

Teaching Statement | Catherine Wilsnack, LMSW

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When a flower is not growing, people are often quick to assume that something is wrong with the flower itself. However, more often than not, it is actually the flower's environment that is inhibiting its growth. Similar to the classroom, if a student is having difficulty learning or achieving academic milestones, my first inclination would be to examine their environment rather than critique aspects of the student. My teaching philosophy is inspired by using Person in Environment (PIE) theory to consistently monitor how students are influenced by their environment (*e.g.*, myself as an instructor and others in the classroom) and in turn how the environment shapes their learning as a student. I strive to promote these values by (1) building strong rapport and trusting relationships among students and myself, (2) using a relational approach to balance power dynamics and empower students' autonomy and confidence, and (3) integrating diverse voices and topics in curricula that increase students' critical thinking skills.

Teaching and learning are iterative processes in which feedback from both students and the instructor can improve the classroom environment and optimize learning goals. One way to increase students' learning and confidence with the material is by providing feedback that is both positive and constructive. I strive to strike this balance by offering positive reinforcement when students demonstrate understanding of a concept, while also offering ways in which they can continue to improve certain skills and consider different perspectives. I believe teaching is most effective when students feel safe and connected with the instructor and with their peers in a way that fosters a supportive, inclusive environment. I find that open communication and transparency with students allows students to feel comfortable enough to express when they do not know something and are able to ask for help from me or from their peers. Conversely, this dynamic can serve in facilitating more difficult conversations when students may not agree with their peers or with my opinions/perspectives. To establish open communication and transparency, I always practice active listening when students express questions or concerns. My experience as a mental health clinician has uniquely equipped me to handle difficult conversations and emotionally charged topics in a skilled, tactful manner that can help de-escalate situations and allow for a safe space to talk about challenging things that occur both inside and outside the classroom. As PIE theory would indicate, stressors in a student's life outside the classroom can impact their learning and must be acknowledged to help maximize their full potential.

As an instructor, it is imperative to continuously learn about your students to and what they need from the class in a way that will allow them to apply their learning in real-life situations. Preparing accessible lessons that allow students to meaningfully engage with the content in different formats (*e.g.*, slides with visual and auditory aids, videos, group discussion, office hours to schedule one-on-one time) is helpful to account for different learning styles and to increase confidence with the material. Learning and growing as individuals does not have to be done in isolation but can be done collaboratively with others. Sometimes, students may feel intimidated and lack confidence that impairs their ability to trust the knowledge and skills they already bring to the classroom and share it with others. Instructors should model humility in how it is okay to not know everything and that at all career stages, learning is a constant process. From my experience, using a relational approach allows for balancing power dynamics by challenging what it means to be an "expert" and how myself as an instructor does not mean I know "better" or "more" than them, but that we all have skills and knowledge we can share with each other that increases our collective learning. I would have consistent opportunities throughout the semester for anonymous instructor feedback so that students feel safe to have a say in their own learning. A relational approach empowers students to recognize that they are

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also experts in holding and creating important knowledge related to the professional and personal work they do. More importantly, a relational approach normalizes that as humans, we will make mistakes and mistakes do not define our capabilities as students or professionals.

I believe that topics related to diversity, equity, inclusion, accessibility, and social justice are essential to incorporate into every lesson as these topics are inherent to social work values and ethics. Maintaining diverse and equitable dialogue across lessons will not only help students become stronger critical thinkers but will also allow students to identify and address social issues that cannot be taught via textbook. In every lesson, I would present concepts and theories from multiple intersections of thinking then incorporate case examples that I have encountered during my career as a researcher and clinician so that students can examine the course material from a practice perspective as well. I often use case examples to challenge problem solving from multiple viewpoints and how to carefully consider topics of race/ethnicity, sex, gender, religion, etc. in practice that ethically upholds social work values. Using an anti-oppressive framework, I would diversify representation of scholars in the curriculum and task students with bringing underrepresented scholars to their individual and classroom learning. For instance, in any course, I would have students complete an assignment where they can bring any material to the classroom (*e.g.*, an article, a video, a piece of art) that challenged their existing knowledge of a topic related to the course and present it to the class that facilitates critical discussion.

During my second year as a doctoral student, I took a pedagogy class that was instrumental to learning and improving my teaching skills. I had to give two guest lectures to MSW-level students, and I received written, anonymous feedback from students afterward. The two classes I gave lectures were for Human Behavior and Social Environment (HBSE) and Social Work in Healthcare. For both classes, common feedback included students describing me as an engaging, relatable, warm, and an approachable lecturer. For the HBSE course, multiple students attested that I presented and explained developmental theories in a way that went “*deeper into more intersectional thinking*” and is “*something that is not always seen in the program.*” Before beginning my guest lecture, I asked students how they felt about theory and a common sentiment expressed was that they felt it was challenging to connect theory to clinical practice. After my lecture, one student described how they felt like I made the material “*more accessible*” by not only teaching them what theory is in human development but how it can be observed and applied in practice. For the Social Work in Healthcare course, one student wrote, “*she did an amazing job covering the topic of hospice, answering questions in a very detailed way, and providing case examples to allow class discussions*” which overlapped with other students’ feedback that also affirmed how the “*powerful case studies*” that I presented helped them feel more secure in their capabilities as a future clinician and normalize that asking for help is part of the learning process. Overall, my experience as a researcher and clinician has positioned me well to teach both methodological courses and clinical practice courses.

As someone who has been a student for most of their life, I know how much I have learned and how much I have yet to learn, but I feel very confident in my ability to relate to students in a way that fosters their learning goals after all the years I have dedicated to my own education and training. Life does not stop once a student enters the classroom and I believe my teaching philosophy and practices takes on a holistic approach that thoughtfully considers barriers and facilitators to a student’s learning. My previous instructors have been very impactful for shaping the researcher and clinician I am today so I would be incredibly grateful to teach alongside students in a way that allows me to meaningfully be a part of their professional development as well.