

Teaching Experience and Training

My teaching philosophy is guided by learning science (Ambrose, et al., 2010), backwards course design (Fink, 2013), and the integration of universal design. While the primary learning objectives drive all course components, universal design acts as a conduit ensuring all students are able to engage as fully as possible. I recognize the classroom is a co-created learning environment in which students hold much more collective knowledge and experience than myself. Teaching is an ongoing holistic process that can be cultivated both in and out of the classroom--to this end, I have provided mentorship and support to multiple students that is not connected to formal courses.

I completed three courses in teaching, including one guided independent study to receive ongoing feedback and problem solve during my first quarter sole-teaching and a teaching practicum in macro practice MSW course. This year, I am sole-teaching two MSW foundation courses: one regarding the historical and theoretical underpinnings of the social work profession and a research course (both of these which I have sole-taught previously, as well). I have previously taught two years of social work practice with trans & queer communities, supervised two independent studies (one research focused and one practice focused), and provided over 20 guest lectures. These efforts have been recognized at the University level, as I was a finalist for the competitive UW Excellence in Teaching Award in 2019 and recipient in 2020. I have received consistently high evaluations, having been recognized as having some of the highest at the School of Social Work in Fall 2019 and Winter 2020.

Pedagogical Learning Goal 1: Achieving Accessibility For All Students

“Vern designing this course with basic disability and access needs at the forefront of their mind not only made it so I could do well in this course, it made it so I could enjoy learning, be present in class, push myself, and go beyond what I’m able to do in other classes.”

While an underlying primary goal is to design courses and instruct in a way that facilitates growth across multiple levels of social work practice skills, a perfectly designed course will still not help those students whose access needs are not met in the classroom. To this end, achieving accessibility through universal design and flexibility is always at the forefront of my teaching practice. In addition to asking about access needs on the first day of class and again mid-quarter, I send students a welcome email prior to the start of class introducing myself, the course, my access needs, and asking if they have any needs of their own to share. This has helped me be aware of necessary adjustments to be made prior to the start of class, while also modeling the flexibility and preparation required of social work practitioners. In order to meet both stated and unstated access needs, I provide a variety of formats in which to engage in lectures, class activities, and assignments. When students are not concerned about whether their needs will be met, they are able to fully focus on the substantive course content.

Pedagogical Learning Goal 2: Empowering Students to Meet High Standards

“They stretched the way I think about history and helped me see the value in understanding it. Vern did an excellent job at making the material digestible, while also pushing me to think beyond the presented material. It was my hardest class, but also my most fun class.” “... spreading the work into weekly, bite sized pieces gave me feelings of ease and confidence which made what could have been a daunting task

feel very achievable. Vern's constant, thorough and incisive feedback and commentary on these weekly assignments lead to a final product that is better than I thought I would have been able to produce.”

As learning science reflects, active and applied learning activities during class time empowers students to later apply, analyze, and synthesize as part of larger assignments. In my queer & trans social work practice class, students form small groups and take part in a multi-session role-playing game I designed (inspired by Dungeons & Dragons) in which they follow a “client’s” journey experiencing milestones and accessing multiple kinds of social services. The activity format includes multiple points in which a roll of the dice decides the next outcome, which creates opportunities for students to react nimbly to shifting situations (as they would in the field). In my foundational research course, students designed multiple formats (e.g., inventory, scale, open-ended) of measures, collected practice data, and analysed it together in class (manually and with Excel and SPSS) throughout the quarter. This hands-on experience with lower-stakes data energized the students, piquing their interest in the research process and building comfort and competency with unfamiliar tools (i.e., SPSS). I pair these learning activities with a “revise & resubmit” style of grading to further students’ critical reflexivity and thought. Paired with lower-stakes scaffolding assignments, this allows for feedback at meaningful progress points, ultimately resulting in stronger final assignments and clear growth on the part of the student.

Pedagogical Learning Goal 3: Prioritizing Justice & Equity Centered Practice

“Vern fostered an environment that was simultaneously authentic and collaborative...classmates seemed to share honest reflections and critiques; at the same time, critiques felt purposeful, constructive and collaborative, not shaming. I think Vern nurtured such a space by being unapologetically honest about intersectionality, privilege, oppression, social work's participation in oppressive systems, and the importance of owning up to (our inevitable) [messing] things up, and at the same time communicating these things with humility, care for us as individuals, and hope in the possibility for change. I feel better equipped and determined to be both critical/unapologetic and compassionate.”

It is impossible for me to disentangle my teaching philosophy and practices from social justice as I believe that there is no such thing as a “neutral education”. This is reflected in three areas:

1. Amplifying marginalized voices and narratives in course content; problematizing oppressive narratives in existing curricula, accounts of history, and social work skills.
2. Providing mentorship and advocacy to trans, disabled, BIPOC, and other marginalized students both in and out of the classroom.
3. Doing what it is in my power to provide students of all genders, races, classes, sexual orientations, and abilities with the social work skills needed to engage clients and communities impacted by structural and systemic oppression.

Through a critical pedagogy that draws from Freirian analysis, my students are able to connect individual challenges to larger systemic oppression and individual growth to social/political action (Reed, et al., 2010). While uncomfortable moments in the classroom will arise, it is my expectation that the students and I can work together to ensure that we all feel as safe, welcome, and affirmed as possible. To this end, I ask students to engage with each other with respect and appropriateness--just as they do with their clients. We are all tasked with the goal of approaching one another from a place of wanting to understand, learn, grow, and assuming best intentions. Through modeling this in the classroom and centering access and equity in course design, I strive to promote pre-existing characteristics in my students as they practice social work and strive towards broader structural change.