

Teaching Philosophy

Remembering the beginning of his teaching career, social work educator Howard Goldstein states:

The question about what to teach in those anxious moments 30 years ago was far more practical than philosophical... As a freshly minted teacher I knew I was lightly armed with only my 10 years of professional experience... As I was focused only on what to teach, I wondered if perhaps I could find something worth teaching in my collection of notes and other fugitive pieces from my master's education... There was nothing but blank pages absent to the kind of articulate wisdom that I hoped would enable me to impart something intelligible to my social work students... Since that was the case, I had to ask myself, how did we learn? (Goldstein, 2001, p.9-10)

My own experience as a new sessional instructor in the year 2000 was not unlike Goldstein's – I had only professional field experience in social work, and my concerns about teaching were very practical and focused on classroom content and technique rather than more abstract reflections about teaching and learning theories or philosophies. I had little knowledge about teaching techniques and what I did know was based on experience – primarily, my 18 years of experience as a learner in the educational system. My knowledge about theories of teaching and learning developed later as I became immersed in PhD studies, and it was not until then that I started to reflect on my own philosophy and theory of teaching. Articulating these has entailed considerable reflection about my own teaching and learning experiences, including my beginnings as an instructor.

When I first started teaching and reflected upon my experiences as a learner and how I learned best, I concluded that what I most hoped for as a student was that social work education would prepare me for social work practice. Thus, I concluded that my main goal or intention for teaching was to help students learn something that would be useful in helping prepare them for social work practice. I am a very pragmatic person, and thus this pragmatic approach was a good fit for me as a teacher. Many years later, this is still one of my main intentions for teaching: for the class to be useful - relevant, meaningful and practical - to students. Providing opportunities for students to direct their own learning (for example, to choose their own topics for assignments, or to choose from different activity options for a class) in order to meet their own learning needs and interests is one strategy that I often use in the classroom to achieve this goal of teaching something useful.

As a student, what I found most useful in preparation for practice were hands-on, experiential types of classes that were rooted in "real" social work practice and where I was actively doing something relevant to practice, such as role-plays. I did not find being lectured to by a teacher or "expert" in the field to be particularly useful or engaging. Further taking me away from the idea of lecturing as my main teaching technique was my own discomfort in the role of expert – at the time, I did not feel like much of an expert about anything. In fact, I thought many of the students could likely teach *me* something about social work practice given their diverse and sometimes extensive life and work experience. I reconciled this anxiety by making the parallel between teaching and practice. In my social work practice, I did not see my role as expert, but rather as facilitator and supporter of change. In the same way, I came to see my role of teacher as facilitator and supporter learning – a second intention of my teaching. In practice, these intentions translated to techniques or actions that focused on active and experiential learning grounded in social work practice, such as class discussions, case studies and role plays. It also meant that I tried to be supportive and helpful to students as much as I could to facilitate their learning (more on this support piece below). Finally, I believed and continue to believe strongly in the importance of creating opportunities for students to learn from and with each other – for example, to share and learn from each other's experiences, perspectives and knowledge. Creating safe spaces for such collaborative and collective learning is therefore a third intention of my teaching.

In reviewing my main teaching intentions: **to facilitate learning that is relevant, meaningful and practical to students through teaching that is active, experiential and rooted in social work practice; to facilitate and support students in their learning; and to create safe spaces for collaborative and collective learning** - it became very clear to me that at the core my philosophy of teaching is very student or learner oriented. I wholeheartedly believe that the reason we teach is to help others learn, so it follows that teaching is all about the learner. During my PhD studies, I learned that this basic belief entails a constructivist philosophy to teaching. I learned also that I am deeply influenced by theories on andragogy, experiential learning, critical and reflective learning, and humanistic approaches to teaching. I see many aspects of this philosophy of teaching as being consistent with and parallel to my philosophy for social work practice, which is person-centered and humanistic at its root.

A humanistic approach to teaching is student-centered and aims to support students not only as learners but also as individuals in all facets of their growth and development as human beings. As a teacher, being empathic; caring about students as learners, as emerging social workers and as persons; and being genuine are all important aspects of this approach. This humanistic aspect to teaching is critical to me, as I believe in being not only a facilitator of learning, but also a source of support for students and a nurturer of their learning journey. To me, this means developing a good working relationship with each student, being very accessible and available, being open to feedback and flexible in my teaching in order to better meet their needs, encouraging students, creating a climate of safety and trust in the classroom, trying to make the classroom a friendly and positive learning environment, and providing timely and detailed feedback. My hope is that these conditions will positively impact students' learning as well as their self-development as professionals and as individuals.

As a social worker committed to diversity and social justice, I also hope and expect that everyone in my classes will contribute to creating an atmosphere of openness and mutual respect in the classroom, and I endeavor to develop classes that are inclusive and free of prejudice and discrimination. I believe that all voices should be heard in an atmosphere of respect, and thus while I encourage students to discuss and debate issues freely in our class discussions, I expect them to be open-minded and to discuss issues in a manner that is both respectful and ethical. I ensure to include a statement about these beliefs and expectations in all of my course outlines, and also discuss them in class. In short, I believe these principles not only contribute to creating safe learning environments that promote meaningful and collaborative learning, but are also consistent with social work values and goals.

"I think in terms of both professional and personal growth this course deeply impacted me. I think it is so important to have a space to talk about the issues we discussed in class as there are very few safe spaces to do so. Thank you so much for being so flexible and organizing the course in such an engaging manner. I really enjoyed it and am grateful for the knowledge that I have gained. I am particularly excited for the shift that I have experienced in terms of how I will relate to my daughter about sexual health. I feel much more prepared as a parent to support her in developing a healthy sexual and gender identity."

-Email from a student in Human Sexuality and Social Work (SOWK 553, Summer 2011)

"One thing I do want to say is thank you so much for the specific detailed feedback. On so many papers, I have gotten very general, encouraging remarks and while that's nice and all, it doesn't give me direction to improve. I really appreciate how you take the time to give us direction to grow further."

-Email from a student in Diversity, Oppression and Social Justice (SOWK 697, Winter 2010)

"I wanted to share with you something I've been thinking about for the past few months. In August, when we spoke on the phone for my final [practicum] evaluation, you said something to me along the lines of, "you are very strong academically." It was the first time I'd heard something like that from a professor, and it genuinely made me feel

like I could pursue anything I chose to in the field of academics. I really appreciated that, and I hope more students hear that throughout their studies, too."

-Email received a student in Practicum and Seminar II class (SOWK 412/413, Summer 2016), letting me know she had decided to pursue an MSW degree

Teaching Methodologies, Materials and Innovations

At the beginning of every course I teach, I tell students that my greatest hope for the class is that the course will be useful to them. I believe that a useful course engages students in active learning and provides opportunities for making linkages between theory being learned in class and social work practice. This active learning is interactive, reflective, collaborative, experiential, practical, relevant and rooted in real-life contexts. It is therefore my goal as a teacher to facilitate such learning, and I aim to do so by designing and implementing a variety of activities that provide opportunities for these types of learning. Examples of activities that I incorporate in classes include large and small group discussions, case studies, role plays, films, reflective exercises, guest speakers, group work, open space, and games.