Bringing Experience into the Classroom: A Shared Journey

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Abstract: Teaching in social work is a great opportunity to share with students the dedication to the profession and experiences in clinical practice. The role of the educator is to facilitate the learning of students, to allow them to develop their professional identity focusing on strength and the self. There are essential perceptions which need to be taken into consideration when teaching. Some of these are the culture, the environment, and the personal and professional experience of the academic. In this paper, I present my reflections on my teaching experience in social work.

Keywords: reflection, teaching, social work, teaching philosophy

In this paper, I present my reflections on my teaching experience and my teaching philosophy with graduate and postgraduate social work students. Since early in my career as a social worker, teaching has been an important goal for me. My plan was to enter the field of social work and obtain experiences in diverse settings in order to later share my passion and experiences with students of social work. Social work is a career that I chose in my early years. I was captivated by the profession's commitment to social change and its aim to empower individuals and communities. This was particularly important for me as a Muslim female who grew up in politically and socially challenging regions in North Africa and in the Middle East (Eltaiba, 2010). Working over the years in diverse settings, such as in mental health and community work, and in cross-cultural practice, such as in developing countries and Australia, has made me more mature but no less passionate about social work and about my teaching. I strongly believe that social work as a profession has much that will promote social change and empowerment. My main aim is to motivate students to think about the gender role in relation to other aspects, such as race, class, religion, and nationality. Another important goal is to inspire students to believe in the importance of their contribution in intervening and bringing about change. I encourage students to think about the context of the culture they work within, the importance of having a social work identity (Dominelli, 2002), and the significance of consideration of international perspectives which are emphasized by globalization (Healy, 2008; Hugman, 2010).

I regard teaching as a great opportunity to share with students my dedication to the profession and my experiences in clinical practice: in short, sharing with students my knowledge. The sharing of knowledge is an outworking of my spiritual and religious values. For example, in Islamic philosophy, "the most generous people will be those who will acquire knowledge and then disseminate it" (Al-Tirmidhi, Hadith 93). Sharing my experiences is also part of my ethical professional commitment to social work.

I am aware of the importance of being an educator and the inherent power in the position; consequently, I reflect on my teaching and regularly review my motivations for, and aim in, taking on such an important obligation. In the classroom, I make it clear to the students that, while I am facilitating their learning experiences, I myself learn from them. This approach of strength-based teaching is informed by my belief that each student has their own strength and

that they bring to class their own personal and cultural resources. The class interaction is an opportunity for self-discovery and empowerment (Saleebey, 2001). Each student's knowledge and experiences are respected and validated; each student has important things to offer to me and the other students. This is one way in which learning is a shared journey for me and my students. The aim of this paper is to share my reflections in relation to my experience in teaching in social work programs. The use of reflexive methodologies is becoming increasingly popular in social work as an imperative source for providing knowledge (Knott & Scragg, 2007).

My Approach to Teaching

Sharing

I use my practical experiences and my cultural background to inform my interactions with students and to provide a firm grounding for their learning experiences in class. In this way, I transfer knowledge from the field to those training to become social workers. For example, I share with students how the self influences the practice in social work (Al-Krenawi, 1998; Holden, 2012). I illustrate this partly by using my own journey of developing insight—through continuous reflections on my own values—towards achieving a balance between cultural, religious, and professional values (Eltaiba, 2010).

One instance of this was when I migrated from Libya and Jordan to Australia, which challenged many of my cultural perceptions about gender roles, parenting styles, homosexuality, and community. Faced with these challenges to myself and to my professional practice, I needed to develop a new perception of acceptance that applied to diverse settings. The expression of my own unique gender and cultural experiences in ways such as this encourages students to consider and examine their own values, biases, and prejudices and to find their own ways to develop their own professional identity. Often, by way of response, students share their own experiences in class or in their written reflection papers. I perceive these reflective accounts as an opportunity to encourage self-discovery, to locate their current and future position, and to develop insights about personal goals in relation to profession (Lopez & Louis, 2009).

Respect is one of the most important values that inform my practice, both clinically and as an educator (Holden, 2012; Hugman, 2008; Knott & Scragg, 2010). As a teacher, I view genuine respect as an ethical commitment which enhances the learning process for students.

By sharing my experiences and *encouraging* students *to explore* their own, I demonstrate that I respect diversity of culture and gender as well as various ways of thinking and points of view inside and outside of the class. Respect for students allows them to grow, to be independent learners, to challenge themselves, and to be creative. I am passionate about, and committed to, empowering students to be lifelong learners. Students need to develop competencies that will maintain their learning and enable them to respond effectively to rapid global changes, the explosion in knowledge, and the complexity of social and political problems (Saleebey, 2001). I demonstrate this by pointing out to students what was done well rather than what went wrong. I emphasize their strengths and point to areas for improvement instead of weaknesses and faults. Respect for students will empower them and will enhance hope and positive attitudes (Lopez &

Louis, 2009). I consider that focusing on positive aspects in class will assist students to adopt strength-based approaches in their future practices in social work.

Learning Environment and Teaching Activities

I consider my courses to be a shared journey of understanding rather than a mere delivery of content (Lopez & Louis, 2009). Thus considered, my role as an educator is to provide a learning environment in which the students can become reflective, independent, self-directed learners (Louis & Schreiner, 2012). Among other things, I seek to create a friendly and safe learning environment. In addition, the teaching process should motivate students to think critically and creatively. In my teaching, I implement various flexible and planned methods to sustain students' enthusiasm and interest and to respond to their differing needs.

The teaching activities are carefully designed to cater for diversity in the class (Bednarz, Schim, & Doorenbos, 2010). I make sure that the students are clear about expectations and goals, and I use several strategies to encourage students to think critically and to contribute to class discussions. In my classes, participation and sharing of experiences are encouraged both in class and through online student forums.

Some of the methods I use in class teaching include PowerPoint presentations, written texts and handouts, documentaries, "think–pair–share," and guest speakers. Other strategies I employ are role-playing questions, small group discussions, case studies, brainstorming, and, most importantly, storytelling—using that word as Soule and Wilson (2002) do, in the sense of relating real life experiences. I have found storytelling, in which I or students present experiences, to be the most effective way of enhancing the learning process.

One particularly effective storytelling strategy is sharing with the students my experiences in the field of social work, a strategy which highlights the links between theory and practice (Soule & Wilson, 2002). The storytelling aims to inspire insights among students into knowledge, encouraging them to think individually and collectively about their own future practice.

Examples of how I do this include sharing my experiences of working as a practitioner in non-Western cultures and my reflections on how appropriate many of the theories underpinning much social work practice are in non-Western contexts. For example, in the area of theory, I formed doubts about some of the Western-based and somewhat biased concepts and theories that I encountered—in particular, the prominence of medical models based upon scientific and materialist frameworks which took little account of the spiritual or religious dimension that is central to the experiences of many in the Middle East.

Furthermore, I convey something of my early endeavors to explore more culturally sensitive ways to work with clients and families in the Middle East. These include my need to think about the influence of gender roles when working with clients from diverse cultures, about suitable interviewing techniques, and about community work features. Some specific examples from the Middle East include:

- Shaking hands: Some patients might not approve of shaking hands with the opposite sex, whereas others do.
- Working with a social worker of the opposite sex: Some might view this as acceptable, while others would prefer, or sometimes insist upon, working with a social worker of the same sex.
- Making eye contact: Some patients might be comfortable with this, while others might be uneasy about it.

Students were encouraged to think about these culturally appropriate interviewing techniques during placements and also during some of the discussions in class. They would bring some examples from their own cultures and some of their observations about interacting with families. One of the students provided an example: She had observed that she needed to use a formal tone of voice and make sure that she was not smiling with a male parent. This would be more comfortable for both her and the male client, because both come from a similar traditional background where male and female are segregated.

When talking about cultural competency, we address possible biases and ways of looking for various pieces of knowledge that relate to diversity. An example of that is when a white male student asked me how to ensure that he would act in a culturally appropriate way with families from Muslim backgrounds. This question was then explored through class discussions.

Grounding social work in the students' cultural contexts and raising issues such as those detailed above directly engages the students and provides relevant opportunities for them to ask questions—which they typically do. Their questions lead to further conversation as I respond to and explore their queries with them.

Identifying the Needs When Building Curricula

Being an academic who has practiced and taught in different social work undergraduate and Master of Social Work programs in Australia and in the Middle East, I have found that there are certain concepts which I need to locate and identify in order to ensure competency in my teaching. The most important of these are flexibility regarding and acknowledgement of the various cultural and sociopolitical needs of the cohort of social work students and programs (Northedge, 2003).

I make sure that I design effective curricula to engage students in inquiry, aware that an effective curriculum facilitates the learning experiences of students. To be successful, a curriculum must be flexible and responsive to the needs of the learners. Attention must also be paid to the way the curriculum furthers the aims of social work programs. In its development, a curriculum is built on three main aspects: knowledge, skills, and values (Thompson, 2005). I make sure that students are aware of the interrelated nature of these three aspects.

I ask students during the class how the class is going and whether they have any suggestions about something they would like to focus on. For example, students of the social work program at Qatar University approached me with the idea of inviting a prominent scholar, Professor

Edward Canda, to talk about the subject of spirituality in social work. I supported their initiatives, and they followed up on the process by initiating contact with Professor Canda, who kindly accepted their invitation. They then organized a Skype meeting with the whole class. During the presentation, the students had the opportunity to discuss many important points related to the subject of spirituality and social work.

I carefully consider the necessary components of successful curricula, such as the clarity of the goals, objectives, and aims; the structure of the course; the variety of material used; the use of technology and online material; the tools to assess students' learning; and the assessment of the learning outcomes. I share with the students the learning outcome and I use rubrics to assess how students are doing in relation to these program learning objectives (PLOs).

Framework

When designing curricula, I make sure that there is room for students to participate in exploring and delivering certain aspects of the course in relation to a practice framework. The aim of that is to empower students to be independent learners and to thrive (Longman, 2009). For example, I divide some of the teaching weeks—some for the delivery of interactive theoretical material and some assigned for students to present on a subject they have investigated in their group work, to hear a guest speaker of their choice, or to design case studies. I encourage students to start thinking about their *theoretical practice framework*, which will inform their practice as early as possible. I share with them my own practice framework (Soule & Wilson, 2002). My practice is informed by an eclectic paradigm that merges various theories to provide more holistic views (Coady, & Nick, 2007). For example, I explain how post-colonialist views assist me to understand the distributions and effects of power and to examine the dominant notion of Western supremacy in relation to non-Western cultures (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2006). This is a paradigm that I investigated and integrated into my theoretical framework very early in my career, and my commitment to it has grown throughout. I also emphasize my orientation towards spirituality and religion in social work practice (Canda & Furman, 2010). I share with the students my thoughts about the longstanding negative place assigned to religion within social work and how, contrary to this, I have found that religion and spirituality are very significant for clients and families. An obvious, unavoidable example I raise comes from my work with people from Muslim backgrounds who have mental health problems and how such people constantly raise the subject of religion and spirituality in their conversations relating to coping with problems and explaining the causes of their difficulties.

I talk with my students about how I managed to think about spirituality and religion in my practice and outline my early endeavors while working at the National Center of Mental Health in Jordan with patients and their families from Muslim backgrounds. I explain how those families taught me about the importance of religion in relation to their perceptions and their search for help with mental illness.

With regard to theories that shape social work practice, I inform students that my approach incorporates various theories, such as the solution-focused and client-focused theories, recovery, narrative therapy, and the strength-based approach. This eclectic model allows flexibility,

especially when working within diverse settings. I also emphasize how my practice framework is influenced by different political and cultural elements and how it has changed and developed with accumulated knowledge and experiences.

Incorporating Research

I make sure that I present students with my own research experiences and the latest research and theory in the field, and I ensure that this knowledge is placed within its historical context (Healey, 2005). When designing curricula, I update and modify some aspects according to feedback from previous classes, which I obtain anonymously at the end of the course. I also base my modification of curricula on the knowledge gained by attending professional development courses.

In relation to being up to date in the field of social work, I review the findings of most recent scholarly activities and research. I make sure that the reading materials assigned are the most up to date and varied to reflect the most recent resources.

Part of my role as an educator is to encourage and support students to undertake research projects. In large measure, this is driven by my convictions about the evidence-based practice approach, which asserts the need to produce evidence and build knowledge through research (Thyer, 2004). If they are to ensure best practice, then social work practitioners need to continually update their knowledge and build their analytical and critical skills.

I share with students my appreciation of the experience of practitioners and the need to enhance the impact of practice in social work through evidence. To promote a culture of research among students, I informally assist those who are enrolled in research methods courses to carry out their research. I support them to present their research in conferences. I also supervise students on their graduation research or when they are recipients of students' grants or are compiling conference presentations (Healey, 2005).

The teaching-research nexus is an important principle in my curricula development (Griffiths, 2004). My areas of research are mental health and religion, teaching in social work, and child protection in the Islamic context. My focus in research is at both a local and an international level. I believe in the importance of the collaboration of scholars in different universities to enrich knowledge, a belief which is demonstrated by the initiatives I have taken in international research and my strong links with international scholars and universities.

When I am developing curricula, I incorporate my research findings. For example, some aspects of the content of my lectures and the associated learning activities have been developed around my research and findings in the areas of mental health cross-cultural practice and religion. Likewise, I explain to students some of the challenges related to conducting research in a culturally sensitive context and the role of the researcher in ensuring that their research is ethical.

I believe that the link between theory and practice is important, and the practitioner needs to strive to retain that link (Howe, 2008). In designing curricula, I understand the importance of a

learning process in which students can make the link between theories and practices and become convinced of the need to keep theory and practice in balance. It is important to empower students during the process by encouraging reflective critical thinking so that they can make sense of future practical situations. They are challenged through various activities to think theoretically (Holden, 2012).

Identifying Community

Another important aspect of my teaching is to create a collaborative community among students of social work in different years. This is part of my approach to empowering students to be independent learners by supporting them to locate resources and to learn by identifying role models (Lopez & Louis, 2009). I invite students from my previous classes to talk to current students about their experiences and how to enhance study skills. Many students have found the interaction with students from previous classes to be very motivating, and it has helped them feel more at ease about what is expected of them. The students from my previous classes have also found these experiences helpful, because they were able to share their knowledge and to network with future social work colleagues.

I supported one group of students who decided to form a social work club. The aim was to support each other in their learning. They also reached out to connect with other social work students in the region. With my supervision, they came up with innovative ideas, such as inviting local and international guest speakers to address them. They also invited students from previous years to talk about their experiences in field education. The students supported each other in the club to build a strong community.

I am aware of the importance of incorporating into my teaching the needs of the community and of following the directions, recommendations, and guidance of professional bodies. I constantly seek feedback from stakeholders and professional bodies in my teaching-learning process. One way I do this is by building good relationships with agencies. I also volunteer to deliver workshops and presentations to state and non-government agencies and invite guest speakers to talk to our students about agency services and the need for services. These guest speakers provide students with insights about social work practice and what is expected of practitioners.

Supporting Students

I understand that students come from diverse backgrounds and have different needs and life challenges (Longman, 2009). Some are international students; some are parents; some students have health problems or disabilities. In my teaching, I respect students' prior learning, their diversity in thinking, and their different backgrounds and needs. I also encourage them to build confidence and to show initiative. I communicate this respect of diversity by encouraging sharing of different views. I direct students to different ways of learning and to diverse resources.

Students are also encouraged to contact me if they need to reflect on their views about the subject of study. Many come to me to discuss problems related to possible uncertainties about

the course, the choices available after completing the course, and/or their difficulties or queries about starting field work. Some students have come to me to discuss personal issues which they thought might interfere with their study. Some of the students feel safe enough to discuss with me their biases, which might be based on gender, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, or class. I support students by exploring with them the resources available to them. I also encourage the thinking process in relation to these issues. An example is when a student shared with me that the reflection and critical analysis essays and the discussions in class made her think about her own biases against people from different cultural backgrounds. As the student said, this realization was a shock to her. The student then talked about strategies that she is implementing in order to overcome these biases. Another student said that the reflective and critical discussions in the class encouraged her to talk to her mother about her position in the family as a young female coming from a traditional background. She wrote to me, saying that the exercises were very helpful to her and to her mother in bringing their attention to some prejudices she was encountering as a young woman. They both started to explore the issue further.

A Continuing Shared Journey

From the outset of my teaching career, I learned that being passionate is the most important element in motivating students. I also understand that retaining a passion for teaching might be affected by many factors, such as being tired or overworked, and by family and personal issues. In order to keep myself motivated, I employ different strategies which I have found—and continue to find—very helpful, such as reflecting (Knott & Scragg, 2010), reminding myself of why I want to be in such a position, strengthening myself spiritually, and talking to my colleagues about difficulties and ways of dealing with them. I try to have a balance in my life and, most importantly, to learn new ways to overcome obstacles. Above all, I feel honored that I am part of the learning journey undertaken by students of social work.

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