

# TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

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My pedagogical approach is based on the social work principles of empowerment and praxis. I use a collaborative learning and teaching approach in the classroom that brings to life the social work theories and practice skills. Modeling community practice skills, I create a classroom environment that builds upon existing student knowledge, experiences, and intersecting social identities to support and challenge students to push their learning edges, fostering the development of critical thinking and concrete practice skills. While I specialize in social work *macro* practice, I feel strongly that students must be capable of bridging their micro, mezzo, and macro skills to use within and across various social contexts. Learning, practicing, and reflecting upon these skills in the classroom frame my social work pedagogy, and lie at the heart of social justice education and the social work profession (Adams, Bell, & Gruffin, 2007; Freire, 1971, 1994; hooks, 1994).

## **Critical Pedagogy**

In order to foster students' critical consciousness and deep learning, I start the semester with a series of exercises that allows students to get to know each other beyond their concentrations, start building trust, and develop an environment where we are all teachers and learners. I engage students in exercises where we discuss what it means to create a respectful and engaging classroom. In particular, we discuss the differences between safety and comfort, and how we can create a safe environment where we can turn conflict and discomfort into opportunities for learning and growth for everyone in the class. One area that often pushes student's learning edge, often creating discomfort and conflict, involves discussions in class around how our social identities impact our social work practice. How, for example, does a straight Latino man who grew up middle class, and attended top universities, recognize the cultural lenses that impact the way he approaches and interacts with a poor Latino and black community living in a housing project. In order to help us engage difficult questions and situations, like the one above that often involves intersecting issues of power, privilege, oppression, and social justice, I work with students to develop evolving classroom guidelines and tools to help us engage in difficult conversations like this both inside and outside the classroom.

I like to use dialogues and role play to learn how to effectively and respectfully leverage our social work tools, while recognizing our various positionalities (Collins, 2000), to best support empowerment on the individual, group, community or state levels. From this space, we use in-class exercises and assignments that give students the opportunity to try out new skills, while providing tools and a context through which to learn from these experiences. For example, I run my community organizing classes like a community group. Within that group, we develop our mission, goals and objectives. While students are learning about important group work and organizing skills, they also take turns facilitating our "meetings," setting agendas, engaging in one-on-ones, teaching each other, and dealing with conflict as it arises. They also engage in outside organizing as part of the class, so they use the class to engage other students in the issues they are passionate about. Likewise, I use reflection papers and journaling to assist students in taking steps toward their own learning in a place outside the classroom where they can be more vulnerable. I further incorporate the learning process into my assessment plan by not only grading on what people know but on their reflective learning processes. By doing so, I try and help students understand that becoming a good practitioner involves not only learning history, facts, and concrete skills, but also learning how to listen and become lifelong learners, a critical social work skill. Finally, I give the students the opportunity to turn in drafts of papers so they can not only get feedback on their work, but can also begin the next step of learning: incorporating feedback into their ongoing learning processes.

## **Learning from Various Sources**

I try to further develop critical consciousness and deep learning skills by combining various types of readings, theories, and experiences. I not only bring in social work and social science reading material, I also bring in those readings that people in the community are currently engaging. For example, in the

area of community organizing, both community members and community practitioners/organizers have written important articles, blogs, and books that are critical reads if students are planning on becoming organizers or other types of community practitioners. These materials tend to be both more current, and they often tell stories that are missed by academia. In addition, I feel it is important that both students and I share our own practice experiences and stories as both practitioners and community members. These stories help bring together theory and practice, and help us learn from our experiences.

I also bring my research into my teaching, which examines pedagogical and organizing models for people with power and privilege to support social justice. Currently, I am examining an organization of young people with wealth who want to leverage their access to support social justice. Often using humor and “fun,” they work to both support and challenge constituents to build critical consciousness around issues of power and privilege in their lives and related institutional structures that maintain systems of inequality and oppression. Meanwhile, they support constituents in taking action on both personal and institutional levels. One tool used in their workshops that I have brought into the classroom, is called Side Effects (of class privilege). The goal is for participants to understand how privilege impacts their perception and experience of different events. It challenges the idea that being wealthy equals being the smartest, hardest-working and most deserving. Side effects include *the boss effect*, *the ivory tower effect*, *the waffle effect*, *the stage hog effect*, and *the big idea effect*. Through role playing different side effects, participants can recognize the side effect of their privilege when it surfaces and change their behavior, thus coming more aware, intentional and effective in different situations. I have used this and other pedagogical tools in my classes to help students understand their structural positionalities both in the classroom and in the field. In this case, I modify the exercise to include race, sex, gender identity and other social identities. We examine how these both play out on a day to day level, and how they can move forward to constructively impact change.

### **Modeling**

To help students push their learning edges, I try to model this behavior in class. When appropriate, I disclose aspects of my social identity that are examples of identities which both hold positions of power and privilege, and those social identities that are more oppressed. I further ask them to hold me accountable. One concrete thing I do each semester is to offer midterm evaluations. I then bring the evaluations back to class and discuss each of the points raised – what students like and areas we need to work on. I acknowledge all comments and take ownership in the areas I need to work on. I’m also open to reconsidering class assignments and processes. For example, I once had a weekly assignment that students did not like, so together we discussed other ways students could get the same learnings, and collectively developed a learning/exercise tool. I also discuss my own learning disability on the first class, and use it as an opportunity to discuss how we all have different learning styles; I encourage students to approach me about their learning needs, and to support each other’s learning styles.

### **Conclusion**

I bring my pedagogical approach of empowerment and praxis to all aspects of my academic life. I take my role of mentorship very seriously. I encourage students to come and talk with me outside of class about issues related to class or other issues. Many come to talk about class, their future career options, and general issues they are having in the program. Likewise, with research assistants I take the time to explain not only how to do the research, but why the questions are asked and the methodologies used, and how both the process and outcome of research can impact practice. I further encourage them to bring their knowledge, interests and critiques to the research. Finally, I use my collaborative learning and teaching approach when working with colleagues so we can build on each others’ knowledge to create more innovative learning experiences.