Teaching Philosophy

My teaching is sparked by my lived experience of resilience and how I transform that experience to inform my social work practice and teaching. To that end, my teaching philosophy is threefold. First, it is grounded in exploring content that is culturally connected to the lived experience of vulnerable communities. Second, my teaching incorporates opportunities for creative expression that encourages identity development and self-reflection. Finally, it highlights the critical examination of historical practices, policies, and frameworks that are precursors to the present experiences of vulnerable populations and communities. Kirst-Ashman and Hull stated, “we often deal with the aftermath of community problems.” I often ask, “how can we deal with community problems if we do not have an understanding of how we arrived at these problems?” I want to encourage students to explore and gain deeper understanding of root and historical causes of social problems.

My positionality as a Black male social worker informs my approach to teaching and my reason for pursuing this career path. I received all of my post-secondary degrees in social work. Throughout my education, I never encountered a Black male professor in my social work courses. This is very concerning. The limited amount of professors from racial/ethnic groups, particularly Black men, in social work education hinders the learning environment. My goal is to use my unique perspective and experience to enrich student learning. A former student echoed the same sentiment in their course evaluation, stating, “He is also the first African American male professor I have encountered in a lifetime of study (we need more).”

In my opinion, it is important to situate myself in the classroom content by connecting the personal with the professional. This practice is important for the co-learning process and assures students that we are undergoing the learning journey together. The research literature suggests that some students come to the profession having experienced traumas and challenges in their own lives. It is essential for social work educators to lead by example. In the classroom I model a level of vulnerability necessary to build understanding and empathy. I regularly interweave personal and professional stories to bring home classroom topics and discussions. When I do this, students often find the courage to share their personal experiences and how they connect to their development as a social worker. It is important for students to self-reflect on their experiences, especially if they expect the people they work with to follow suit.

In my 15 years as a social worker, I learned the importance of interventions that are culturally connected to the communities the profession serves. I frame my teaching in principles that are grounded in traditional restorative justice beliefs and values. For example, to create an equitable classroom environment, I conduct an experiential learning activity where students participate in a community building circle. Community building circles are synonymous with Indigenous peacemaking circles where the community comes together as one. The activity is designed for students to share their personal beliefs and values to build community. This activity creates the space for in depth self-reflection to promote wellness and creates a constructive learning environment that guides our time together.

As an educator, I incorporate creative and expressive pedagogy that allows students to connect artistic mediums to social work practice with youth and families. I know the power of expressive arts and elements of hip hop culture changes lives. In 2008, I published a book of hip hop spoken word titled *Carrying the Wait: A Book of Rhymes*. This book initially served as a cathartic

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practice in my healing and wellness process. However, my experience working with youth and families showed me that my lived experience is similar to others. Upon entering the doctoral program, I realized that the themes in the book aligned with a predominant goal of social work, alleviating social problems. The book continues to drive my presentations and teaching in the classroom. For example, I introduce students to hip hop lyrics, spoken word, and other expressive arts to discuss issues such as poverty, neighborhood gun violence, police brutality, as well as hope and promise, and other experiences in urban communities. Through these activities, students listen to, read, or watch content, deconstruct it, and then discuss how it relates to them and how it relates to the environments of vulnerable youth and families. This is a very powerful activity because students often find the courage to participate and share parts of themselves through creative expression.

In the classroom, I encourage critical dialogue and create the space for co-learning between the entire classroom community while focusing on social justice, issues of oppression, diversity, and inclusion. My goal is to create an environment that brings the participants together as a community to understand differences and explore similarities. One of my teaching activities is to engage in content and issues that are personal to individual students. I do this through weekly presentations where students signup to present on issues and events that are important to their social work and social justice agenda, and other content that impacts individuals, families, communities and the profession. This activity has three objectives, (a) to encourage difficult dialogue in the classroom, (b) to give students the opportunity to critique content that is not on the instructor’s agenda, and (c) to provide students another opportunity to learn something about their colleagues. A powerful outcome from this activity is students who are often reserved find the courage to engage in the classroom conversation, especially when they realize other students have similar values and concerns.

The classroom is a space where students can practice and learn skills that prepares them for work with vulnerable communities. It is essential that students develop critical thinking skills and engage in difficult conversations to expand their knowledge about social justice issues. More importantly, students can ground their knowledge in theoretical frameworks that foster an understanding of the root causes to injustices that vulnerable communities experience. I encourage students to expand their knowledge beyond what is normative. One of my goals is to expose students to historical practices and policies that offer insight into some of the issues society faces today. For example, I incorporate readings and discussions that rely on theoretical frameworks such as critical theory and social reproduction theory to foster critical dialogue in the classroom. In my opinion, these are two frameworks that enhance understanding of how and why certain communities are subjected to certain positions, while at the same time exploring content and opportunities to promote positive social change.

Engaging students in content that is culturally connected, creative, and critical requires innovation and risk. I incorporate mediums such as documentaries and social media to enhance visual learning and keep students abreast of alternative outlets for knowledge and skill development. I also encourage students to seek content outside of the classroom that may be alternative to their cultural connections, beliefs, and values. Students can do this by taking classes and reading books that focus on specific racial/ethnic, gender, or intersecting identities. Often, these courses are offered in other departments such as cultural studies and education.

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Students can benefit from exposure to such content that challenges them to consider interdisciplinary knowledge, enhancing their social work development.

I evaluate the progress of my students mainly through participation in classroom discussion and weekly reading reflections. In my class, students are required to write a weekly reflection based on readings and classroom content. I ask students to identify themes and concepts that are relevant to social work practice, and how their thoughts have changed or expanded based on new knowledge. I evaluate myself based on written exercises during the semester in which I ask students to reflect on moments when they were most engaged and least engaged in the classroom content. I then read these reflections to identify themes to determine what I need to modify to produce a constructive learning environment.