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Given the increasing imperative for skilled social workers and social justice advocates, I take the role of social welfare instructor very seriously. It is vital that students develop the ability to think critically about how institutions, systems, policies, and social norms can occlude and highlight different types of knowledge and how that “knowledge hierarchy” can become implicated in cultural and social norms, practices, and policies including their work as social workers. Coupled with that, it is critical that students gain the self-awareness to understand their own positionality, and how their histories, experiences, and all layers of the social ecology impact them, becoming the lens by which they interpret the world, and implicated in their professional lives.

My dream for students in social work courses is that they be curious about themselves and others, willing and able to explore various ways of knowing and being, understand the lineage and context social welfare practice and policy comes from, and situates itself in, and the impacts of that lineage on individual and collective bodies. I also hope that students will take emotional and conceptual risks which will help them learn about themselves and their relationship to the complex world in which they live; growing effective, equity-focused practitioners.

This dream is aligned with the social work mission and values which, among many things, recognizes the importance of human relationships. To create and maintain a space in which students can engage authentically with the ways which course content intersects with their own experiences requires a level of trust, curiosity, and openness that comes from a willingness to be vulnerable and engage with discomfort. Aligned with feminist pedagogy and liberatory frameworks, I collaborate with students to build and sustain such an environment by modeling my own cognitive and emotional processes, being transparent about my intentions for each lesson, connecting with each student in person within the first few weeks of the quarter, sending along relevant material specific to each students’ needs and interests. I also take appropriate risks in the classroom such as trying out a new activity and asking students to provide specific feedback on that activity and then modifying as needed so that they understand that a). we are all learning b). learning is dynamic and iterative and that c). I value and honor their feedback. Activities and instruction are intended to build students’ capacity to discern, tolerate the ambiguity and uncertainty that is the human experience and must be confronted when dealing with the sensitive topics relevant to social justice and equity, sense and manage their own emotional experiences, and practice compassion, while engaging critically with social welfare content.

As well, I model a “growth mindset” through iterative course design; demonstrating curiosity, flexibility, and integration of my own relationship to the material and course concepts, as well as to students own ideas about what might benefit them as learners. I do this through showing students the plan for the coming weeks and for the specific days and allowing that plan to be changed as per their feedback. In addition, I model being flexible within a lesson plan to adjust for what students feel that they need. For example, I might have a lecture planned followed by an activity, but if students begin discussing an upcoming assignment and articulating anxiety around that, I would suggest that I make a recording of the lecture and spend time digging deeper into their questions about the upcoming assignment and end with a brain mapping activity so that they have a plan to move forward.

I apply thoughtful coursework, diverse activities, and my own modeling throughout the course. Instruction is varied, using a variety of media materials, readings, somatic, cognitive, and reflective activities, both inside and outside the classroom. Students learn and practice skills such as conducting an assessment, critically discerning relevant research applicable to their substantive interests, and creating a “one minute pitch” designed to have students build translational skills to adapt to diverse audiences.

My approach to teaching is informed by theories of both adult learning and contemplative pedagogies which suggest that students learn best when they can connect conceptual knowledge to their lived experiences. Contemplative pedagogies aim to integrate students’ minds and bodies to deepen their self-awareness and resilience, and build empathy, curiosity, flexibility, and courage to take informed risks and learn from experiences. These are all characteristics that can be learned, and I am interested as an instructor in focusing on learnable strategies that support the development of those within the context of the whole-person (not just their academic selves). Many others in diverse disciplines across the academy and in leadership settings are working from this more whole-person centered stance. A great example of this approach comes from the Center for the Contemplative Mind in Society which states:

*“We envision higher education as an opportunity to cultivate a deep personal and social awareness in order to stimulate inquiry into what is most meaningful to us as interconnected human beings. We seek to recast the traditional foundations for education into a truly integrative, transformative, and communal enterprise that is wholly open and inclusive of all...”*

I use this same approach in the diverse spaces that I teach and mentor beyond the social work classroom, such as when mentoring colleagues or in yoga classes; knowing that each of us are experts in our own experiences, and using contemplative pedagogies to inform and connect those experiences with tangible strategies with substantive content.

I think that for students to be truly responsible, compassionate, practitioners, researchers and citizens, it is imperative to do the vulnerable work that comes with exploring our own assumptions and how those can become implicated in our work and my teaching reflects that commitment.