“Equipped with knowledge, armed with courage, and tempered by prudence, may you continue to strive to bring wisdom to human affairs, to toil for justice, and to advance the common good.”

---- John Afred Hannah

The above quotes from John Hannah captures my view of teaching philosophy of higher education, especially in the field of social work. My experiences as a trained clinician and researcher significantly shape my approach to social work education. I value close attentions to both empirical evidence (from practice) and theoretical knowledge (from research) in teaching in social work. In addition, the integrative application of the two components should be reflected in a broader social justice context. As a social work educator, I aim to share the theoretical and empirical (real-world applicable) knowledge of social work that will: (1) allow students to develop a comprehensive understanding of social work theories from various disciplines and discourses, (2) become aware of the value of empirical knowledge for social work, and most importantly, (3) use the social justice perspective to critically examine various practice behaviors (from micro to macro) that are driven by empirical and theoretical knowledge.

Conceptually, I want to teach my students to move beyond pure intellectual thinking but to use their well-equipped intellectual property to advance the greater common good. Social work is neither just a discipline nor just a profession. It is a combination of both (Lovelock, Lyons, & Powell, 2004). Therefore, across various courses I am going to teach, I will emphasize the content, how to master the content but also the rationale behind the content. For example, in a statistics class, after introducing the statistical theory, relevant research questions and how to conduct the analysis, I will continue to facilitate students’ thinking on how any particular statistical analysis can be used for client advocacy, agency improvement, and policy reform. Also, in a clinical practice class, I will move beyond the theories and techniques of any psychotherapy approach, and to guide students thinking about the assumptions, presuppositions that any clinical approach can impose on the clients. Generally, students will be offering multiple chances for reflection throughout the learning process. I will carefully nurture this reflection process so that it will become a more sustainable trait even after the students finish their higher education.

At the content-specific level, I want the students to understand the wide spectrum of social work practices and where clinical social work or direct practice intervention is placed in the spectrum. To achieve this, I encourage them to think “outside the box”. For example, in a class for cognitive behavior therapy (CBT), I will facilitate students’ conversations on the both similarities and differences between CBT and other practice approaches in social work. I will guide the students to talk about concepts that are unique to CBT and concepts that are borrowed from other approaches. A frequent question for discussion will be “now that we know it is an effective clinical approach, what do we know when we use this approach for mezzo- or even macro-practices?” I will use classroom debate, peer simulation among other pedagogical approaches to facilitate the discussion. As a result, I expect students coming out of the class not only knowing what CBT is and what it is not in comparison to various other clinical approaches.

At the course-specific level, I will make sure that for each individual class session, different types of knowledge will be delivered: from theoretical, to empirical, to reflective and critical thinking. Typically, a class would start with a mini-lecture to lay the foundation of the whole session. The instructor, I, will make sure that students understand the basic definitions, facts, and
others. The class will have students to discuss and reflect with their peers in small groups and/or as a whole. After making sure the students all have a good grasp of the course content, I will encourage the class to critically challenge what have been discussed as well as to apply what they have learned to social justice related issues.

To achieve the student learning goals at all level, I intend to: (1) offer an interactive and diverse teaching methods; (2) incorporate various assessment that are appropriate and intellectually stimulating; and (3) create an inclusive classroom that is safe, motivating and intellectually challenging to the students. I strive to create an inclusive classroom environment that is safe, supportive, and experimental for intellectual ideas. I intend to know all my students’ name early on during the semester, and encourage activities (e.g. group project, team building) to foster students’ sense of belonging. Most importantly, I will make myself available to speak to students outside the classroom any time they feel needed. As a growing profession, social work itself is still constantly evolving. An inclusive classroom will offer plenty opportunities for bold, innovative and brilliant ideas to create social change. I will make it clear that I will do my best to make students’ learning experiences a pleasant and productive one. I will also share my vision on the power of learning from peers as well as the importance of a safe, friendly classroom environment.

Apart from traditional lecturing, I will use multi-media (online video material, movie clips etc.), group discussion, role simulation, theoretical debate and many other forms of pedagogy to accommodate the diverse learning styles and skills students might have. In terms of assessment, I value every effort students put in their learning experiences. I plan to include one-minute paper (writing down what you already know about the subject in class), self-reflection on learning, closed book exams and project papers. It is my belief that students are all natural learners, and they will be highly motivated to learn once being given the right platform. Granted, I will run into students who are less motivated from time to time, I plan to be as supportive to those students as I can and, meanwhile, to hold them accountable for their decisions and behaviors. This “supportive-yet-hold-them-accountable” relationship with the students is what I view as an ideal mentorship. Lao Tzu, one of China’s most prestigious philosophers and educators once said “give a man a fish, he eats for a day. Teach him to fish, he will never go hungry.” Mentoring a student moves beyond imparting knowledge and evaluating his/her learning. Mentorship is also about cultivating students’ motivations to learn (why it is important and what’s the purpose), and about nurturing a sense of responsibility and self-regulation during the process of learning. Therefore, I will carry with me those principles in collaborating with students for mutual learning. As a strong believer of effective communication, I will offer plenty opportunities (e.g. end of class evaluation, mid-semester check-in) for students to exchange their suggestions and comments with me on how to make future classes more effective and productive. By encouraging students to have more involvement in the course, it will motivate them to be more committed and responsible throughout the learning experience.

Most social work students come to the profession because they “care” – the very reason why I became a social worker – and this is what I aim to mentoring my future students – something to carry forward. My ultimate vision for all my students is that, with the knowledge developed, assumptions challenged, critical thinking cultivated, they are confident of what they do to help others, and find more meanings to their own lives.