I approach learning and instruction as a relational process with students. I value collaborative approaches to education and practice, where instructor and students alike strive for a more just and equitable society. I believe student experiences and abilities—their professional aspirations, expertise, diversity, identities, strengths, learning objectives and preferences—must be at the center of learning processes. Rather than experts disbursing knowledge, effective instructors are facilitators and learners too, co-creating supportive environments with students to engage with new ideas and challenging problems. In the classroom, I facilitate spaces where students develop autonomy and control over their learning. Mastery-oriented students become engaged participants responsible for their own learning as well as the learning of their peers.

I create learning communities based on mutual respect, openness, and authenticity. I begin relationship building by knowing all students by name, and I learn about their educational interests, career plans, and favorite ways to learn. On the first day of class, I ask students to collectively develop and agree on norms to sustain a more inclusive and equitable learning community. I also ask students to share (in writing) what they wish to learn and accomplish; I follow up on these goals with students throughout the semester. I share professional and personal experiences appropriate to course material and learning objectives. As a mentor and co-learner, I maintain an encouraging and supportive posture toward students, which helps sustain a nonjudgmental learning community. For example, students often share how their personal and professional identities shift during college, some more profoundly than others. Students sometimes navigate new gender identities; I honor student preferences for being addressed with specific pronouns and names, and I have incorporated ways for classmates to do the same. Mutual respect allows students and instructor to engage in critical thinking, reflection, and discussion about pressing social problems and polemic issues.

As instructor for a social welfare policy course, I noticed that students, especially those focused on micro-level practice, sometimes expressed concerns about succeeding in policy class, a foundation course with a writing flag required of all social work students. I work to allay these anxieties and help students build confidence in their abilities to succeed. During the course, I also encourage students to shift their attention to upstream structural factors that impact individual, family, and community well-being. To do this, I ask students to read a memoir or ethnographic work of their choice alongside the core policy textbook. With these intimate stories--of marginalization, courage, struggle, resistance, solidarity, poverty, discovery, trauma, revolution, healing, justice and more--students must grapple with the role of policy in the lives of people and communities in their book choice: How might their lives be different with or without a particular policy? What is the emotional heart of the book? And, most importantly, why should policymakers care about these stories? I developed course assignments and activities to help students forge connections between the experiences of people and communities chronicled in books they choose and assigned readings (e.g., social welfare history, policy frameworks, key legislation, etc.). The pairing of student book choice with a core textbook (and assignments such as a book review directed to policy professionals) gives students autonomy and space for deeper learning; students extend concepts and skills from one context to another, and in ways meaningful to their individual learning and career goals. I was invited by CSWE’s Center for Diversity and Economic & Social Justice to share this innovative pedagogical approach as a featured resource on their website.

Interprofessional experiential activities are integral to social work education. As co-facilitator for an interprofessional health education class comprised of more than 140 students and faculty from social work, medicine, nursing, and pharmacy, I used case studies, simulations, and professional experiences to advance discussions about the role of social workers on medical teams dedicated to improving person-centered care. Given that practice in most settings is team-based and multidisciplinary, I emphasized learning activities that consolidated theory, research, and direct
practice experience, including my work in public hospitals and county jail health clinics, that showed the value of fostering strong teams.

Experiential activities are also occasions for connecting theory to research and practice. My own research experiences in health disparities for marginalized populations with chronic conditions, including prolonged fieldwork abroad and immersion in the cultures and languages of Mexico, informs my approach to teaching. In one class project, I introduce students to structural violence/vulnerability and the social determinants of health as lenses for discerning barriers to medical care for undocumented immigrants. These frameworks spark discussions that push students to consider factors beyond the characteristics of individual patients and providers. Drawing from evidence-based practices that favor incremental approaches to learning (Lang, 2016), I incorporate brief classroom and online activities that attend to different learning preferences and keep students engaged.

Technology can complement and enhance traditional pedagogical methods. As a guest lecturer, I planned and taught online sessions of Dynamics of Communities and Organizations for MSW students. Deploying Adobe Connect, I developed a lesson plan with online breakout groups and assignments as well as class discussions. For in-person classes, I used anonymous online polling to collect feedback about my teaching from students at different points during the course, or even at multiple points in a particular session, to evaluate myself and calibrate my teaching. Along with mid-semester and year-end teacher assessments, polling during class allows students to share immediate concerns and helps me adjust in the moment.

To evaluate students, I prefer learning-based approaches rather than assessments that emphasize rankings. I also build in time and the expectation for students to submit multiple drafts for written assignments, and I give early feedback. Revisions are opportunities for students to engage more deeply with their ideas, assumptions, and arguments. Revisions are also common in the workplace, whether working in teams or individually. I support student efforts to grapple with course material (and its application to learning and practice outside class) as they revisit and refine their work. A focus on writing as a many-stepped process, while often more time-consuming for instructor and student alike, allows learners to work constructively with feedback and focus on mastery and deep learning rather than a final paper grade. During the semester, I also prioritize frequent, lower-stakes assessments that are cumulative and based on clear expectations, such as Monte Carlo-style quizzes (Fernald, 2004). I also use ungraded pre-tests at the beginning of new modules for students to assess what they already know, receive immediate feedback, and develop questions.

With experience teaching and learning in large public universities, I am mindful that opportunities for students to fulfill their academic and professional goals are closely linked to structural factors beyond the classroom. My role as an effective educator entails continuing to deepen my own self-awareness of social justice and inclusive pedagogy, and advocating for students and educators within the school, university, and community.

To conclude, I position myself as a mentor and co-learner with students during their journey from academic endeavors to learning and practice in professional social work settings. As a researcher who values instruction as a relational process, I enrich courses with shared knowledge generation, engage social work students in contemporary issues with multiple perspectives, and develop supportive learning communities for students to achieve their goals.