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“A Vital Christian Presence in Social Work”

THE ART OF TEACHING SOCIAL WORK: REFLECTIONS ON MY JOURNEY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Introduction

In this paper I reflect on my personal journey to teach. I also cite some relevant literature and summarize my teaching methods and philosophy. This paper gives valuable insight into my teaching style, and also gives helpful information to other professors, especially new faculty members or those looking to change their teaching style and class format.

Background: Early Beginnings

As long as I can remember I have wanted to teach. While growing up, my younger sister was my student and had homework, workbooks and chalkboard lessons in my room. In my senior year in high school I entered a careers program where I spent the second half of my school day as an assistant in a first grade class. I never pursued education as a career because although I thought I would enjoy teaching, I found children difficult to work with. Years later while I was conducting workshops for adults I realized that this was the age group I enjoyed teaching. As a social work student I expressed mixed feelings in a journal to my social work professor. Although I loved my social work major I wondered if I would regret not pursuing the education field. My professor's reply was simple but through it she encouraged me and expanded my thinking. "Why not do both? You can be a social worker who teaches, I am." I thought to myself, maybe someday I could do that. Years later that came back to mind and I pursued making the dream a reality. I now teach social work classes and work with that same professor and several others I knew as a BSW student. This has been a major accomplishment and reaching this goal brings personal satisfaction to my life.

Getting Started

I pursued an adjunct position at The Richard Stockton College of New Jersey in 2001. I was disappointed when I did not get an offer to teach right away. Then a year later, I got a phone call from the program coordinator explaining that they needed someone to teach *Ethnic and Minority Relations*. The faculty member scheduled to teach it could not and the class was in danger of being cancelled. I was informed that this was my opportunity to prove myself to the program and college. I call it "my big break". Always up for a challenge I agreed to teach the class and went right to work. I had less than one week before the semester started to prepare for a course I had never taught before, in fact I had never taught any college course before! I put together the syllabus, all assignments, the evaluation methods, and got the desk copy of

the textbook. Everything came together quickly and on class one I was handing out the syllabus like all the other instructors.

Pushing Forward and Gaining Ground

My first semester went well and I learned everything from experience, the rapid on the job training a.k.a. trial by fire. I discovered that my grading system was much too complex, so I made a mental note to simplify it for future semesters. Other lessons learned were that it takes a *long* time to grade papers and that students have no problem letting you know when they have perceived you have given them an “unfair grade“, it doesn’t matter to some of them that they didn’t follow the requirements for the assignment. I find the area of student evaluation to be one of the more challenging aspects of teaching. Also, my students were bored with my lectures but they came alive and engaged with class discussion and other activities. This encouraged me to do some research on what I later found to be described as creating an active learning environment. During this first semester I also heard the work Pedagogy for the first time and had no idea what it was. Now I still can’t pronounce it, but at least I know what it is!

BOYER: 2

During that first semester and throughout my teaching career, my other colleagues in the social work program and my Assistant Dean were good resources for me. Their experience and the resources they recommended have helped me to improve my teaching skills and courses to benefit the students. My role is not just that of teacher, but also of a learner as I strive to stay teachable. Each new course and semester is a new learning experience and another step along on my journey through higher education.

On My Way

Although my first semester went reasonably well, the program needed to wait for the results of the formal course evaluations before deciding to ask me to continue as an adjunct. We use an evaluation tool called Student Evaluation of Teaching (SET) where the students rate their instructor and the course. My results came back and were considered very good, especially considering it was my first semester and I had only a few days to prepare for the course. I was asked to continue teaching as an adjunct. The next course I taught was *Introduction to Social Work* and since then I have been teaching both courses on a regular basis. There is no doubt that I have now established myself as an instructor.

Navigating Class Format

Although I originally started teaching using a traditional lecture approach, I have since moved away from that format. After my first two semesters of lecturing the book chapter by chapter, I started researching other methods and styles of teaching. I don’t remember all the sources I consulted at the time but I completely re-vamped my courses beginning with the Summer 2004 semester. Since that time I continue to make minor adjustments each new semester as I see what works and what doesn’t by experience. The last few courses I have taught were one night a week in a four hour block from 6-9:50 PM. This also requires me to be creative and use a variety of teaching methods in order to keep the attention and interest of the students.

Evaluating Progress

I have found that it is vital to be self-aware and evaluate my teaching on a regular basis. In order to do this, I use a combination of my own self assessment and reflection as well as student feedback. I review my SET results and pay special attention to the majority and all answers to the open-ended questions. I also use a mid-semester evaluation and a first day reaction index card. My goal is to gain student feedback as the semester progresses from the very start through to the end. I consider all of this feedback when developing my class format and teaching style for future semesters. Angelo and Cross (1993) examined several other methods of assessment that I am also considering incorporating into my student feedback process.

Overcoming Obstacles

I have also had my share of difficult and disruptive students. There is always one or two in each class. Amada (1992) stressed that there are some actions that can be taken to prevent or minimize disruptive incidents. I have found that as I moved away from the traditional role of the instructor as dictator and only expert, that this has decreased disruptions in class. I believe that part of this is due to my new teaching style and format as well as the closer bond created between the students.

BOYER: 3

Stopping to Look and Examine the Syllabus

I spend a lot of time preparing my syllabus each semester because I believe it is a crucial element in teaching. My syllabus is always very detailed because I want students to know and understand what is expected from them right from the beginning. The advantage of this is that it helps the student plan their semester and decreases their anxiety about the course assignments. The disadvantage is that it does not give the instructor as much freedom and flexibility once the semester is in progress. I go over the course syllabus during the first class and encourage students to ask questions. I also make myself available and approachable throughout the semester. I have found an article titled "*An Examination of the Integrity of the Syllabus*" useful and it explains some of the rationale for the detail involved in my syllabus (Habenek, 2005).

Discovering Teaching Style and Methods

In my courses I take more of a group facilitator role. I use small group activities, films, guest speakers and student presentations to keep it interesting and offer a variety of learning experiences. The disadvantage to this style is that students who are visual learners or who need to write and take notes struggle and may feel that they are not learning enough because of this non-traditional approach. However, I have used their exam results and pre and post test scores to show them just how much they are learning in the course. I also find it is helpful to explain this class format and my teaching style, as well as why I use it during the very first class.

I also spend time doing ice-breakers during the first two classes to help develop class cohesion. Although this can be time consuming, it is very important and saves time and difficulties later in the semester. The obvious advantage to using ice-breakers is that as students become more comfortable and familiar with each other they feel free to participate in class discussions. Some who started out as strangers at the beginning of the semester are friends by the end of it. I believe this gives students a greater sense of belonging and makes their overall college experience more rewarding. I have also had an attendance and participation grade to further encourage class discussion, although I have found this to be very subjective and difficult to assess at times.

In my preparation for future classes I am also trying to offer more of a balance in my format to appeal to students with a variety of learning styles. I am in the process of putting together power point presentations. I plan to use these to start class before moving on to general class discussion and small group activities. This change is in response to student feedback which reported that they like the discussion format but some felt they needed more notes to help them prepare for exams. Time will tell if this is a winning combination, but I think it will be. My teaching and courses are getting better each semester and I think that is due to my

willingness to always try something new and then assess its effectiveness.

New Developments

Quay and Quaglia (2004) addressed the issue of creating a positive environment that promotes learning. They advise trying to do things such as “creating a sense of belonging, moments of fun and excitement, encouraging healthy risk-taking by making things safe for students and providing opportunities for students to be leaders in the classroom“ (p.1). In 2005, Riordan also wrote about the importance of student learning in a supportive environment and the need for the instructor’s role to change in the future. Girgin and Stevens (2005) examine the value of innovative instruction and in-class participation. They encourage the move from a teacher-centered classroom to a student-centered classroom. Their guidelines and method of evaluating class participation is very interesting. I followed this on a smaller scale when I used a rubric to describe how I would evaluate the attendance and participation grade on my summer and fall 2004 syllabus.

BOYER: 4

The Pathway to Empowerment

My movement towards creating an empowering learning environment coincides with several ideas presented by Huff and Johnson (1998). Although their study focused on a graduate-level social work course, many of the principles for classroom empowerment are also relevant to students in undergraduate social work courses. In 1998, Huff and Johnson wrote about “respect, validation, ownership and choice” (p. 376). I believe these are relevant to all students regardless of age, grade level or major. The authors make the point that as social workers we believe strongly in empowerment and that how we teach our classes gives us an excellent opportunity to model the empowerment principle to our students (Huff & Johnson, 1998).

When I first started teaching I did not realize this and my courses were not very empowering to my students. Over time I have begun to keep in mind the principle of empowerment when developing my courses and will continue to seek ways in which to do this. In order to further empower my students I have started to offer them more choices regarding their assignments. They can now choose what assignments they will do from an approved list. This allows them to pursue options they are interested in and feel are a better fit with their course and career goals.

Appreciating the Beauty of Diversity

In addition to empowerment, understanding and respecting diversity is an important value in social work and a major component in all of my classes. Research has shown that courses in diversity in higher education were effective in improving students’ intergroup tolerance (Hogan & Mallot, 2005). I enjoy the opportunity to teach a social work course on diversity as well as weave it into all of my courses. Addressing diversity issues in the college classroom has been a very rewarding experience for me both professionally and personally.

Summary: Teaching As Art

Although social work is a science, when I reflect on teaching social work I view it as a form of art. Each new class allows you to be creative and try different things. Each class is unique because of the distinct people in it and what they bring to the class. I always tell my students that they will learn some things from me, some from their readings, films, speakers...but that they will learn the most from each other. My goal for all of my courses is that students do more than just learn the material, but that the class will have a positive impact on their career and their life. The classroom is a small piece of our society and great change can start there.

Closing Thought: The Journey takes a New Direction

My journey continues as I plan to return to school to further my education and continue advancing along the path of my social work career. I love teaching and view it as an art. In addition to educating students I hope to use my enthusiasm for learning and teaching to inspire other faculty in higher education. I find the study of pedagogy so interesting and it is an area I would like to continue to write and present on in the future. When reflecting on how I can summarize my thinking on a good social work education I thought of the following:

Education must be experienced. A well designed course is like a fine painting or an interesting book...it leaves a lasting impression on all those who experience it.

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A. Sample of Small Group Activities:

Interview a Classmate: Students pair up with another student in the class that they do not know and take turns interviewing each other. This is usually done during the first class and serves as both an ice-breaker and preparation for the Interview a Social Worker assignment.

First Impressions: Students discuss their impression of Social Work and explore how they developed these impressions. This is done early in the semester, usually during the second class.

Social Work and Your Major: Students who are not SW majors discuss how their major/career choice might intersect with social work in the future. Those who are majoring in social work discuss why they chose social work as their major and what areas/fields within social work they are interested in. This is completed during the first few weeks of the semester.

Social Work Poll: Students poll 3 people outside of class and ask them what they think social work is and what does a social worker do? Students then discuss and compare these responses in their groups. Completed in the first few weeks of the semester.

Project Discussion: Students discuss with each other their individual projects and what they learned/how it impacted them. Usually completed at mid-semester or whenever their projects are due.

Defining Social Work: Students work together to come up with one *comprehensive group definition* for the terms “Social Work” and “Social Worker”. Each group shares their definition with the other groups until we have *1 class definition* for each term. This is completed during the second half of the semester after students have had time to grasp what social work is about.

Bill of Rights: Each group comes up with a list of rights for clients of social work services. They discuss the NASW Code of Ethics and how to apply the principles of this code when working with clients. Completed during the second half of the semester.

Current Events/Classified Ads: Students look through the news and bring in articles that address the areas of mental health, children & family, substance abuse, etc. They discuss their articles in their groups and discuss how they relate to social work. Students also search through the classified ads and choose ads that are for social work employment and bring in several to discuss. Completed during the last few weeks of class.

Material Review: Students define and discuss key topics including: empowerment, generalist practice,

privatization, managed care, private practice, agency use of volunteers, self-help programs, host settings, different funding sources and other topics that are addressed in their textbook readings. Each group has different topics they work on and when they all “report back” to the class on their group work it serves as a review of key concepts. This is completed near the end of the semester.

Film Discussion: Students view a short 20-30 minute film that is relevant to the course material and then discuss it in small groups. This is used often in my *Ethnic and Minority Relations* class. The rest of the groups above are used in *Introduction to Social Work*.

Course Feedback Groups: Students break into groups and fill out an anonymous survey giving feedback on the course: what they liked, didn't like, would they recommend the class to others, etc. They also discuss and record what they learned about the field of social work. This is a new group I am beginning to use in all courses and is completed during the first part of the last class. It gives me timely feedback to use in preparation for the next semester, because the formal evaluations take several weeks or months to be returned to instructors.

**Note: I developed all group worksheets, with the exception of the Bill of Rights group exercise.

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B. Student Comments/Feedback:

Reaction Cards: Completed during the first class each semester. (no names)

On the front of the index card (lined side):

Write your reaction to today's class and how you are feeling about having this course for the rest of the semester.

On the back of the index card (blank side):

Write any questions that you have or concerns that you didn't voice in today's class.

Quotes:

- * “Today was very informational. I have a good understanding of what will be covered and expected of me. It was also fun getting to know the other classmates.”
- * “I thought class went well today. It went fast for a 4-hour class and never seemed dull.”
- * “At first I was overwhelmed but as the class went on I was more at ease. The ice-breakers made me feel more comfortable with the whole class.”
- * “The class seems like it will be interesting and fun. I don't like classes where the professor talks the whole time; I like to be involved. This is good since we will be doing a lot of discussions.”
- * “The 1st day of class went well. Getting to know some of my peers was a good way to start the semester.”
- * “The few hours went by very quickly. You had my complete attention the entire class period. I'm excited for the rest of the semester. I think social work is indeed the major for me.”

Quotes from the Mid-Semester Student to Teacher Feedback form:

Response to: “Briefly state one way that this instructor was effective in his/her teaching.”

- * “Very knowledgeable, also very confident with her material.”
- * “She encouraged class participation which allowed the students not only to learn from the book, but also to learn from each other.”
- * “The group work was very effective and made learning the material easier. Having guest speakers- they were all interesting.”
- * “Very interesting class because of your teaching. I was not used to a discussion format, but I now feel very comfortable with it.”
- * “She is very detailed in her syllabus.”
- * “She is very clear in what she expects from us.”
- * “She was very good at answering concerns and questions. She is an instructor that tries very hard to help you succeed.”

Quotes from Formal Evaluation Tool: Student Evaluation of Teaching (SET):

Responses to Question #5: “How might the instructor improve his or her teaching?”

* “good teacher-no need to improve”

* “nothing-she’s awesome.”

* “She is a great instructor. She made the class very interesting and fun”

Responses to Question #7: “What did you think of the format of the course?”

* “Very well formatted. This class was interesting and made it very easy to learn.”

* “excellent, for a 4 hour class the instructor kept my interest in the class”

* “I liked the discussion format”

Responses to Question #8: Overall, was this course a valuable learning experience?

* “yes. I would recommend this class and teacher to others.”

* “yes, I enjoyed coming to class every Monday!”

* “yes absolutely”

Other Comments: * “Teacher has a sense of humor.”