As a social work educator, I use student-centered inclusive practices to teach practical skills and enhance critical thinking. Critical thinking skills are important for all students and the practical skills taught are determined by the course topic and class level. For example, the skills learned in a research methods course for undergraduate students compared to doctoral students will be conceptually similar but the latter will go into much more depth. Alternatively, the skills learned in a research methods course compared to a community practice course will be different, while still based on similar EPAS and competencies. I teach practical skills and enhance critical thinking by blending a mix of theory, evidence-based, and practice-based knowledge. Using the core competencies as guide, I also cultivate students’ sense of professional identity as social workers. For example, I teach students about professional behavior as social workers by my own use of reflection and self-regulation to manage personal values while discussing difficult topics in class. I also model the empathy that social workers should show the people they serve by being aware of students’ situations and being flexible with assignment due dates if needed.

I strive to create an inclusive environment for students beginning on the first day of class. The students and I discuss expectations such as respecting one another, validating that some people might have differing opinions on issues, and allowing all students to have an opportunity to express their views. I model this by inviting all viewpoints and addressing each viewpoint with a thoughtful response, either on the spot or at the next class session. Establishing this type of environment is important as I invite students to take risks and challenge them to appreciate rather than avoid complexity. I challenge students with topics that bring about difficult dialogues. However, I do not tell students the meaning of a concept based on my interpretation of it. Instead, I provide ideas that the students can take and make their own. For example, some students in Texas, where I taught, are perfectly comfortable with guns in the home and others are not. It is important to learn about both sides of the debate and I do not push any agenda on any student’s views. I encourage the construction of meaning through collaboration and discussion with other students in the classroom. I learned about the importance of using closed-captioning from taking courses with hearing impaired doctoral students. I now make sure any auditory materials I use while presenting have closed-captioning as another method of practicing inclusive teaching. I also let the students know that I am just like them in that I am constantly learning ways to improve. For example, I tell them that I try to use “you all” or “y’all” when addressing the class but sometimes I accidentally use “you guys”, which is not inclusive. I tell them this to explain that everyone can do things to be more inclusive and little details make a difference.

The classroom setting will seldom compare to real-world experiences which leads me to place an emphasis on experiential learning. Since social work is a practice discipline at the graduate and undergraduate level, it is important to incorporate real-world assignments. One example of this is teaching students how to understand basic principles of research for the purpose of utilizing evidence-based practices in the field. As a former child welfare worker, I understand the importance of using evidence-based practices and also understand the challenges (e.g., access to journals, time in the workday) frontline workers face to stay up to date so they can use evidence-based practices in the real world. Nevertheless, it is still important for students to practice
understanding and critiquing research. Another example is the use of clinical healthcare setting simulations. Simulations provide opportunities to make mistakes and learn under high-pressure low-risk circumstances. I incorporate examples from my experience as a social worker in a county social services department, non-profit agencies, and hospital. I also use examples from my research on child health to explain how research and practice are tied together.

I use multiple teaching methods in addition to the experiential method, such as lectures, visual and auditory materials, group activities, in-class and online discussions throughout the semester to maximize the opportunities for meeting students’ diverse learning preferences and abilities. There will always be students that are more comfortable speaking up in class, and it is important to provide many opportunities to pull out ideas from those who may feel they have less of a voice or are more introverted. I find this can be achieved through small group and online discussion boards. Due to COVID-19 I had to adapt and hone in on new instructional methods. I am now proficient in online teaching. For example, when using Zoom, I utilize break out rooms and class polls. I also use Proctorio, an exam and quiz proctoring tool through Canvas, to administer synchronous or asynchronous virtual quizzes. As I mention above, I try to put myself in the shoes of the students while playing the role of professor and as part of this, made modifications in the attendance policy in order to address the challenges of students who had difficulty with internet access or competing priorities while at home (e.g., small children in the home). I also make myself easily accessible and available to students via various modes of communication, while maintaining boundaries, such as typically allowing for 48-hour response time.

I am always looking for ways to improve my reach to the students. I conduct anonymous in-class surveys and mid-term evaluations to understand how to better present the course materials or improve my teaching methods. I then incorporate this feedback into the second half of the semester. Another tool I use is asking a fellow colleague to sit in on my class to provide feedback on a given class session. If I am administering exams, I utilize tools from our Faculty Innovation Department that allow us to submit our tests so they can provide analyses to understand which questions are most difficult. This gives me time to figure out how to best present that difficult concept or material.

I use various methods to evaluate the students based on the type of class. I utilize tests, papers, presentations, and group projects to evaluate collaboration skills. For example, tests and critiques of research are great evaluation methods for a research methods class. Alternatively, having students develop interview questions, conduct the interview and then transcribe and analyze the response for the purpose of presenting to the class is a great way to evaluate students in a course on working with communities and organizations. To encourage students to own their assignments, I often allow them the opportunity to revise and resubmit larger assignments based on my feedback. I find students are appreciative of the opportunity to revise and improve their work.

These components of teaching are essential to achieve my goals of teaching practical skills and enhancing critical thinking to prepare students to enter their respective field. I put forth my best efforts to nurture future social workers and vow to be an incessant learner to provide students with innovative and up to date instruction.