Hannah Selene Szlyk, MSSW, LCSW

Teaching Statement

My teaching philosophy is grounded in the social work principles of stewardship, person-centered approaches and social justice. Students of social work have two fundamental but critical tasks. First, to learn various social science frameworks and approaches and, second, to apply these frameworks to micro, mezzo, and macro levels of practice. It is my responsibility to demonstrate to students how the concepts from textbooks and articles are related to practice, and to convey to students’ how their personal identity complicates the translation of theory to practice. To achieve these goals, I strive to create a classroom environment that both supports and challenges students as they move beyond their preexisting knowledge and comfort zones, and learn to collaborate with peers.

As the facilitator of the classroom environment, I display transparency about my own professional judgment over the course of my social work career. Through discussion and assignment feedback, I share with students my experience as both a clinician and a researcher and hope to inspire students to pursue the diversity of opportunities that a career in social work provides. Considering that classroom conversations do include serious topics, I model my own humility in dealing with the material, the limits in my knowledge and expertise and demonstrate the on-going process of self-awareness and professional development as a social worker. In return, students are expected to model respect and empathy for themselves and their peers.

To actively engage students in their learning process, I use a flipped classroom. Students are expected to have weekly readings completed before class and to participate in class discussions and mini case studies to practice and apply new knowledge. This method also ensures that students have more opportunity to learn from each other and articulate their emerging social work knowledge. Weekly Monte Carlo quizzes\(^1\) are another format for confirming knowledge of the topics addressed in assigned readings. Monte Carlo quizzes involve 10 multiple choice or short answer questions on the assigned reading. Students will only have a quiz if a peer rolls an odd number at the start of class. The questions from the quizzes will be incorporated into midterm and final exams. The repetition of material allows students to build mastery of social work frameworks and concepts, and enhance their ability to apply theory to practice.

Writing assignments are essential tools for students to identify their interests in social work and to articulate and synthesize their knowledge of course content. A literature review is one way for students to become better acquainted with empirical literature surrounding their topics of interest in social science and apply this knowledge to areas of social work. This assignment prepares students to become social scholars, as they search for and select peer reviewed articles, strategically and critically read articles, and develop an argument surrounding this literature. Students are responsible for smaller components of the assignment to practice how to write an

American Psychological Association style paper. I have students turn in a draft of the literature review once a semester to receive feedback from their peers and myself. Students learn how to receive and integrate feedback into revised product and refine their ideas and assumptions surrounding their topic.

Finally, a case analysis paper assists students in integrating their new knowledge in writing, using empirical literature, and course content on social work frameworks together. I believe it is important that students clearly see how course work and readings can be applied to real world scenarios that they will encounter in the field. For this assignment, I have students chose one of three case options and use theoretical frameworks and journal articles to guide engagement, assessment, and intervention, and evaluation of practice for the targeted client system. In accordance with the Council on Social Work Education’s Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards, this assignment prepares students to build clinical judgement and tailor social work approaches to meet the needs of a specific client system.

Students have the opportunity to participate in midterm evaluations of my teaching and of the classroom curriculum in order to establish ownership in their own learning process. Students are encouraged to write down remaining questions and concerns about the course content on index cards each week. My professional standards and the syllabus demonstrate the expectations that students will arrive on time, participate in class each day, and put forth their best work. These expectations are linked not only to their academic success, but are also ways to further develop their professional identity as a future social worker.

Additionally, I encourage students to apply critical thinking to understanding the layers of privilege and power in terms of their clients’ experience, how these dynamics apply to their client’s wellbeing, and their own role in the provider-client relationship. I believe it is essential for social work students to begin exploring how their personal and professional identities will interact. It is essential that students think of self-awareness as being just as important to their social work practice as learning a new clinical technique. Classroom discussions, the case study assignment and literature review allow me opportunities to assist students in “digging deeper” regarding social issues and the intersection with their personal biases and opinions.

I consider myself a facilitator of social work knowledge, critical thinking, and professional development. I prepare my students not only for the social issues that they will face in their daily work, but for the intrapersonal decisions they will encounter as they grow as social work professionals. Most importantly, it is my responsibility to continue to mentor students of minority or lower socioeconomic statuses in pursuing post-Bachelors certifications and degrees. Too often, I have observed skilled and competent students be deterred from exploring opportunities due to finances, time constraints, and lack of support in navigating higher education. To pay forward the opportunities I have had in higher education, I strive to assist all students in achieving their career goals and to increase the diversity of social work students in practice, policy, and research.