Teaching Notes for The Consumer Dialogue Project: Changing MSW Students’ Attitudes Towards People with Mental Illness 
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Slide 1

This material will be useful to students in a mental health track, who already have a foundation understanding of severe and persistent mental illnesses, and who have been introduced to the concepts of stigma, consumerism, and recovery.

Ideally, a consumer (i.e. an individual with severe and persistent mental illness) should be present to co-lead the discussion.

Slide 2

Discussion Question
How are people with mental illness portrayed in the media? The arts? 
In what ways do mental health systems and the people working in them perpetuate negative attitudes? Act them out on consumers?

Slide 3

References
Describe dialogue to students. Ask if any have participated in such a process either formally or informally.

References

The following is a description of a project done at the UNC SSW.

Reference
Scheyett, A. & Kim, M. “Can We Talk?”: Using Structured Dialogues to Shift Student Attitudes Towards Persons with Mental Illness. Submitted for publication.

Students were first and second year MSW students who volunteered because of interest in the project. Consumers were recruited through the state’s Mental Health Consumer Organization. The facilitation was a Master’s level mental health professional who was not faculty for the students. An additional person took notes on the events of the dialogue. The day was full, but with many breaks--important for consumers.

Recommendations focused on ways students and consumers could work together to improve the system, and ways the social work curriculum could be improved to better prepare students to work with consumers.
Slide 7

The facilitator began each section of the dialogue with an opening question around one of the themes, then allowed the discussion to evolve, with gentle guidance around relevance and timeframes.

**Discussion Questions**

What sorts of issues would you have raised had you been part of the dialogue?
What questions do you have, or what would you like consumers to understand about social workers?

Slide 8

In addition to the discussion and recommendations produced by the dialogue itself, students were asked to complete three attitudinal surveys around mental illness immediately prior to the dialogue, and again within three days following the dialogue.

Within a week after the dialogue each student was interviewed by a Ph.D. student who had not been present at the dialogue, using a semi-structured interview format.

**Activity**
Have students complete the three scales for themselves. Without sharing their actual scores, then have them discuss the following questions:
What scale questions were the hardest for you to answer? What made them hard?
Were there any questions that raised issues you had never considered before around consumers? What were they?

Slide 9

**Reference**

Penn, D., Guynan, K., Daily, T., Spaulding, W., Garbin, C., Sullivan, M.

Slide 10

**Discussion Question**

What do you think it was about the dialogue process that shifted student attitudes?
In follow up interviews students talked about learning how important a caring, honest partnership relationship is for consumers, and expressed some confusion around how that messed with professional training around boundaries. Students also expressed surprise at the level of recovery possible, and the strengths demonstrated by consumers, even in the face of some very difficult stigmatizing experiences. Several students expressed increased interest in working with consumers as a result of the experience.

Discussion Question

In the dialogue, consumers emphasized the importance of a partnership relationship with social workers, where the social worker is “real” and honest. How can a social worker do that, and maintain appropriate professional boundaries? What are some examples of things you feel are ok or not ok? Would you talk about the following with consumer clients?
- your children
- that you’re having a bad day?
- that you’re in the middle of a divorce?

Students and consumers were very enthusiastic about ongoing partnerships within social work education.

Discussion Question

What are some other ways you might want to include consumers in your educational process?