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Teaching Philosophy & Statement

Education has always been an integral part of my life. Ever since I was young, my parents valued the practice of critical thinking. When I got home from school, I was not only asked about the content of what I was reading, but I also engaged in the Socratic method to explore the underlying assumptions of the material. I learned that I had valuable things to say, which was particularly liberatory within a sexist education system where women are taught to be quiet, agreeable, and friendly. I hope to foster similar opportunities in the classroom by encouraging my social work students to engage in critical thinking. Consequently, my teaching focuses on three student-centered goals: 1) create an inclusive learning environment; 2) provide opportunities to engage in critical thinking and improve oral and written communication; and 3) apply theoretical concepts to practical experiences.

My teaching philosophy is informed by pedagogical scholars such as Paulo Friere and bell hooks, who both recognize the potential for education to be a form of liberation. According to Friere and hooks, liberatory education requires both consciousness raising as well as praxis (or action). I believe reflection and practice are well-suited for social work education, and necessary for the training of socially conscious social workers. During my Introduction to Social Work and Social Welfare, both reflection and praxis were incorporated throughout the semester. Students are assigned weekly reflections, whether on discussion boards or longer papers. Additionally, students completed a group presentation about a local social service organization and the role of the social worker, in order to learn how social workers in the community were engaged in praxis. They also applied their understanding of social inequities and structural oppression to a local issue.

It is essential that undergraduate and graduate students are taught to engage in critical thinking. Critical thinking requires at least three components: interesting reading, reflective questions, and strong facilitation. My syllabus provides students with different forms of information for weekly assignments including readings, articles, videos, podcasts and social media. My syllabus also includes a diversity of authors and perspectives and there were multiple reflection assignments such as discussion boards and short papers. Not only does this give students flexibility, it also increases the chances that they will be engaged in the content. This creates an accessible learning environment, where students can choose material that aligns with their learning style. Students are evaluated based on their classroom engagement and assignment completion with opportunities for extra credit such as attending online trainings or seminars.

While designing an engaging syllabus is crucial, the process of creating space in the classroom for critical discussion is equally important. Students typically have different levels of comfort with in-class discussion based on the content, format and audience; this can be even more relevant for online teaching. Therefore, I provide multiple opportunities for engagement including online discussion boards, small discussion groups and live polls or surveys. Moreover, it can be difficult or uncomfortable for students to have their assumptions or beliefs challenged. In order to facilitate nuanced discussions, students generate class guidelines, which creates an intentional space for students to make mistakes, learn, and grow. It sets clear expectations for critical conversations and acknowledges some of the uncomfortable feelings that can arise. Therefore, the classroom becomes a place where students can learn to become comfortable being uncomfortable, an essential skill for any social worker.

I believe communication is a core skill for social work students to practice in the classroom. Social workers regularly work in complex systems such as healthcare or child welfare and need to be able to understand a system's intricacies, synthesize that knowledge, and clearly communicate it to colleagues, clients, and coworkers with varied educational backgrounds and life experiences. In order to allow students to gain clarity on their thought processes, I ask them to engage in classroom discussions, practice forming opinions and speaking in front of others. I also require at least one class presentation on a theory, concept, or idea that students prepare throughout the semester. This gives students an opportunity to focus on a topic of interest, gain specialized knowledge, and share their findings through peer-led teaching.

Finally, it is important for students to understand the reciprocal relationship between theory and practice. Theories serve two main purposes: to provide foundational knowledge about complex systems and to better understand our own or our community's lived experiences. Therefore, students apply theoretical and clinical concepts to practical experiences in my classroom. For example, critical race theory is an essential framework to understanding structural racism in America, as it connects American laws and policies to racial oppression and disparities across a number of sectors including education, housing, and healthcare. Further, if we want to advance the field of social work practice, we have to connect theories more broadly to the lived experiences of the clients and communities we serve. I present critical race theory in one of the first lectures, and incorporate it throughout the semester by applying it to several examples such as clinical cases and social policies.

I am dedicated to collecting student feedback throughout the course of the semester. I regularly poll students at the end of class about the content and delivery method, in addition to any outstanding questions. I distribute an anonymous class evaluation mid-semester that is based on the standardized evaluation provided by the University of Texas at Austin. Once I have received feedback from at least 50% of the class, I review and present the findings to the class and implement changes as needed. For example, my Introduction to Social Work class asked for more opportunities for small group discussion, so I reorganized my upcoming lectures to provide them with more time in breakout rooms. All of these techniques have served me well, as I received an overall instructor rating of 4.8 out of 5 and an overall course rating of 4.7 out of 5 for my Introduction to Social Work course. Some specific feedback I received were as follows:

“[Liana] has really supported my education by being gracious when I expressed personal issues and giving me an extension that benefitted my learning in this course. She truly cares about her students and responds thoughtfully to messages. I am really glad to have taken this course and I recently submitted my application to dual major in social work because of it!!!”

“A lot of the information that we learned in this class was local, or the topics she spoke about she made them personal to a lot of us who are located in Austin, and I think it’s important to make information relatable so we retain it better. I would highly recommend this course to a lot of people who are just even thinking about Social Work as a career path!”