



**CREATIVE PEDAGOGIES FOR TEACHING SPIRITUALITY IN  
THE CLASSROOM**

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## **Introduction**

Spirituality has been acknowledged by the social work profession as a necessary component of social work practice for the past two decades, as evidenced by the number of articles published pertaining to this topic as of late. However, there seems to be a lack of integration of the topic of spirituality into social work education curricula. In order for students to become competent in addressing issues of spirituality with clients, they must be trained and equipped in this area. At our university I teach an elective social work course, *Spiritual Formation and Issues in Social Work*, where I seek to assist students in self-exploration, broaden their understanding of spiritual and religious language and learn to set boundaries in discussing spiritual content with clients.

In designing a course with the content focus on the ineffable, it seems incongruent for the process of the class to be lecture/listen followed by exam-taking. The entire premise of the course is on the individuality of spirituality with clients and the powerful dynamic of the client/worker interaction when spirituality is allowed in. In order to effectively teach this, I find that it must be *modeled* and *practiced*. Therefore I view the classroom as a semester-long training environment and the instructor as a role model.

## **History of the Course**

In 2002 the chair of our social work department, at a Christian Liberal Arts University, approached me about developing and teaching a course on the topic of spirituality in social work. She explained that in the past several years the social work literature was increasingly reflecting this topic as a need for consideration. Furthermore, while historically we have, as a profession, been afraid to speak of things spiritual or religious with clients, for fear of crossing the line of self-determination, we have neglected a large component of the person-in-environment perspective. We have claimed to be holistic, yet have dodged an area of clients' lives that could potentially hold a great strength and hope, or conversely a source of pain and unrest in their lives. (Gotterer, 2001) This being said, my department chair surmised that it was time to devote an elective course to the topic, and being a Christian university there was no reason for us to hesitate. She asked that I teach the course, as she knew my personal pursuit of God was of great importance to me as was the ethical and authentic use of self with clients.

With fear and anticipation I began to design the course, searching for the perfect textbook and the best assignments to use. At the time, it was difficult to find a text that fit with my desired outcome. I determined that the course focus was to be: spiritual self exploration for the students, the development of this area of their lives, the growth of the skill of values suspension with clients and the identification of areas of the field with a direct spiritual connection for their future work with clients. Most texts that I found fit into the following few categories: solely focused on Christianity- leaving little room for other spiritual paths; "Church Social Work"- limiting the setting of practice; Religion and Psychology- which didn't match either piece; or books where spirituality was broadly defined yet weren't focused on tools for work in the field. So, I began the process of collecting journal articles, readings from these aforementioned text books, selected chapters from popular spiritual and counseling books and began the compilation of a long

bibliography of articles that would become the meat of our class. Since the inception of the course, readings have been added and removed based on their effectiveness and the discovery of new pieces.

The process of the class seeks to provide a safe environment for students to explore their own spirituality as well as grapple with how to use their spiritual awareness to ethically and respectfully support their future clients.

### **My Personal Journey**

Being raised in a spiritual and religious home has informed my worldview. During my undergraduate education I was growing and being nurtured spiritually while simultaneously being educated as a helper and change maker in the field of social work. I found myself grappling with these two parts of myself and wondering how to reconcile them in my future work. They seemed, for the most part to compliment each other, while there were areas that challenged me. I was perplexed as to how to integrate my personal and professional selves, as Lawrence Shulman so aptly phrases. (Shulman, 2009) In graduate school I was further confused and conflicted. However, it was during my second field placement, at an Adolescent Counseling Agency, that I saw the most ethical, beautiful, diverse spiritual work being done with the young people we served. I had co-workers from all walks of life and all faith backgrounds loving each other, entering into spiritual conversations with clients, meeting them where they were and seeking authenticity, harmony and competency. This was a gift to me, as I then would enter a public school setting, in the role of an Alcohol and Drug Prevention Specialist. Being in a public agency setting, I knew the limits that I had regarding spirituality, but had found a way, through my training in my field placement to discuss things of a spiritual nature with my clients. I was able to help students become involved in Alcoholics Anonymous, which is a spiritual (non religious) program. The experience I had of being a guest in countless meetings furthered my growth as I saw the power and need of spirituality in the healing process. During these years I found that I was able to respectfully and genuinely engage clients in conversations about their faith in a way that honored the dignity and background of my clients.

### **Objectives of Class**

- A. **Importance of Spirituality:** Understand and articulate the value of spirituality in social work practice.
- B. **Personal Growth:** Have a clear picture of his/her own spirituality in order to be self-aware.
- C. **Diversity:** Have a greater understanding of various faith communities as well as ethnicity's role in spiritual formation and its influence on clients
- D. **Ethical Practice:**  
Honor the dignity and worth of an individual's spiritual journey in a non-judgmental way.

Enhance the well being of humans as they identify and address the spiritual realm.

Demonstrate an understanding of how to honor the social work values and ethics as learned through the NASW Code of Ethics in addressing issues of spirituality.

### **Course Content**

#### **Personal Growth**

I have found the students I encounter are either: strong, and at times even rigid, in their spiritual beliefs, or conversely, they are disconnected and uncomfortable with this aspect of their lives. For each perspective, there is need for growth in their comfort with the topic while practicing self-determination with clients. In order to effectively use “self” as a tool, one must be comfortable with issues past and present in one’s own spirituality. It is essential that a student feel comfortable with an adaptable but authentic language of spirituality. In the course students are led through a process of spiritual self-assessment. We read and discuss articles, which provide inspiration and examples of this type of self-work. The students each posts weekly on a Class Blog reflecting and applying the class articles and discussions and responding to each other’s thoughts. In addition they write a spiritual self-assessment, complete with a spiritual genogram. (Hodge, 2001)

#### **Ethical Practice with Clients**

Through the course we consider areas of social work practice that have a seemingly direct link to spiritual conversation. We specifically discuss, in some depth, the areas of grieving, death, illness, abuse and addiction as important areas for spiritual assessment and intervention. These were selected as each has an inherent spiritual aspect to it. Grief is a spiritual work and death and illness cause us to face our limitations and our mortality. Oftentimes themes of afterlife and faith emerge. Within this scenario the spiritual health of the family members can significantly impact their response to the eminent loss. With the healing of addictions, there is much spiritual work to do, as individuals face their vulnerability, powerlessness, and seek hope, healing and release. The 12-step model of recovery is a spiritual path and has been vastly successful internationally. Abuse is included, as it is a situation in which the survivor undergoes much spiritual work in his/her restoration (forgiveness, letting go, release, rebuilding self-image, etc) and at times may even overcome religious abuse that was used against him/her by the abuser. The course also addresses the link between culture, ethnicity and religion, inviting the students to increase their cultural competency and religious understanding.

#### **Teaching Tools/Assignments**

Along with discussion of the assigned articles, the course includes several creative components that seek to engage both sides of the brain in learning and discovery in practice. These assignments and teaching strategies are utilized in order to engage students in the learning and also model for them techniques that can be utilized with clients. These are discussed below:

### **A. Class as a Training Environment:**

Not only is the course full of rich *content* for our spiritual and professional development, but also the *process* of the course is purposeful. The class is a discussion format, and I seek to use the class as a training environment for the students. I consider this similar to Social Work Practice courses, which oftentimes use the classroom as a training ground for skills and techniques. Therefore, I seek to model for them: values suspension, personal work, non-judgment, sensitivity and centeredness. Furthermore, I ask that they treat each other in this professional manner, for the good of the classmates and the development of skills.

### **B. In-Class Activities**

\**Chime/Meditation*- At the start of each class, we set the tone for the class with a time of silence, breathing and centering, marked by the ringing of a small chime at the beginning and the end of our moments of silence. . This allows us to calm our minds, focus on the present moment and move away from the bustle of campus to the quiet of the classroom. Students have reported that this has been beneficial to their class experience and helpful to teach them the value of silence and stillness.

\**Guest speakers*- Throughout the semester several clinical social workers visit the class and speak about how spirituality is a part of their work with clients in various practice settings: hospice, faith-based family counseling and domestic violence work.

\**Free Writes*- Occasionally I will provide the class with a writing-prompt related to the topic or reading for the day, and have them “free write” in class. A few of our favorites are about “How I see myself” – a piece on identity; The Seasons of My Life – in response to Robert Fulghum’s chapter on Ritual (Fulghum); and A Serenity Prayer Assessment.

\**Pairing and Sharing*- for some of the articles discussed in class, I break students into small groups and have them discuss and draw out highlights to share with the class. One article introduces a Breath Prayer and I pair students to discuss the use of this technique in their own lives and in their clinical work.

\**Case studies*- We read and discuss case studies, which include dilemmas of culture, spirituality and ethics and discuss issues of values, ethics and best practices.

\**Art Activities*- Torn paper mosaics, watercolor painting and sculpting are a few of the art activities that are sometimes used in the class to stimulate the right brain for reflection and personal analysis. This also introduces creative tools useful in their future social work practice settings.

\**Fruit Meditation*- In conjunction with a section of the course on mindfulness, centering and mediation, students read selections from Thich Nhat Hahn’s *Peace is Every Step* (1992), and I lead them in a fruit meditation.

### **C. Out of Class Activities/ Graded Assignments**

*\*Silence and Mindfulness* “field trip” to Radnor Lake (a nearby state park)-

We spend one class during the semester traveling to a nearby state park to spend time opening our senses, focusing on breathing and walking in silence on the trail. We then share our learnings, observations, what we heard, saw and felt during our journey. It proves to be an effective time and one that leaves an indelible impression on them. Many begin a habit of returning to continue this practice in their personal lives.

*\*BLOG:* As an ongoing journal exercise and additional conversation, we have a class blog. Students are each assigned a week during the semester to post an entry. The student reflects on the reading and discussion from that week and poses a question for their peers. Students are required to comment each week in response to the posed question.

*\*Spiritual Self-Assessment:* Students complete a self-assessment of their own spirituality, including a reflection and evaluation of: past experiences, family of origin’s influence, and present experiences, beliefs and practices. The paper also includes a spiritual genogram (Hodge, 2001).

*\*12 Step Project:* Students are required to attend three 12-step meetings of their choice (meeting schedules and information are provided). They are then to write a paper on the role of God in the healing process for those who struggle with addictions. We discuss these experiences and findings in class.

*\* Faith Observation Research Paper & Presentation:* Students are required to select and study a faith, denomination, or religion of which they are not a part. They are required to attend a service at the place of worship, interview an individual of that faith, research the significance of their spirituality, and write a paper about these and how this knowledge will help them as a clinician. Students present their findings to the class and are required to provide a printed handout for each class member during the presentation.

### **Successes and Challenges**

As is often the case with a discussion-based course, the unique dynamic of the group brings unknown challenges. With each class, the level of sharing and maturity of the students vary. It is always my hope that there will be a fully engaged class, who equally share the space of conversation. This ideal is not always a reality. However, a safe, non-judgmental space is non negotiable and can be created through ground rules, encouragement and modeling by the instructor. This is, after all, a training ground for clinical social work practice in the community. Valuing the dignity and worth of each individual is of utmost importance.

At times, when I have had a class with many students reticent to share, I have used small groups for discussion, so as to provide a smaller arena for their sharing. When I have had dominant students in the class, I have encouraged a 5-comment limit for students per class, in order to help them select with greater care the contributions they make to the conversation. Moving outdoors, having guest speakers, creating art together all seem to

keep the course fresh and help to engage all types of learners. The BLOG has been a great asset to the student's sense of safety and connection with each other.

This course is typically comprised of social work majors and minors, psychology or sociology majors, and students from other disciplines who have had a personal recommendation of the class. The elective course that I teach is now offered every semester and its success is due, in great part, to students' recruiting their peers to register for the class. Students have reported that it is "their favorite class", that "they wish they could take it every semester as it was so centering in their life" and that "they think it should be a part of the required BSW curriculum because they are seeing the value of it in their field work" (Belmont University Student Evaluations, 2009).

### **Options for spiritual content in the social work curriculum**

There are many ways of approaching the teaching of spiritual content in the curriculum. A course (elective or required) solely focused on the topic of Spirituality and Social Work is ideal. The course content could be integrated in whole or in part into the social work curriculum of a social work program on the undergraduate or the graduate level. However, if a program cannot sustain an entire course, or provide instruction time for it, "modules" can be developed and infused into other courses (Practice, Field, HBSE). What seems essential is that the course content reflects the goals of the university and program, aligns with the NASW code of ethics and is taught in a creative and engaging way.

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