

The Teacher Becomes the Student: An Example of Lifelong Learning

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Abstract: Lifelong learning is required for many professions. Lifelong learning is “proven” through engaging in continuing education. Continuing education can take many forms; however, many state licensing boards only look at continuing education in a narrowly defined way. In this narrative, I reflect on my continuing education experience of auditing a class at the university where I teach. I discuss learning about class concepts and, more importantly, myself through this opportunity.

Keywords: continuing education, lifelong learning

I arrived early, nervous but excited to start. I pulled out my new, colorfully designed spiral notebook and blue folder from Target. My folder held the syllabus for my new class called Advanced Multivariate Analysis. I had anxiously studied the syllabus ahead of time in order to be prepared. Data analysis had never been my strength; I’d taken several statistics courses over the progression of my multiple degrees and still felt uncomfortable walking into this one. I glanced around the room. I could not tell if students were happy to be there or if it was just another required class. You could tell the other students knew each other or had been in classes together based on the ease of their conversations. None of them talked to me. Nonetheless, I was eager and could not wait to begin.

Introductions began. Students talked about enrolling in the course in order to enhance their portfolios for graduate school or in order to meet university requirements. It was then my turn. I introduced myself as a social work faculty member at the university...who was taking this class to learn more. This was not a class social work students enrolled in, so no students knew me. The students could tell I was different from the “traditional” students on our campus. They had never seen me as a student in prior classes. I was older and dressed up. This class was at the end of my normal class schedule, so I usually looked tired, but I had my soda to keep me going. When I walked into the room, no one initiated conversation with me. I would initiate conversations when I walked into the room. If I said “hi” the other students said “hi” back, but I was never asked the questions that I heard them ask each other, such as “How was your weekend?” or “Did you get your homework done?” They would answer me if I asked general questions, but they kept their responses brief. When I would see them on campus or in the community, they might say “hi,” but it was a quick response before they would turn and walk away. I never talked to my professor about my relationship with my classmates, but I think she could see it. She tried to get them to respond to my questions and encouraged them to find someone new to work with when we broke up into groups—similar things I had tried in my classrooms when I wanted students to get to know each other.

I had a large amount of respect for my professor. She had agreed to allow me, a colleague, to audit the class at no cost. She graded all of my homework and spent time with me during office hours. I could have paid for the course so it would show up on my transcript but chose not to in

order to take the pressure off myself to get an “A.” This challenged me to learn—just to learn—without having to focus on the outcome. I felt blessed for the learning opportunity. The students shook their heads when I told them I was not taking the course due to any requirement, but in order to learn new material so I could develop my research skills. For most of them, this was not a class they would take if not required.

As a professor in social work classes, I always encourage students to be “lifelong learners.” But what does this mean? According to Jivanjee et al. (2016), lifelong learning means “the continuous learning and transformation needed to be an effective social worker in the changing social, economic, and political environment” (p. 260). Does this mean attending the state required boundaries and ethics courses or taking another class about the basics of substance use to fulfill licensing requirements? Or does it mean more, such as reading a book to enhance your skills or taking a class that will allow you to grow personally? According to the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE, 2015), social workers recognize the “importance of life-long learning and are committed to continually updating their skills to ensure they are relevant and effective” (p. 7). At times, I feel that state statutes related to lifelong learning and continuing education limit my ability to see the many options of learning as I get overly focused on using my extra free time to complete the required licensing requirements. As a professor, am I exploring and sharing the multitude of ways in which students can engage in lifelong learning? Do I limit the definition when I talk with them about expectations?

In Wisconsin, where I practice, I must have 30 hours of continuing education every two years to maintain my clinical licensure. Four of these hours must be in the approved area of “Ethics and Professional Boundaries” (Wis. Admin. Code, 2015). The state statutes say continuing education credits can be granted “if relevant to the professional practice of marriage and family therapy, professional counseling, or social work” and offered by “any continuing education program approved, sponsored, provided, endorsed, or authorized by” specified state boards (Wis. Admin. Code, 2015). It also states that continuing education hours are awarded for professional activities, such as providing a training, writing an article, writing a book, or creating electronic media or software. However, who is examining what I am doing to ensure my success in these endeavors? Who is evaluating what I do? Does someone need to evaluate me? Do the statutes allow for out-of-the-box learning leading to professional growth? Should I be required to pay to get learning? With these state requirements of continuing education, it has historically meant signing up for those trainings about concepts I am familiar with—especially after 25 years of attending trainings—and taking one or two new pieces of information back to the office with me. At other times it has meant showing up for a training I was familiar with that would allow me to check emails during the training, or going with a friend so I could pass the time more quickly. No one would critique which classes I would sign up for or how much (or little) I participated, as long as the classes were from one of the “approved lists” of providers by the state in which I held my license.

In surrounding states, there are similar requirements. In Illinois, the state statute related to continuing education for social work is the following:

Every licensee who applies for renewal of a license as a Licensed Social Worker or Licensed Clinical Social Worker shall complete 30 hours of continuing education (CE)

relevant to the practice of social work or clinical social work. At least 3 of the 30 hours must include content related to the ethical practice of social work and, effective December 1, 2013, at least 3 of the 30 hours must include content related to cultural competence in the practice of social work. (Ill. Admin. Code, 2013)

Illinois administrative code also specifies that:

CE hours shall be earned by verified attendance (e.g., certificate of attendance or certificate of completion) at or participation in a program or course (“program”) that is offered or sponsored by an approved CE sponsor who meets the requirements set forth in subsection (c)...CE credit also may be earned for completion of a self-study, computer, or Internet-based course that is offered by an approved sponsor who meets the requirements set forth in subsection (c). Each self-study course shall include an examination. (Ill. Admin. Code, 2013)

At the time of this writing, Minnesota’s continuing education is defined by statutes as “academic coursework obtained after licensure (1 semester credit = 15 CE hours), including educational workshops or conferences, staff training offered by an employer” or independent study (“independent study must be for publication, public presentation, or professional development and includes, but is not limited to, electronic study”). To qualify as “electronic study” independent study, CE programs are not live or interactive (Min. Admin. Code, 2019). Although all the above states are similar, they all require continuing education to be proved through verified attendance or completed through an “approved” provider, a self-study, or an examination.

This class I enrolled in was something new, totally out of line with what I had done in the past in relation to continuing education. Even though it was offered at the bachelor level, it was overwhelming. I thought about how insecure my students might feel when starting a new class, especially a class viewed as more complicated. Because the students were not talking to me, I did not know how they felt. Looking through the textbook ahead of class starting, I knew I was in for something more complex and involved. The chapters covered areas such as introduction to the general linear model and assumptions, factorial analysis of variance, repeated measures analysis of variance, analysis of covariance, multivariate analysis of variance and of covariance, and multiple regression and path analysis (what does this even mean?). Even though I have my PhD and had successfully completed three statistics classes, none of my classes covered these concepts as thoroughly as I wanted, and more importantly, as I needed. I had been a qualitative researcher. I was better at analyzing words; numbers were a foreign language. I had difficulty reading scientific articles and understanding the research methods described in the articles based on my limited knowledge. To truly be the educator I wanted to be, I knew this was one class on my education bucket list that I needed in order to feel more confident in my research skills, to continue my education, and to be a lifelong learner.

My student peers did not know what to do about me and, honestly, I was unsure how to engage with them. Although there were no social work students in the class, I did run into a social work student when I was asking for help during the professor’s office hours. She had my professor for a statistics course. I got up to let the student get the help she needed (feeling guilty about taking

up time she needed) when she said, “No, Dr. Hessenauer, do not leave. I will wait.” I struggled with this. In class and during office hours, was I a fellow classmate or was I a campus professor who should be treated differently? I told the other students to call me by my first name. I raised my hand in class, although I was hesitant to raise my hand too much to take care away from those students who paid for the experience. I shared my fears and frustrations, but only two of my fellow classmates, those who sat closest to me, ever truly accepted me as an equal. Those two students worked on class projects with me when we were told to break up into groups. They worked on solving problems with me. They would joke with me: “You do not know the answer?” Or, “Thank goodness you know how to do this; I do not feel like thinking that hard.” For that, I was saddened others did not get to know me, but grateful to the two that did because I truly needed those students’ help. I wondered what students of mine had felt this way in the past. One of my classmates worked on in-class assignments with me and emailed me about group projects. Interestingly, he was a returning student. He was younger than me, but still talked openly with me about balancing his family, work, and classes. It appeared he knew I could relate. Another student emailed me notes when I had to miss class due to a death in my family; this was a reciprocal relationship that developed after I had emailed her notes on a date when she said she would be gone. It was a give-and-take relationship. I tried to engage casually with the other students, but it remained superficial. Exchanges included a “hi” when we walked into the room or “have a nice weekend” as we were exiting the class. It made me question the expectations students have in the classroom related to relationships with peers. Do we examine these expectations when we are leading a class? Should we? Are classroom/workshop relationships important for learning?

Each week, we explored new concepts. At times it felt like I was studying a new language, and at times, I was. It was a language that I had heard, but not one that I had studied in depth. As each week went by, my confidence grew. The students who had befriended me started to engage more with me, asking me what answers I had arrived at and how. Still, it was never really more than conversations about class. I continued to fight through the concepts, took the quizzes, and anxiously waited for feedback on my homework. Even though I was not taking the class for a grade, my grade was still important to me. As an educator, I can get frustrated about students’ focus on grades, but here I was, doing the same thing: My potential grade weighed heavily on me and influenced how I engaged in the class. I read and re-read the feedback on my homework with the goal of reaching competence with the material. I attended office hours to further support my learning, all the while receiving glances from a fellow colleague wondering what I was doing so frequently visiting a colleague in another department—as well as from students who appeared to question why I would need to go to office hours. I perceived the students as questioning why I would need additional support, as if my PhD gave me advanced knowledge in every area. Yet despite these assumptions I was making about their perceptions of my learning, I chose not to have a conversation about it or clear the air; I was already an outsider in this learning environment.

My professor continued to encourage me. We discussed my struggles, my lack of confidence, and my accomplishments. At one point, she said, “You got this. Soon you will be publishing your own multivariate studies.” She was just as encouraging to the other students. As much as I was learning about new concepts, I was also learning about how a colleague, someone who was my equal in the eyes of the university, approached classroom learning. I appreciated her

completely case-based assignments and her willingness to let students earn the grade they wanted. If you analyzed five cases, you received an A, four cases a B, and so on. It helped me rethink my approach to grading. It is rare that professors get opportunities to really experience another colleague's teaching style in depth.

The last day of class came. Our assignment was to present to our peers. We needed to share independent research required for the class. This assignment included collecting data, data analysis, and thoughts on the results. I was ready. I completed my PowerPoint ahead of time, double-checked my data and analysis, and went over my results with my professor. It had to be good. I was not only doing this for myself, but I was showing other students the importance of "never being too old to learn" and, ultimately, I wanted to make my professor and myself proud. I shared my presentation. I was excited. The other students asked questions about my presentation and told me they found my results surprising. It was the most interaction I had with many of them the entire semester. However, my professor was watching them and encouraging them to interact with each presentation. My professor informed me that I had a great research project I should expand in order to improve the field of social work. Although I elected to not get a grade in the class, I would give myself an A. An A for taking a risk, an A for effort, A for engaging in and demonstrating lifelong learning to students, and an A for following through with something I had always wanted to do.

My class does not count for continuing education in my state as I did not pay for it; therefore, I do not have a grade on a transcript or a CEU to "prove" my learning. I still question who I am proving my learning to. Is a grade or a CEU certificate the only way to prove that learning occurred? Despite the lack of an official grade or certificate, I learned. I engaged in what I call "lifelong learning." I picked an area I wanted to grow in and sought out a way to do so that I felt would be beneficial to me. Honestly, I learned more in this semester than I ever learned taking a CEU class. I was focused on the material, I revisited what it felt like to be the "student" in the classroom, and I watched a peer teach a class and learned new classroom activities. I especially learned more about myself. I pushed myself, I grew, and I now have new skills that will enhance my work professionally and, ultimately, enhance me. Isn't that what continuing education and lifelong learning should be about? Is it time to revisit what is meant by *continuing education*?

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