

# Teaching Philosophy Statement

Bethany Wood, MSW, CSW

---

Steve Hicks School of Social Work | The University of Texas at Austin | 801- 433-8544 | bethanymwood@utexas.edu

I teach so that when students leave my classroom, they will be better prepared to examine society through critical lenses, disrupt systems of power, and ultimately mitigate social injustices through advocacy, practice, or research. My teaching philosophy is grounded in anti-oppressive frameworks including Critical Race Theory, Krieger's Ecosocial theory, and Paulo Freire's pedagogical model as they relate to social work education as a process of liberation. Although my own education in social work was especially liberating for me in understanding how poverty affected my early childhood, my experiences as a closeted undergraduate student attending what is consistently ranked as one of the least LGBTQ+ friendly universities in the U.S. are also deeply informative in my current inclusive pedagogical practices for minoritized students. As an educator, I am committed to inclusive, critical, anti-oppressive pedagogy. To accomplish this goal, I utilize engaging teaching strategies that emphasize inclusivity, critical thinking, and social justice.

To foster learning as an inclusive experience, my pedagogical approach considers students who have varying socioeconomic, racial, ethnic, disability, and other intersecting identities. I lead discussions on expectations for each course, including creating an environment where students with marginalized identities feel safe to share their own experiences (e.g., using each person's pronouns) and where all students are encouraged to lean into difficult topics and conversations. I aim to build rapport with my students throughout the semester, including taking time to mentor them one-on-one or by being transparent with my students about *why* the skills they are learning will be helpful to them. For example, I explained that I chose R as the statistical software in my *Social Work Statistics* course because I understand that this software is accessible in many social work settings, at no cost, following graduation, and has countless free resources for continuing education after my class. Despite many students expressing initial reservations, many of those same students expressed excitement to add the statistical training they received to their resumes. Earning an Inclusive Teaching Certificate at UT Austin helped me apply universal design principles to increase course accessibility. Furthermore, because I recognize that academia is often an unwelcoming place for students who have faced systemic learning barriers, I also infuse choice into the classroom. For example, my *Introduction to Social Work* syllabus includes a menu of assignment options for visual and kinesthetic learners, such as artwork, online petitions, and video recordings, in addition to a traditional written option. For this assignment, one of my students chose to create a 20-minute video documenting homelessness services in Austin and decided to continue engaging with this population through social work following the project.

As Paulo Freire states in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, "Liberating education consists in acts of cognition, not transfers of information." Therefore, to cultivate critical thinking among my students, I use anti-oppressive frameworks in my classroom, lectures, and assignments. As the instructor for *Introduction to Social Work and Social Welfare*, I select theories (e.g., Intersectional Feminism and Critical Race Theory) that encourage students to deconstruct their own biases and recognize systems of power (i.e., patriarchy and White supremacy). Guided by these frameworks, my syllabi intentionally reflect the experiences and scholarly work of minoritized groups. For example, as the instructor for *Social Work Statistics*, my students read chapters from Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva's *White Logic, White Methods: Racism in Methodology* in preparation for a class discussion and assignment. In my teaching, I select techniques that build upon students' critical thinking skills to help them develop skills from anti-oppressive pedagogy, such as conducting self-reflection or identifying their social responsibility in various situations. I also extend this to the profession. For example, my discussion board questions regarding Indigenous Peoples' experiences with child welfare prompt students to write about the

## Teaching Philosophy Statement

Bethany Wood, MSW, CSW

---

Steve Hicks School of Social Work | The University of Texas at Austin | 801- 433-8544 | bethanymwood@utexas.edu  
current responsibility of social work, given past injustices committed by social workers against Indigenous Peoples through the child welfare system. I aim to help students to be critical of existing structures in society, including social work and its history, in order to inform the future.

To create an environment where students can see themselves as proponents of social justice, I first engage students by making my classroom a dynamic place for learning with multiple forms of participation. For example, when teaching *Introduction to Social Work and Social Welfare*, I include live word clouds and online polls to gain anonymous participation, class discussion to engage participation, discussion in pairs to facilitate social connection. Next, as social work is a practice profession, I relate the concepts I teach to existing societal injustices by providing real-life examples relevant to social issues, such as designing a hypothesis related to food deserts. Additionally, as I teach about social injustices, I model considering multiple integrative points of intervention, including at the individual, community, and policy level. Then, to help the students move to consider levels of intervention, I lead discussions in class and design assignments to assist students in practicing this skill out of class. For example, in my *Introduction to Social Work* class, several students chose to write their final paper on environmental justice and addressed different points of intervention across the ecological model for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers. I know that I have been successful as an instructor when students express that they are more prepared to engage with social issues beyond the classroom and students can explain why social justice for marginalized communities is critical to social work.

Measuring my teaching effectiveness is of paramount importance to me. To do this during the semester, I collect frequent anonymous feedback from students about their experiences in the class and implement changes based on their responses. This is an effort to encourage students to be critical about the material I present in class, in order to make the most of their learning experience in my classroom through constructive feedback and the practice of self-advocacy. Following the semester, I measure my impact through instructor and course reviews. As the instructor for both *Introduction to Social Work and Social Welfare* and *Social Work Statistics*, I received a 4.9/5 average on both my course and instructor scores (department average: 4.2/5). Although I taught students who had not chosen online education last year, students commented in their course reviews that my classroom was the “most engaging” college course that they had ever taken, some students requested that I teach their future courses since I used techniques that matched their “learning styles,” and others noted that I was “highly responsive to feedback.” I have mentored previous students in various ways, including assisting with graduate school applications, turning assignments into publishable work, and conducting research. I deem it my responsibility as an educator to prepare students to mitigate societal inequality through practice, advocacy, and research.

In my future as an educator, in addition to teaching policy and research foundation courses, I would welcome the opportunity to teach poverty and mental health focused courses. I am also interested in creating specialized courses, including *Social Determinants of Mental Health*, or a seminar on the intersection between neighborhood inequality and environmental justice. As a mentor, I would be especially eager to mentor first-generation, international, and queer graduate students. Furthermore, I would be happy to host research writing groups for students facing systemic barriers in higher education, including older students, students with disabilities, and students from low-income backgrounds. My teaching and mentoring style can be described as engaging, collaborative, and grounded. I will continue to prioritize teaching and mentoring students as one of the most effective ways that I can contribute to mitigating inequality in our society.