Statement of Teaching Philosophy

One of the aims of the International Federation of Social Work is to make a “professional and critical contribution to society.” This concept of critically analyzing social problems and contributing to social change is what initially drew me to social work. As a profession, this drive toward equity and social justice is what makes our field unique and powerful. Therefore, it is my aim as an instructor to share this passion with students, plant the seeds of critical consciousness, and foster critical thinking and dialogue that can ignite my students’ own paths toward social justice.

As part of the process to foster critical thinking among students, I expect students to engage in challenging and potentially uncomfortable dialogues and discussions with others who might hold different viewpoints. Given the controversial topics I bring to class, I co-construct expectations about the classroom with students at the beginning of the semester. For example, we discuss expectations such as respecting one another, validating that some people might have differing opinions on events, and allowing all students to have an opportunity to express their views.

To promote critical thinking and reflection in my students, I incorporate a variety of pedagogical techniques. Knowledge in my classroom is seen as co-created, and therefore I encourage active participation and discussion among students. I strongly encourage active student participation and combine both small group and large group activities to foster critical thinking. Furthermore, I provide weekly online discussion posts allowing students to comment and respond to each other about a topic before we discuss it in class. This facilitates class discussion and gives students who are more introverted an opportunity to express their opinions before discussing them verbally in class.

For example, in a teaching session related to culture and social work, I gave students a recent article from the BBC detailing multiple cases of refugees from the Middle East who entered Europe as child brides. Students split into small groups to discuss different strategies for dealing with this conflict of cultural norms and offer suggestions for ways to work with these families as they enter Western cultures. Students were asked to critically reflect on their own beliefs and values regarding “appropriate” relationships, and evaluate how these beliefs might influence their engagement, assessment, and intervention with these families. Students evaluated the activity after, writing statements such as “this was by far the most interactive class this semester,” and the class was “engaging and interesting.”

In addition to reflecting on their own beliefs and values, I foster critical thinking by asking students to apply theoretical frameworks to current events and issues. As social workers, it is important for us to recognize and address what is occurring in the world around us. Thus, I offer space in my classroom to discuss, process, and analyze pressing issues. For example, in the
Human Behavior and the Social Environment course I taught independently to undergraduate students, I adapted the syllabus so that students could process and critically discuss the aftermath and implications of the Parkland mass shooting. Students connected theories explaining why they believed these types of shootings occurred to actions that could be taken to prevent future tragedies.

Another component that I integrate in my classes is the concept of intersectionality and the multi-dimensionality of social issues. I encourage students to reflect upon their own positionality and experiences in order to examine how their beliefs might influence their decision-making in social work practice. As a field supervisor for undergraduate student interns in Santiago, Chile, I asked students to frequently reflect on how they were coming to conclusions when assessing families with children in Child Protective Services. As an instructor, I also model this process by presenting case studies from my direct practice experience and asking students to critically assess my own decisions. In addition, I provide multiple opportunities each semester for students to share anonymous feedback on ways to improve the course and my instruction.

In addition to feedback on my instruction and courses, I give students feedback multiple times throughout the semester on their assignments. To foster critical thinking, I use a holistic approach to student evaluation that recognizes different learning preferences and validates each student’s unique perspective and insight. For example, I incorporate diverse types of assignments such as reflection papers, research papers, analyses of practice cases, online discussion posts, in-class discussions, and exams with closed- and open-ended questions. To encourage students to apply critical thinking and reflections to their assignments, I give them the chance to revise and resubmit papers based on my feedback and feedback from their peers. With closed-ended questions on exams, I recognize and validate multiple possible answers and encourage students to bring evidence that supports their answer when it differs from mine.

By incorporating examples from my practice and research on child welfare, I blend research, practice, and pedagogy to encourage students to combine all three spheres of social work. Through frequent reflection and application of theories and key social work concepts to current issues and events, my objective is to provide students with the opportunity to ignite their own passion for social work and to become stewards of social change. My focus as an instructor is engaging students to think critically and raise critical consciousness so that they can effectively contribute to the profession and to society.