Teaching Statement   Jessica H. L. Elm

University of Washington School of Social Work

jelm@uw.edu

Social work practice involves combining and applying values, knowledge, and skills. As an instructor, I deliver material and provide opportunities to practice new skills, upon a platform for discovery and expression. This state is reached through acting as a learning facilitator with whom students can connect. It is important to find a balance of nurturing and instilling motivation so that each student feels supported yet challenged. I weave modalities of challenge, support, and connectedness with teaching-learning mechanisms to maximize student learning. I discuss the three modalities as if they are independent constructs, but in practice, I braid them together differently in response to the variability of each class. For example, in one class, I may rely heavily on challenging students through critical pedagogy. In another, I may balance nurturing and motivation so that students are encouraged to take healthy risks and contribute to the learning environment through discussion. Below I present reasons for centering *challenge*, *support*, and *connectedness* in my teaching and provide specific examples of how I implement these themes within learning opportunities.

Challenge. I challenge students to conduct introspective reflection, take healthy risks that push their comfort boundaries, and expand their understanding of the world around them. These ways of challenge generally involve students' deep consideration of the paradigms and biases they bring to the classroom. To facilitate this process, I begin the first day of an MSW class by asking the students to reflect on why they chose to enter the field of social work. I pause and witness students try to pin-point their reasons and construct possible responses. I then begin my own story of entering a BSW program with the goal of conducting case management with incarcerated men. I speak of how I wanted to move toward employment in this area because my son was 8 years old and phenotypically Black. I explain that I was afraid he would end up in prison due to the multitude of injustices that Black males experienced and that I wanted to take action that would reduce the likelihood that my son would not go to prison as a young man. (See the *Connectedness* section below for more on this practice.) Students then move into small groups and share with one another their reasons for choosing the field of social work. By sharing my story first, students are more willing to offer personal, often vulnerable stories, with one another. In doing so, they push their boundaries of comfort, deeply reflect on their own values and world views that guide them toward social work, and begin to practice assessment skills using their own story. As the class moves forward, I build upon this early exercise and connect how our values, beliefs, perceptions, and actions are shaped by our paradigms. Ultimately, students gain a profound awareness of self, their biases, etiologies of interests, and diverse values and beliefs.

My expectations are that students improve their critical thinking skills. An example of how I promote the advancement of critical thinking is by assigning holistic analysis of a controversial issue. I have done this in a child and family services and policy course by having teams of 5 present a pre-planned debate session to the class. One topic that students have presented on is

as follows: "Since most child abuse treatment programs for physical abuse have high recidivism rates, should agencies be more aggressive about terminating parental rights in cases of severe physical abuse where broken bones or hospitalization were required?" This small group project allows students to define their stance and the social justice ramifications of an issue, while being exposed to alternative views and macro and political nuances of a controversy. Students also come away understanding the underlying values, beliefs, and politics of parents' rights versus children's rights, plus enter the work force with more competence in verbal communication and some mastery in elementary policy analysis.

One student reported,

> *This class has stretched my ability to learn in various ways. At first I was very apprehensive... I am accustomed to being given strict confines for my learning and working within those confines… I was pleasantly surprised how much I pushed myself to learn.*

Support. I see the classroom as an environment that is generally egalitarian, absent of peer competition, and inclusive of various learning needs and abilities. Building such a platform is critical for engaging all students and maximizing their knowledge and skill development. To structure this setting, I employ various tactics. I offer students comfort, through relatability and my own storytelling, which leads to their expanded willingness to approach me with questions and consultation, and initiate classroom participation. (See how this relates to *Connectedness* in the following section.) I also encourage peer support by asking students to share contact information with one another as reading/discussion groups of 3 to 4 are formed in the first 2 weeks of class.

Social work students often bring their adverse life experiences to the classroom. Part of my role is to balance an inclusive sharing space while ensuring that the learning environment remains structured and productive. I do so by integrating students' shared narratives with the overall learning goals of the class session. I serve as a supportive guide as the students and I work through material, experiences, and struggles as a community. This allows students to move into self-awareness, engage in vulnerable discussions, and work through challenging emotional content as part of the unwritten learning activities in social work courses. The practice of helping students strengthen their coping skills is not only fruitful for learning but also generates an individual's longevity and increases the rate of retention for employment as a social worker. I remind students to be gentle with one's self as they strive to become the best social worker that they can be.

Connectedness. To foster connectedness within my students, I bring with me a humanistic attitude, humility, relatability, and transparency to our learning community. For example, I have found that bringing my own life experiences such as a living as a Native American woman, or as a homeless single mother of an African American male to the classroom helps open students up to learning processes and creates a sense of connectedness between the student, myself, and the materials. Brief narratives of my life circumstances allow students to integrate values, knowledge, and skills, similar to reading a case study or practice assessing needs while hearing the story. Students engage with the learning goals as they grasp onto a

narrative of the person that is in front of them. This practice of sharing my own experiences helps the students see me as less authoritarian and more like a "real person", thus contributing to a supportive learning environment. The most frequent positive comment I receive on teaching evaluations is the appreciation of bringing my own personalized stories into the classroom.

The best evidence of the effectiveness of my teaching style is summarized through students' own words. One student reported,

> *This class has given me direction and clarity around how I want to continue growing as a social worker. I know there's still so much more out there I need to learn, but I'm feeling inspired, motivated, and connected to how to continue to carry a historical trauma and resilience lens in my work. Thank you for a wonderful quarter.*

Use h2 level if you wish to include headers

text, flush left, text may be hyphenated, but DO NOT JUSTIFY. Justified margins are really only for books and journals. Can be difficult to read on-screen. This paragraph style is set at 12/15 to give a little more air between lines so that the text is easier to read online.

Use this same for format for the Teaching statement and for the dissertation abstract.

I've put in a page break in and second page footer in case you need to go to 2 pages.

University of Washington School of Social Work

e-mail address

Use h2 level if you wish to include headers

break these into separate files