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Teaching Philosophy

Goals for Student Learning

My desire to teach future social workers is informed, energized, and humbled by my experiences. As a former foster youth, my academic and professional goals are born out of a reflection on my own experiences and a desire to improve the public social service system. As a professor, I relish the opportunity to impart skills and values to future workers, and by building knowledge and good practice early, help to positively influence the lives of individuals, children, and families. I am driven by this possibility, and hope that on a daily basis, I bring this excitement to the classroom. Toward this goal, my teaching philosophy centers on six learning outcomes, informed in part by my own experience, but also the work of Harry Specht, Eileen Gambrill, and Patricia Benner:

1. Know that nothing is simple. “Cases” are never as self-evident as they seem, and it is only in exploring situations *with* your clients that you can try to understand what is going on. Make a commitment to engage in dialogue with your clients, to listen attentively, and to avoid rush judgments.
2. Be proud of what you’re doing. You are becoming a social worker because you want to help people. You have taken on risk and costs to pursue this goal, and it is important.
3. Be reflexive about your role as a social worker. While it is important to take pride in the commitment you have made, it’s also essential that you are aware of the enormous power you wield and the possible harm that you can cause with this power. Do not rest on your intentions to do good, or on the confirmations that you receive from society that you are doing good. Be forever vigilant.
4. Be accountable. Take a stand early in your career that you will be transparent in your decisions, and open to criticism of your work. Make a commitment to evidence-based practice even when it takes extra time or is difficult.
5. Be brave. In many ways, society has given up on the clients you serve. Many of your clients are considered to be responsible for their own fates, beyond help, and/or undeserving. In some cases, your clients are considered disgusting, evil, or criminal. Advocating and working for these clients is your daily task, and your calling, but it requires courage as you align yourself with people that others have cast aside.
6. Pursue continued expertise. Expertise is the embodiment of the mechanical rules and procedures of your practice to the extent that your mental and emotional energies are available to your clients on a more human, and personal level. Attainment of such expertise comes only after prolonged and dedicated practice, and only if you value it.

Making the Personal Professional

Following an undergraduate degree and an M.S.W, I worked for three years as a child welfare worker in the San Francisco Bay area. As a worker, I met parents and children who struggled daily with a number of hardships, and I learned that the abuse and neglect that reached the attention of the child welfare system were often symptoms of poverty and other environmental factors that presented challenges for these families on a daily basis. Similarly, while employed as a worker, I also learned that the field of child welfare is full of varied experiences and many layers of complication and that policies, individual actors, and specific child welfare problems interact in ways such that when the system “fails” it is rarely due to corruption, bad actors, or lazy social workers. Instead, child welfare workers are usually competent and compassionate people who do their best on a daily basis for the children and families on their caseloads. By bringing these experiences to the classroom, I hope to teach students that social work is a nuanced process and that the lives of individuals and families are full of subtlety - requiring a thoughtful approach.

In the spirit of Harry Specht, I also hope to communicate a pride in public sector work to my students. Specht grew up in poverty, and had an ambivalent relationship with social services. Fatherless and with an ill mother, Specht lived under the looming possibility of foster care and social workers were both feared and yearned for. Over time, Specht became an advocate for public sector social work, urging the field to recognize the role of the public sector in addressing the systemic issues affecting the underprivileged, and tackling the real concerns of individuals and families by providing goods and services. Specht recognized public sector work as essential in fighting oppression and injustice, and alleviating the real problems that clients face.

As a professor, I hope to convey a similar sense of purpose and pride in students who will choose public sector social work - I hope to feed their passion, encourage them to be brave, and to “enter the fray” with their clients. It is my belief that this type of values-education can only be attained by engaging personally with students, being interested in their lives, and allowing them to bring their personal and professional selves into the classroom. Technological advances in university teaching have come a long way in nurturing this sense of community. In my teaching, I have relied on online portals such as UCB’s bcourses to provide opportunities for students to post materials that they find relevant on course message boards, hold additional office hours through online chat rooms, and connect students to each other through facilitated email. All of these advances create opportunities for students to connect with myself and one other, and to integrate course material with their personal and professional lives.

“To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin.”
-- Bell Hooks

Valuing Accountability

“Honoring our own code of ethics to inform clients and to draw on practice-related research will help us to have the courage and integrity to challenge puffery, avoid propagandistic appeals, and value truth over winning arguments.”
-- Eileen Gambrill

To assist students in becoming life-long learners and continually improving practitioners, I also hope to pass on a commitment to critical thought and evidence-based practice. Especially as students learn to engage their personal experiences and passion in thinking about practice, I also want to arm them with critical self-awareness so that they will be the first to question their own judgment, seek data to inform their decisions, and be open to and accepting of critiques of their work.

To accomplish this, I will pursue an andragogic teaching model, which utilizes a number of strategies designed to engage students as adult-learners capable of taking an active role in their education. These strategies include letting students know why something is important, showing students how to direct themselves through information, and relating classroom lessons to student experiences. In addition, I will help students develop critical thinking by guiding them to see the potential impacts of their decisions. In my teaching, I have found case studies and group work to be particularly effective in helping students learn problem-solving skills and to become critically self-reflective about their choices. By giving students an opportunity to practice social work decision-making, and then opportunities to discuss their decisions with others, I have watched them develop strong arguments for their choices and skills to assess potential consequences. Given the controversial nature of many issues central to social work, I also encourage the expression of multiple perspectives in the classroom, do my best to anticipate conflict, and use disagreements as opportunities for students to develop stronger communications skills and understand different points-of-view. By developing a safe and trusting atmosphere, students become accountable to each other, thus developing norms around transparency and accountability.

While assessment and standards for student work carry a dimension of accountability, they are also instrumental in helping students develop depth and sophistication. In my experience, these objectives are best achieved through iterative writing assignments and presentations where students apply theoretical and practice principles to new circumstances, and where discussion and feedback are integrated into the assignment. In the pursuit of building pride and expertise in student work, assignments will be demanding but practical. I will make sure that students understand the usefulness of their work and can position it within their practice. Furthermore, all student assignments for my courses will require students to make effective arguments, support their claims with evidence, cite their sources, and use high quality references. Grading of assignments will be as narrative-focused and group-directed as possible, with multiple drafts and updates built in to improve dialogue, writing technique, and argument. While I hope that students in my courses will be driven to attain high scores, it is more important that they seek and then take something useful from graded assignments into their practice.

Pursuing Expertise

“Good [nursing] practice relies on the human backdrop of embodiment and our embodied capacities to experience life-manifestations and our common human condition of finitude, dependency, and interdependence. Openness and attentiveness can be cultivated through the development of perceptive skills, character, and skillful ethical comportment as learned directly from those we would help, from education, and from other practitioners. The schooling of [nurses] should encourage and not thwart the ability to see and respond to the other.”

-- Patricia Benner

Dr. Patricia Benner introduced the concept that nurses develop skills and understanding of patient care through a sound educational base, but more importantly, through a depth of experience. She proposed that a practitioner could advance from novice to expert through extensive practice, and also offered that as the practitioner advanced in knowledge, he/she would move from rule-governed and rigid decision-making to decisions that are based on an understanding of situations as a whole rather than separate pieces. Importantly, Benner also argued that as practitioners become more expert and the rules and procedures of practice become rote knowledge, the practitioner is mentally and emotionally freed to engage with clients on a more human, intimate, and interdependent way. Further, it is through

this more actively engaged participation that practitioners provide more “exquisite” care. Ultimately, Benner argues that practitioners should pursue a specialized definition of expertise – one where the practitioner embodies “caring practices that meet, comfort and empower vulnerable others. Such a practice requires a commitment to meeting and helping the other in ways that liberate and strengthen and avoid imposing the will of the caregiver on the patient.”

Modeling Benner’s conceptualization of expertise, I will strive to create a student-centered classroom. One technique that I have found effective is to have students submit open-ended critical questions addressing major themes from assigned readings. I use these questions to frame my lectures, as prompts for written reflections, and to start discussions. This approach is also useful for addressing areas where there is lack of comprehension, allowing students to ask questions that they may be embarrassed or too shy to ask in person. Overall, this process has been an effective means for tailoring my courses to each cohort’s unique abilities, interests, and concerns, motivating students to read assigned texts, and encouraging them to think analytically about the ideas presented.

Personal Development as an Educator

As I hope to instill in my students, I will also take a critically reflexive stance on my own teaching. As yet, I have not worked with a thoroughly diverse array of students, and take seriously my continuing need to understand different learning needs and to make adjustments to my teaching. In a recent teaching evaluation, I gained additional insight about different student needs as some students indicated that the course was too difficult while others stated that it was not challenging enough. These evaluations were an important reminder of the importance of examining my own assumptions and biases, seeking out student feedback early and often, and opening myself to assessment. Through these methods, I hope to continuously learn about different student needs and abilities. Furthermore, by cultivating an environment of caring and trusting adults, encouraging critical thought and openness of opinion, as well as a commitment to accountability and continuing expertise, I also hope to learn from my students how to be more culturally responsive and the types of teaching styles that best facilitate learning. As I encourage my students to look to me for guidance in pursuing expert social work, I will look to them for guidance in pursuing expert instruction.

“Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with student-teachers.”

-- Paulo Freire

Teaching Interests

Child Welfare Policy & Practice
Human Behavior & Social Environment
Program Evaluation
Research Methods & Evaluation
Social Work with Involuntary Clients
Substance Abuse & Treatment

Information or Additional Materials

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