



University of Michigan Provost's Teaching Innovation Prize

2013 WINNER



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The Stick Project: To Transform and To Be Transformed

Innovation Description

How can instructors address the limits of teaching practice-oriented material within the confines of a classroom? How can learners directly experience topics being taught in order to develop rich understandings of abstract and amorphous concepts?

In social work, it is particularly challenging to convey to students the process of personal transformation for clients seeking change in one or more aspects of their lives, and to further address the responsibility inherent in guiding another. Not only must practitioners be able to build effective relationships with clients, but they must also practice effective self care to protect against burnout.

Part of an experiential-based syllabus, the Stick Project assignment invites students to observe and spend time with, write about, and physically transform ordinary sticks. This puts students in the shoes of a client working at change, struggling with what comes along with change, grappling with the downside of the process, and celebrating progress toward goals.

The experience teaches clinical humility and empathy with a client's purpose for engagement. Future practitioners develop flexibility and tolerance for ambiguity, so that they are ready to work with whoever shows up. The creative and reflective aspects of the assignment offer opportunities for renewal and reinvigoration—vital resources in a stressful profession.

Student Comments

"Each student had to form a relationship with their stick and create a journal reflecting our thoughts and feelings throughout our experience."

"I mean, it's obviously great as a walking stick, but what else can a stick achieve?"

"I try to interact with it a few minutes every day—usually rubbing my hands over the bug holes, thinking about the time it took for the insects to burrow into the wood, and the unforeseen, unintentional beauty that resulted."

"Makes me think about the childhoods of a lot of the youth. They see everything and experience so much, but have no voice."

"In the beginning, I thought the project was too free-spirited and impractical. Why would I want to spend hours and days carrying a stick around in awkward situations and wracking my brain to find some unique way to make it my own? ...because being a good social worker requires self-reflection, creativity, innovation, knowing how to handle awkward moments, and the ability to take control of a therapeutic process."

"A huge revelation...the Stick did not need to be anything, but rather it was a means of our experience. ... I have learned the power and influence of creating experiences. They are life-transforming, no matter if they fail."

Examples of Teaching Innovation



The "weird stick-carrying students" undertake activities that encourage linkages and sharing about personal and professional areas that often remain hidden. They create a community within a large graduate program.



Each stick had to be the main character of a short story or poem. "The Bridge of Indecision" helps people overcome their fear of making bad choices.



Imperfectly carved spirals represent hours of responding to differences in the wood—a metaphor for the patterns of relationships, sometimes easy to maintain and other times taking intense focus and hard work.