional and personal contexts. It is important to understand that general competencies are needed not only in the labour market, because they are mainly associated with the needs of the modern market (Bulajeva, Lepaitė, & Šileikaitė-Kaishauri, 2011), but also in personal life.

The acceleration of globalisation offers more jobs, but the labour market becomes very competitive (Černevičiūtė, Jančoras, Strazdas, Kregždaitė, & Morkevičius, 2014), therefore, lifelong learning and the development of general competencies acquire a significant meaning in modern society (Žydžiūnaitė, 2016). There are three categories of general competencies:

instrumental, interpersonal and systemic competency (Jakubė & Juozaitis, 2012; Zubrickienė & Adomaitienė, 2016).

### **Features of the building of general competencies during the process of experiential learning in a social work studies: theoretical aspects**

The competencies that we develop in study curricula disciplines and apply in various contexts (Bulajeva et al., 2011) can be identified as general competencies. During the studies general competencies are crucial. In the learning process, the general competencies enable the students to “transcend” different boundaries – these competencies facilitate communication and collaboration with specialists of different fields, which is very important and in the social work area. A whole set of general competencies helps to continuously learn and develop. In the training of general competencies, a person becomes a conscious and active member of the professional community and society (Jakubė & Juozaitis, 2012). A person analyzes new phenomena and facts, summarizes and draws conclusions, links abstract theoretical knowledge with specific facts of life, personally plans self-development and learns from activities carried out in practice (Deltuva, Keturakis, & Godvadas, 2011).

The traditional training of higher education institutions, highlighting the importance of acquiring and transferring knowledge, is transformed by the modern teaching and learning paradigm. A constructive method of learning involves the students’ perception, thinking, feelings and behavior of qualitative changes in order to highlight individual abilities to see, experience and understand the ongoing processes that surround a person in the real world. The student is enabled to create individual knowledge, thinking and personal growth (Bubnys, 2012). The experiential learning method creates a journey of self-knowledge based on self-analysis in a safe, friendly environment, but with certain challenges (Deltuva & Godvadas, 2015). In order to improve themselves as future specialists, student need to know themselves well.

Being a good worker demands to be able to work in a multicultural environment, quickly respond to changes in the environment and be able to adapt to them, be active and creative. In order to achieve all of these objectives, the student is trained already during the studies, building not only special but also general competencies (Autukevičienė, 2011). Trained social work specialists must be able to deliberately express their views, defend their beliefs, values, have a bold talk even at a time when the environment has a danger of social risk (Oliver, Jones, Rayner, Penner, & Jamieson, 2017). There is a strong focus on social work practices in the course of studies, thus educating individuals on analytical thinking and improving the competencies of individuals (Feng, 2010). Considering the current situation in Lithuania, it is understandable that the volatile, mobile, risky social work requires a very high degree of professional preparation (Kiaunytė & Ruškus, 2010). In order to maximise the quality of studies, the importance of practice and experience in the study process is becoming less questioned. Theoretical knowledge and skills are complemented by practical activities which are then reflected. The development of skills and the formation of behavior in combination with constant reflection gives a stronger foundation for the development of general competencies (Jakubė & Juozaitis, 2012).

Experiential learning is defined as a deliberately organised process in which participants have direct experience in constructing skills and knowledge which are then adapted to the future. Experiential learning takes place only at a time when participants engage in the widest range of activities, and then, by pondering, analyzing and reflecting their experience, receive

useful insights necessary for changing thinking and behavior (Deltuva & Godvadas, 2015). Also experiential learning is described as a meaningful process in which the inner human world is incorporated into the external environment. This learning method highlights a number of new and significant transformations of individual experiences, and the new experience is combined into one broader conceptual framework.

The use of experiential learning in the process of preparing social work professionals has two important aspects: first of all, the appropriate conditions for the reflection of personal and professional identity are needed during the course of studies, i.e. so that the students' acquired experience interacts with the necessary competencies, knowledge, theory, skills as well as values in the social work; secondly, to enable the student to independently, actively analyse the practical activities and identify, understand and solve emerging problems (Vaicekauskienė & Čiužas, 2013). It is desirable that an experiential learning approach should be integrated into all study subjects preparing social workers in order to enhance the uptake of knowledge by analysing situations, designing and selecting the most appropriate solution option, provoking a re-evaluation of their abilities and perception (Rubin & Babbie, 2015).

Social work is characterized by constant challenges, difficult self-solutions, enormous tension and this causes many difficulties, especially for beginners. The systematic reflection of previous experience in decisions that may have both positive and negative consequences can facilitate self-determination by making better choices. Self-reflection is a meaningful way of teaching that provides the right conditions for improving one's personal and professional development in a practical context. Analysing experience increases the professional growth and competencies of a person, and the quality of social work is increasing in the course of this process. Therefore, the training of social workers must take care of the learning process of the future specialists, so that future specialists would be able to overcome the difficulties that have arisen (Toros & Medar, 2015).

**The problem question of the research** has been formulated in this context: *which instrumental, interpersonal and systemic competencies of social work students are built through the experiential learning process.*

**The object of the research** – general competencies of social work students.

**The aim of the research** is to perform the analysis of the building of social work students' general competencies during the process of experiential learning.

**Participants of the research:** the study involved 11 students from Social Work study programme of Šiauliai State College who participated in the experiential learning activities for one week in the beginning of their studies.

### **Research methodology**

*Data collection.* Method of structured written reflection was used to collect data for a qualitative study. Reflection questions were drawn up on the basis of planned activities and theoretical analysis, research object and aim. Four reference question groups were made for students: 1. *Specific experience* (what happened?) 2. *Reflective monitoring* (how do I appreciate it?) 3. *Abstract conceptualization* (what conclusions do I make and what ideas do I have?) 4. *Active experimentation* (what will I do?). Prior to the study, students who participated in the experiential study were advised to write reflections every day after the activities in order to provide as detailed information as possible. Experiential learning activities were organized for 5 days (average about 5-6 hours a day).

*Data analysis.* The qualitative study was based on the interpretive paradigm. Student written reflections were analyzed finding meaningful and critical units, which were categorised into subcategories and categories that were interpreted afterwards, presenting examples of confirmatory statements.

### Results and discussion

The analysis of structured written reflections aimed to reveal what instrumental competencies were developed during the experiential learning process. The results of the study are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Structure of developed instrumental competencies

Category	Subcategory	Number of confirming statements
Instrumental competencies	Skills to communicate in native language both orally and in writing (verbal communication)	49
	Skills to identify, understand and solve problems	26
	Skills to plan and make good use of time	15
	Skills to search, process and analyze information from various sources	12
	Skills to create future visions	6

Students of the first year of social work have emphasized that during the experiential teaching process they had a lot of verbal communication with study group friends and surrounding individuals: “<...> greeted and discussed with other friends of the group about yesterday and discussed their impressions <...>”. Prakapas (2007) emphasizes communication as one of the most important conditions for human spiritual existence. According to the students who participated in the study, at the first moments they were focused on communicating with each other, which was important for the development of existing communication skills: “*At the time of the activity we tried to establish joint contacts, this helped me to acquire communication skills <...>*”. Informants are expressing their interactions with strangers during the activities, where they need to introduce themselves: “<...> had to communicate with all strangers and share some facts about my life<...>” or “<...> to communicate with people completely free and without constraint <...>”.

During the experiential learning process the participants improved their skills to communicate verbally: “<...> helped defeat my fears to speak publicly, revealing myself as a personality to friends of the course <...>”. The depictions of the history of life (words, symbols) and oral presentation confirm the development of the skills to communicate in the mother tongue: “<...> had a group of friends to depict and tell the story of my life <...>”. During the experiential learning students were given the task of communicating not only in their group (only with the members of the group), but with strangers. The participants of the study say that during the educational process they had to communicate with strangers: “<...> I had to speak to unknown people and offer to exchange things <...>” or “I have been congratulating each and every person <...> we had to find eye contact with another person and greet him”. Greeting, suggestion, and farewell affirms the verbal communication. Gedvilienė et al. (2015) argue that communication in the mother tongue is a general competency, without which the modern society cannot be imagined because we communicate at home, at work, in society.

Communication can be identified by other definitions: exchange of experiences, thoughts, experiences. These competencies are identified in written reflections: “<...> *sharing your ideas and thoughts <...>*”, “<...> *can discuss, create strategies, share your views*” or “<...> *speak publicly, express your views and thoughts aloud, and justify them*”. Similarly, communication in the mother tongue is not only oral, but also in writing (Gedvilienė et al., 2015), which was also developed in the experiential learning process: “<...> *have received a task to write things <...>*”. In the view of Abdullah, Demong, Ghani, Ahmad, & Adnan (2015), the mother tongue is very important as an educational aspect that needs to be nurtured constantly.

One more developed instrumental competency is the skill to identify, understand and solve problems. It can be noted that the skill to name, identify a particular situation, environment, or action as a problem was developed during the experiential learning process: “*Who will want to exchange an item with a white sheet of paper?*”, “*The task I heard surprised me about how it would look and whether it would be stupid <...>*”. This is perceived as a problem, difficulty in performing a task. There is a noticeable ability to identify the problem by pondering the cause: “*But this time maybe it was more difficult, maybe because of a completely alien place or the people I met for the first time*”, “*Initially, I accepted this experience with fear and did not think of anything, but later I began to understand the meaning of this activity <...>*” or “*I accept this experience with difficulty, because I have never had such an experience in my life <...>*”. The difficulty arises from an unknown environment and people defined it as a problem, but it is not about the decision. Individuals clearly identified, understood the problem, and predicted a solution to the problem: “*Since I have never been a volunteer, I have first prayed and had no thoughts, but with my group we have been thinking for a long time and decided to <...>*”. The aspects of the problem identification and its solution were analysed by Vveinhardt & Žilaitytė (2014).

In the experiential learning process, the skill to plan and properly use the time has been developed. During the course of the experiential education, students received the tasks they were required to perform within the allotted time. They had to exploit that time properly: “*We got a few minutes to create tactics to go through mines*”. In order to make the best possible, participants repeated the task several times: “*We have been doing this task more than once, because we have tried to improve the time result*”. During the learning process, there were tasks that would require more time to invest: “*We have received <...> task for five days, through which we had to come up with activities for all group members*”. In order to improve their competencies, several participants of the process devoted some time after the lecture: “*We met with our group to create a plan out of college <...>*”. This behavior of students shows that they are able to plan and exploit their time appropriately, i.e. they strive to make the task as good as possible. During education and training, it is very important for individuals to be able to plan their time, and time-planning methods could be used to help to solve problems (proper use of time) (Subotkevičienė, 2015; Župerkienė, Župerka, & Babičaitė, 2015).

The aim of the experiential learning process was to develop another instrumental competency – the skill to search, process, analyse and systematize information from various sources: “*After analyzing our behavior in a particular situation, we also figured out how and why we acted.*”. According to the authors (Rutkienė & Tandzegolskienė, 2015), these skills are of particular importance for acquiring quality of knowledge. During the workshops, participants had the opportunity to carry out tasks in groups that seemed to be initially intimidating, but provided a lot of knowledge about them. After the assignments, they analyzed their behavior

and realized that they learned very much, although this was not a theoretical material: “*The task for our group was a test of unity, patience, and mutual communication*”.

The participants highlight the importance of future visions during the experiential learning process: “*I have realized that we need to <...> help others not only when we are told to do so. I thought I would start volunteering. I will continue to get knowledge and gain more experience*”. Participants want to use their time appropriately for volunteering purposes: “*I have never volunteered <...> my flair says that I will continue to use this experience in my life*”. Bubnys (2012) emphasizes that volunteering can make a meaningful contribution to leisure activities. Reflections are internal considerations on how to make a meaningful use of your free time in the future, which will benefit not only them but also other individuals.

Analyzing structured written reflections, it was noted that interpersonal competency was most developed during the experiential learning process. The results obtained during the study are shown in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Structure of developed interpersonal competencies

Category	Subcategory	Number of confirming statements
Interpersonal competencies	Teamwork skills	126
	Skills to be self-critical	94
	Skills to act, based on ethical principles	42
	Skills to be critical when evaluating teamwork	24
	Skills to be critical in terms of activities	17
	Skills to be socially responsible	15
	Skills to be critical in evaluating the behavior of others	11

The participants in the survey focused strongly on the skill to work in the group: “*The focus during the task was on the whole group, all together we had to decide how we would overcome one or another task <...>*”. The participants perceived in practice that, in order to achieve good results, they must rely on each other to trust and collaborate. The various activities result in the need to cooperate and collaborate: “*We later received more tasks, but we were able to overcome them quite easily, perhaps because we had begun to shape ourselves as a group, a common collective, and shared our ideas and thoughts, we did our task much faster than before*”. In modern society, teamwork becomes one of the main factors that lead to success (Dromantas, 2007). Marmienė, Kalėdienė, Kaselienė, & Vladičkienė (2015) state that teamwork is a complex help. One area of multi-human work can be mutual assistance to achieve the goal. Foreign scientists (Jackson, Sibson, & Riebe, 2014) and Lithuanian scholars (Černevičiūtė et al., 2014) actualize the importance of teamwork education.

By reflection of various activities, students criticise their actions, behavior, and overflowing emotions. Participants realize that they were able to do the task better, not to get too much into emotions and to strive for perfection: “*One of the first tasks was to concentrate and think well, even though its content was easy enough, but I did not understand and said stop*”.

During the experiential learning, participants were tolerant, ethic both for their group friends and for those around them: “*As we work in the team, we help each other, agree on the shortcomings of the job and reach a common compromise. We collect the best route of the track, plan and agree on a common march*”; “*<...> no matter how long you would have to*

wait all the people had to talk, no one was unnoticed, everyone was able to exercise tasks, to get involved, to express their views”. During teamwork, the ability to operate, based on ethical principles is much faster and achieves better results than working individually or examining the code of ethics in theory. The ability to act, based on ethical principles, is important in any working area. In order to ensure ethical behavior in organisations, the basic instrument is a code of ethics that must be observed for all members of the organisation (Palidauskaitė, 2010).

During the analysis, the skill to be critical was divided into three sub-components: the skill to be critical when evaluating teamwork, activities and evaluating the behavior of others. The persons who participated in the process were able to critically assess the work in the team: “<...> after that, we all started to rush and forgot our tactics. Although the majority passed through mine on the end, we were all distracted and made a mistake”. The participants were reflective in terms of activities: “The march was a complex process and the plan needed to be significantly improved”. The conduct of the group’s friends is critically appreciated during the activities: “Our activities were quite smooth, perhaps a little talk was lacking, some shouted one through another <...>”. Babonienė, Daukšienė, & Jonaitienė (2014) analysing the development of general competencies, distinguishes between criticisms and self-criticism, which are more difficult to develop than other competencies, as demonstrated by the research.

During the experiential learning process, students expressed their skill to be socially responsible: “<...> I myself can <...> make a wonderful day doing <...> good work. My flair says that I have to make it <...>. In doing so I am glad and for me this is a challenge that I love”. Prakapas (2007) argues that citizenship education from childhood is essential for the harmonious development of a person and for successful integration into society. The development of a general competency (to be civic and socially responsible) must take place throughout life. Students responsibly carried out volunteer tasks, felt positive emotions by doing a good job: “Although I didn’t really like this task <...> I finished it with a smile because that feeling when I was helping people <...> was very wonderful”. Although there are no direct claims about citizenship in the experiences, it can be perceived that individuals tend to be part of the active community.

Jakubė & Juozaitis (2012) argue that developing general competencies is an important process for modern society. Instrumental and interpersonal competencies can be developed at the same time, but systemic competencies are only developed at a time when the above-mentioned (instrumental and interpersonal) competencies have already been trained. As a result, the systemic competencies of the first year students of social work have been less developed during experiential learning. The results obtained during the research are shown in Table 3.

**Table 3.** Structure developed of systemic competency

Category	Subcategory	Number of confirming statements
Systemic competencies	Skills to adapt in a new situation and withstand environmental pressures	37
	Skills to be proactive, to cultivate a spirit of entrepreneurial and intellectual curiosity	22
	Skills to apply theoretical knowledge in practice	11
	Skills to generate new ideas	10
	Skills to create and implement projects	6

The most developed systemic competency is the skill to adapt in a new situation and to withstand environmental pressures. The ability to adapt in a new situation is particularly relevant in the environment for all those involved in the study, given that they are in a “new stage of life”: *“A new experience, an unusual physical and psychological environment, unfamiliar people and a new study program”* or *“Everything on this day was new, because in the past, at school it was not so, I always tried to get out, and today it was necessary to be involved <...>”*. From the example, it can be understood that a participant was in a new situation where he suffered environmental pressures, but was able to withstand it and adapt to the requirements of the activity presented. Individuals must be able to adapt to new things for their personal development. The adaptation in the new environment was analysed by Rupšienė & Batuchina (2012), Jasiukevičiūtė (2013).

The aim of the tasks presented in experiential activities was to cultivate a spirit of initiative, entrepreneurial and intellectual curiosity: *“I will take the first steps towards self-improvement”*. During these tasks, students are able to draw conclusions, take the initiative to improve their intellectual curiosity in the future as personalities. In order to develop the entrepreneurial ability of a given task, students needed to exchange a white sheet of paper into a more valuable item, and for most students, it succeeded: *“As a <...> (to swap a white piece of paper into something more useful) I took a little bit of my job and started talking to people <...>”*. All the participants carried out the task and were able to celebrate the results achieved. In the prevailing competition in modern society (Černevičiūtė et al., 2014) it is very important to be proactive in order to be spotted.

The skill to adapt theoretical knowledge in practice is constantly evolving in the Social Work study programme, but already in the first week students had the opportunity to start developing this: *“I learned about the iceberg metaphor and I could apply it to myself”*. During the first day some theory about the experiential learning process was given, therefore, students were able to apply theoretical knowledge to further activities: *“I realized <...> in what area I am now, in which I would be <...>”*. Bloom (2016) states that it is important to be able to associate theoretical knowledge with practical activities during the course of studies.

In the experiential learning process, the task of generating new ideas was presented. The participants of the study had to identify specific subjects that are relevant and meaningful to each individual. Only having the skill to generate new ideas they were able to accomplish this task. *“<...> by sharing our ideas and thoughts, we’ve done <...>”*. There were also tasks when it was necessary to create a single joint approach, which would help to find a solution.

The skill to develop and implement projects has been developed indirectly by understanding the essence of this competency. One of the main project was the development and performance of a real-trip strategy. Such a task for the students seemed “strange” and most of the participants said “STOP”, refused to go to the track. But the strategy had to be created by all students: *“<...> got the task to create a strategy for a real-trip, which will take place for a certain time”*.

## Conclusions

1. Qualitative research results revealed several instrumental competencies which were developed during the experiential learning process. Social work study program students emphasize that they have developed skills to communicate in native language both orally and in writing, to identify, understand and solve problems, to plan and make good use of time, to search, process and analyze information from various sources and to create future visions.



2. Teamwork skills, skills to be self-critical, to act, based on ethical principles, to be critical when evaluating teamwork, to be critical in terms of activities, to be socially responsible and to be critical in evaluating the behavior of others were recognized by the students as interpersonal competencies, which were developed during experiential activities.
3. The experiential learning activities contributed to the development of instrumental and interpersonal competencies, and that was a base for the development of systemic competencies such as the skill to adapt in a new situation and withstand environmental pressures, to be proactive, to cultivate a spirit of entrepreneurial and intellectual curiosity, to apply theoretical knowledge in practice, to generate new ideas and to create and implement projects

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## BUILDING GENERAL COMPETENCIES OF SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS THROUGH EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING PROCESS

### *Summary*

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Social work is characterized by constant challenges, difficult self-solutions, enormous tension and this causes many difficulties, especially for beginners. The systematic reflection of previous experience in decisions that may have both positive and negative consequences can facilitate self-determination by making better choices. Self-reflection is a meaningful way of teaching that provides the right conditions for improving one's personal and professional development in a practical context. Analysing experience increases the professional growth and competencies of a person, and the quality of social work is increasing in the course of this process. Therefore, the training of social workers must take care of the learning process of the future specialists, so that future specialists would be able to overcome the difficulties that have arisen. One of the best solutions for making education more vibrant, intense and effective is to use experiential learning as an educational process booster.

The article deals with the building of general competencies of social work students during the process of experiential learning. The research involved 11 students from Social Work study programme of Šiauliai State College who participated in the experiential learning activities for one week at the beginning of their studies. Method of structured written reflection was used to collect data for a qualitative study. Reflection questions were drawn up on the basis of planned activities and theoretical analysis, research object and aim. The qualitative study was based on the interpretive paradigm. Student written reflections were analyzed finding meaningful and critical units, which were categorised into subcategories and categories that were interpreted afterwards, presenting examples of confirmatory statements. The article reveals which instrumental, interpersonal and systemic competencies of social work students were built while participating in the experiential learning activities for one week.

The use of experiential learning in the process of preparing social work professionals has two important aspects: first of all, the appropriate conditions for the reflection of personal and professional identity are needed during the course of studies, i.e. so that the students' acquired experience interacts

with the necessary competencies, knowledge, theory, skills as well as values in social work; secondly, to enable the student to independently, actively analyse the practical activities and identify, understand and solve emerging problems.

Qualitative research results revealed several instrumental competencies which were developed during the experiential learning process. Social work study program students emphasize that they have developed skills to communicate in native language both orally and in writing, to identify, understand and solve problems, to plan and make good use of time, to search, process and analyze information from various sources and to create future visions.

Teamwork skills, skills to be self-critical, to act, based on ethical principles, to be critical when evaluating teamwork, to be critical in terms of activities, to be socially responsible and to be critical in evaluating the behavior of others were recognized by the students as interpersonal competencies, which were developed during experiential activities.

The experiential learning activities contributed to the development of instrumental and interpersonal competencies, and that was a base for the development of systemic competencies such as the skill to adapt in a new situation and withstand environmental pressures, to be proactive, to cultivate a spirit of entrepreneurial and intellectual curiosity, to apply theoretical knowledge in practice, to generate new ideas and to create and implement projects.

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