Teaching Philosophy | Sehun Oh

I approach teaching as a team effort, which builds on a collaborative partnership between instructor and students. Such relationships can be formed when the instructor is dedicated to working with students to create an inclusive environment where everyone feels safe, supported, and encouraged. In addition to promoting an inclusive environment, I strive to achieve effective learning by: 1) helping students to establish a connection with the course, and 2) meeting individual students’ learning needs to maximize personalized learning.

I consider creating an inclusive classroom as the foremost responsibility for all educators. It is not just a normative and morally correct thing to do, but it is essential for facilitating effective learning by assisting students to freely engage in learning. For instance, critically analyzing complex social problems and designing effective and innovative solutions are key learning goals in the macro practice courses in which I specialize. These skills can be developed only when students are encouraged to think outside the box in order to exchange unique, innovative, and even nonsensical ideas. To promote such an inclusive environment, I strive to maintain self-awareness about any biases, prejudices, and assumptions I may bring to the classroom. Moreover, I make myself easily accessible and available to students via various communication means, including in-class questions for feedback, anonymous surveys, and mid-term evaluations as well as emails and in-person office hours.

Along with continued efforts to create an inclusive environment, my early-semester focus is on establishing the connection between the course and students’ interests. As most social work students are more interested in working in micro/direct practice fields, they may need time to appreciate and acknowledge the importance and relevance of course material focused on policy, statistics, and research methods. Based on mutual understanding of the course objectives, I encourage students to apply learning material to their fields of interest. For instance, in a BSW policy course I am teaching this fall, I will assign a semester-long project that provides an opportunity for each student group, organized by overlapping interests, to investigate current social problems and relevant policies tailored towards clients they would like to work with. This allows students to learn more about their specific areas of interest while learning macro skills. This project will also include writing an opinion editorial that can be submitted to a newspaper(s) and a class presentation in the form of legislative testimony so that students gain experience advocating for their clients and communities in need.

I also endeavor to make my classroom a personalized learning environment. Because each student has a unique background and different learning expectations and needs, it is important for instructors to understand each student and work with them by incorporating their unique preferences and abilities in the classroom. As an initial step, I will give non-graded quizzes to assess students’ levels of prior knowledge on basic concepts and analytic tools necessary to process course content. These low-stakes quizzes will inform the early course schedule so that I can adjust my teaching, giving all students the opportunity to understand what they are expected to learn from the course. I use multiple teaching methods such as lectures, visual and auditory materials, group activities, in-class and online discussions, and take-home exams throughout the semester to maximize the opportunities for meeting students’ diverse preferences and abilities as well as to capture their attention.
Most of all, my unique contribution will come from my interdisciplinary and international background. Especially in macro practice and quantitative research courses, I believe that training to examine social problems in broader sociocultural contexts using different perspectives and comparing responses in the United States to other countries’ approaches will lead to greater opportunities for innovative and critical thinking. Whether social work students are in micro or macro practice concentrations, these skills are necessary given the significant impacts of structural factors and social policy measures on the well-being of all clients in the U.S. For such purposes, I plan to assign readings that shed light on the link between sociocultural backgrounds and social welfare policy such as Esping-Andersen’s book, *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism*. In addition, I will introduce European and Asian countries’ social welfare policies so that students will have opportunities to compare and critically appraise approaches used in the United States to promote well-being in its disadvantaged populations.

In addition, when it comes to teaching, I make extra efforts to: 1) prepare up-to-date resources, 2) facilitate guided and thought-generating discussion, and 3) promote experiential learning. Instructors need to be incessant learners, especially when teaching current policies. Preparing the most up-to-date content is an important way to ensure the relevance of the topic. To promote critical thinking, students need to have sufficient guidance during discussion. Therefore, I provide discussion guides so that students can allocate their time and effort to the learning objectives intended for the discussion activities. Lastly, courses are designed with special attention towards promoting experiential learning. Even though social workers have served disadvantaged and underrepresented populations over the profession’s long history, many students in higher education come from middle- or upper-class families and may have few lived experiences in common with our clients. To offer an opportunity to better understand clients, multimedia resources reflecting the accounts of affected individuals and communities, guest speakers, and course activities/field assignments such as research projects in collaboration with community partners will be strategically utilized.

All in all, teaching is a learning process for both instructors and students. Collaborative partnership between instructors and students is the foundation, essential to promoting an inclusive and effective learning environment. Therefore, it is my conviction that I, as an instructor, will put forth my best efforts to nurture mutual understanding and to be a positive role model contributing to the learning environment of each student.