I teach in order to 1) foster critical thinking in students; 2) develop empowered change agents that are well-grounded in social work values; and 3) model a socially-just relational learning environment, which provides students with a lived experience of an equitable community and instills hope that such communities are achievable in the broader society. I rely on Paulo Freire’s and bell hooks’ principles of liberatory education to achieve these goals.

Liberatory education calls on students to be active participants, empowering them to take control of their own learning and effect social change. For me, this means creating an inclusive and accessible learning environment, which encourages reflection, dialogue, and productive conflict. To accomplish this, I begin each class by asking students to recall the times when they attempted an important conversation that did not go well, resulting in a relational disconnect. After acknowledging the pain and frustration that such situations generate, I propose approaching our class as an experimental relational learning community that explores new ways of being in a community and engaging in important conversations. Students identify shared values and associated behaviors that can sustain this alternative community. The community then actively uses these values and behaviors to ensure accountability. This process has consistently generated a relational classroom where students are not only responsible and accountable for their own learning, but responsible and accountable for the learning of others.

In the liberatory classroom the instructor is a facilitator rather than an expert. As such, I identify clear learning objectives; strive to ensure a comfortable physical space; design course content that is engaging and dynamic; and make sure that students are simultaneously challenged and supported. I also incorporate cognitive, affective, interpersonal, and intrapersonal domains of learning that build on the students’ lived experiences. This requires me to use both traditional pedagogical tools like reading and writing, and non-traditional ones like music, visual arts, and graphic timelines. Small- and large-group dialogues allow me and the students to collectively analyze our circumstances, find links between our own experience and historical and global processes, and develop a "big picture." I also utilize experiential activities, community-based learning, and carefully-structured assignments to facilitate student-centered learning. This highly interactive process of knowledge-generation provides a profound opportunity for each of us to reflect on our social identities, power, privilege, and the structural inequalities that shape society and our own lives, all while remembering that these issues have significant implications for our social work practice.

In liberatory education, however, the education process is not complete without action, personal or political. That’s why in my Women’s Issues in Social Work and Social Welfare course, the students develop a series of public workshops, rather than presenting their chosen topics to classmates only. This innovative assignment generated an Annual Women’s Issues Workshop Series, well attended by students, faculty, staff and community members. Similarly, in my Social Justice and Human Diversity course, I developed a semester-long three-part assignment to help students understand the dynamics of privilege, which was subsequently adopted by several Social Justice and Human Diversity course instructors. The assignment required students to engage in a series of dialogues with individuals outside-of-class who shared a form of social group privilege with them, being white or able-bodied for example. After recording, transcribing, and analyzing the dialogues using a sociological framework, the students describe their findings in a reflective paper. Through this process students learn, reflect, and practice dialogue skills while taking action within their spheres of influence.

My commitment to modeling socially just relational learning environments also informs the way I assess students. Throughout the class, students can request informal feedback on work that is in-progress. I also use a formal mid-semester evaluation to solicit feedback from students about the
course progress, which allows me to address issues and make changes. Periodically, I also collect positive feedback and constructive criticism at the end of the class, making sure I have a good sense of our progress. I always base my grades and evaluations on assigned work and clear performance criteria. Given the highly interactive nature of the classes, I address possible concerns about “politically correct” answers by ensuring a neutral grading scheme based on completed work and demonstrated knowledge, rather than views or opinions. Finally, students receive extensive feedback on all submitted work. If students are not satisfied with the grade they receive on written assignments, they are welcome to revise them until they are satisfied with the grade.

My commitment to fostering critical thinkers and engaged change agents well grounded in social work values goes beyond my classroom teaching. I served as a social work field instructor for almost ten years and volunteered to serve as an academic advisor for students who were passionate about health equity, social justice and women’s issues. I support former students by writing recommendations, serving as a reference, helping them make career choices, sharing resources and contacts, and working through ethical dilemmas.

I continue to develop self-awareness, facilitation skills, and content area knowledge by actively seeking new training, reflection and action opportunities. For example, this summer I attended the Center for Popular Economics’ 2017 Summer Institute at the University of Massachusetts Amherst titled Building global solidarity in an age of division: The political economy of trade, migration and climate crisis. This allowed me to make significant revisions to my upcoming Foundations of Social Justice course, for example emphasizing the intersection of economics and oppression based on social group membership. I believe that my commitment to such activities reinforces to students the requirement that ethical change agents commit to a life-long process of learning.