

Teaching Statement | Erin Nolen, MSW

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My teaching philosophy is rooted in the idea that learning is a fully embodied experience, where students do not just bring their minds to the classroom, but also their bodies, emotions, experiences, and social contexts. Embodied learning requires both participation and transformation, and my role as an educator is to create a space where personal growth is possible in addition to meeting course objectives. I am committed to creating an environment where students will be empowered learners and agents of change within their communities through three primary strategies: 1) applying real-world examples and practice to learning objectives, 2) using scaffolded learning opportunities where projects gradually build on learning concepts, and 3) balancing course structure with flexibility.

I served as an instructor for Research Methods in Social Work, which is often perceived as a boring or difficult course among undergraduate students. I help students understand that research and data are essential for pursuing social justice by sharing creative ways research and data can be used in social work practice. This includes using community resource maps, community assessment reports, and policy briefs to inform stakeholders on important social issues. I bring in real-world examples from my professional experience at an anti-hunger non-profit and show how community maps with various health and poverty indicators can be used to highlight underserved areas of a community. I share community reports I have authored to showcase how program data, such as child nutrition participation rates, can be used for advocacy and funding purposes. I support students in identifying the strengths and weaknesses of data and research from an intersectional perspective. For example, I have students identify how certain forms public data are not disaggregated by sex, non-binary gender, and often do not include individuals who are pregnant, elderly, or disabled, which has important implications for social work programs and policy.

My curriculum and assignments are rooted in the belief that adult learners benefit from having agency in their own learning and that learning requires ongoing and cyclical feedback. Thus, I use a variety of assignments to evaluate learning, encourage students to think about how data informs our everyday lives, and provide ongoing iterative support. I use innovative methods such as online journal entries, engagement with news sources and social media, and real-world application to encourage critical thinking with all types of learners. Journal entries allow students to personally identify how research shows up in their everyday lives, helping students understand that research is not just long reports and confusing data charts, but is what holds our society together. I encourage critical thinking through a Media Analysis project where students identify a social topic, locate news sources covering the issue, and discuss how those sources use data to back up their claims. Students then rate each news source in terms of data bias and provide recommendations for more fair reporting in the future. I use peer-teaching strategies to reinforce curriculum objectives and to allow students to ground research concepts in their own experience. For example, I assign students into Expert Groups where students discuss a research scenario (e.g., one group is tasked with developing a survey instrument to identify community concerns about COVID-19 vaccination; another group is tasked with developing a qualitative interview guide for evaluating a program focused on reducing bullying in schools). Each group discusses a series of questions together to critically think through core research skills that apply to their scenario. Students share their key findings to the larger class, which gives them an opportunity to teach one another and reinforce key research concepts.

In addition to viewing students as agentic and embodied learners, I believe that teaching must help students “learn how to learn.” Many students are learning how to write college-level papers for the first time, so supporting their writing development is crucial. I provide scaffolded

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support to students by having them pitch their research questions early in the semester and then providing soft deadlines for section drafts throughout the semester to provide feedback on the development of their research design. I support students in the development of their writing skills by providing in-class opportunities to practice literature searches, differentiating between synthesizing and summarizing literature, and providing examples of paraphrasing to avoid plagiarism. Peer reviews are also a helpful way for students to identify strengths in others' writing and to learn about their own strengths which they may not recognize for themselves. I have experience in designing both online and in-person lectures and activities. In my Research in Social Work course, students provided positive ratings and feedback—my overall instructor and course ratings were higher than the department and university averages in Spring 2022.

I am committed to anti-oppressive education by critically considering the power and privilege I hold in shaping curriculum content and classroom engagement strategies. My unchecked assumptions might shape the learning experience for students, so I regularly discuss challenges and strategies with my mentors and peers and seek out students' feedback on assignments and classroom structure. I use multiple discussion formats including think-pair-share, small group discussion, peer-based learning, and brief writing exercises so that students can express their learning/viewpoints in ways comfortable to them. I am committed to intentionally incorporating readings and guest lectures from BIPOC scholars and supporting students to address racism at both personal and systemic levels. Because our identities are often developed in the context of community, I recognize the significance of the classroom in grappling with issues of identity and oppression. Two ways I will approach my teaching moving forward to support this critical reflection is to have students keep personal journals where they can acknowledge and work through feelings of discomfort, consider the differences between each other's lived experiences, and to reflect on their own story and history to move through the embodied tensions of racism and oppression. Secondly, as a tangible strategy toward creating a brave classroom space, I will have students participate in naming classroom values together, including which values should be prioritized (e.g. communication, honesty, respect), so that they will remain invested and in control of their learning environment and to set a structure for supportive discussions.

An embodied philosophy of teaching means recognizing that my students are more than their cognitive development. Teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic has been challenging, with students (and instructors alike) experiencing mental health crises. Many students began my course burnt out, which was a difficult challenge to overcome. Showing up, being kind, and providing a predictable structure is an important starting place, especially when our social environments feel unstructured and precarious. Embodied teaching requires embodied learning, and I am committed to both.