

# Beyond the “Sage on the Stage”: Helping Experts Become Effective Teachers

Douglas Behan

**Abstract:** Social work continuing education programs are charged with providing quality training to support social workers in practice. These programs hold a gatekeeping role to ensure the programs they offer are scholarly, engaging, and practically useful for social workers. Traditional methods of teaching that rely primarily on a lecture format are still prevalent, particularly because most subject matter experts have not had formal training on effective teaching methods for adults. Optimal learning experiences for attendees are maximized when a continuing education program (a) has defined acceptance criteria for selecting the programs they offer and (b) provides support and tools to assist instructors in creating and delivering engaging training programs that are based on adult learning theory.

**Keywords:** social work continuing education, adult learning theory, professional development

When I became the faculty director of a university-based social work continuing education program over 10 years ago, I was not prepared for the job. Despite having over 20 years of experience as a clinician, instructor, and administrator, I did not know how to ensure programs for social workers were engaging and impactful. Despite having clinical expertise, I was never trained on how to design or deliver an effective learning experience. I assumed that knowing the work meant a person could also teach it. I was not alone in this perception. I was the norm.

## Who Are We Teaching and How?

By the time a person becomes a masters-level social worker, they have completed at least nineteen years of formal education where they were primarily socialized to assume a passive learning role. It is a scene we are all very familiar with—sitting in a row of desks, eyes forward, listening to an expert dispense knowledge. A free-flowing back-and-forth exchange with other students, and especially with the teacher, is not a common occurrence in this approach. In his 1970 book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire (2005) famously referred to the concept of educational banking in which knowledge is deposited into the heads of students so it can be withdrawn someday in the future. Freire sees this type of education as “projecting an absolute ignorance onto others” and writes, “In the banking concept of education, knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing” (p. 53). However, professional social workers, who work on the front lines of society’s most pressing social problems, are certainly not “ignorant”; they bring a wealth of knowledge and experience into the classroom that should not be discounted. Many instructors have impressive experience, knowledge, and interesting stories, but if working professionals—who the day before were engaging in the dynamic activities of a social worker—are now expected to sit passively for an extended period in a classroom or webinar and bank information, they will eventually get bored and therefore distracted (e.g. checking phones, thinking about other responsibilities). However, when they feel personally engaged, they lean in and stay involved in the training.

Continuing education programs should guard against bank learning approaches in their programs. Professionals do not need to build a repository of knowledge for the future; they need it for their work *the next day*. Their minds are not empty and in need of filling—they have lived experience and arrive in the continuing education space with professional knowledge that can significantly contribute to the learning environment. This dynamic calls for a different teaching approach that is applied and immediate. The challenge becomes, “How do I involve the participants in the learning process and not talk at them?”

In his seminal work on adult learning theory, Malcolm Knowles (1974, 1984) differentiated the learning process for children or “pedagogy” with adult learning, termed by him “andragogy,” which posits that adult learners approach learning in a fundamentally different way from children. A teaching approach matched to adults recognizes that they:

1. Are self-directed learners seeking to add to an already established skillset and reservoir of experience.
2. Respond best to a mutual and collaborative engagement with the instructor versus a more formal and authoritative approach.
3. Have learning goals which center on addressing existing real-world problems versus the subject focus used with children.
4. Experience an immediacy to apply what they learn (Knowles, 1974, 1984; Merriam, 2001).

Despite these distinct aspects of adult learners, the old pedagogical model, which is subject-focused and not student-focused, still underlies the approach of many teachers. Students are expected to revert to their old classroom conditioning and passively listen to instructors when they share their expertise in extended lectures (Ebert-May et al., 2011; Gibbs & Coffey, 2004). It is a tough sell to ask professionals to go back to the passive learning mode of their school years. A good continuing education program ignores this reality at their peril.

Attendee feedback will let the program know if a workshop fails to provide useful content applicable to their work or if the instructor failed to appreciate the expertise existing within the group and simply lectured the whole time. It is vital to hear their voices—they are the customer. This was the wake-up call I received when I started in continuing education. We would frequently offer a program with an instructor very well known for their expertise, but participants would make tepid comments on the survey forms we distribute after every training. They would voice things like “He really knew his stuff but it was pretty dry,” or “There was too much content—I couldn’t take it all in,” or “She only left a little time for questions at the end.” Certainly not the positive feedback you want to hear.

Participants also let us know that they overwhelmingly appreciated trainings that used mixed learning modalities that engaged them as professionals: “I loved that we had real conversations...The training just flew by, we did so much...I can’t wait to use the skills we just practiced with my clients.” It became clear we needed to create a new organizational approach that prioritized providing an engaged learner’s experience.

## What Does Good Training Look Like?

This led to an exploration of the literature on best practices in training adults (e.g., Flint et al., 2002; Soney, 2003), which seems to reside in an insulated space from the academic approach toward teaching (Ross-Gordon, 2011). We decided to move from an approach of *teaching* the professional learner to *facilitating their learning*. This new approach incorporates mixed teaching modalities that allow professionals to actively engage in the construction of their own knowledge (Clapper, 2009). We underwent a process of evaluating the instructors we had been using against this more active type of teaching and sorted them into two groups—one that was already using this approach or was deemed capable of pivoting, and another group that was unlikely to evolve from the traditional lecture format. This latter group we would need to move on from.

The new approach involves going beyond simply telling people things via lecture—it involves adding elements that allow people to *see* new information (e.g., demonstrations, video, graphic representations) and then *practice* applying it (e.g., role plays, case studies, discussions, small group activities, simulations). Active learning modalities allow professionals to personally relate to and practice new learning, which increases the chances of retaining and using the newly acquired knowledge in practice. Active modalities are also more likely to engage the learner on an emotional level, which also enhances learning (Clapper, 2010). Incorporating these elements into a training requires forethought by the instructor on the training design and delivery. It also requires more effort from the instructor beyond simply lecturing.

The opportunity to review the steady stream of feedback from professionals after their training experiences also forced me to look at my own teaching in the social work master’s program. I was doing a lot of *telling* students what they needed to know based on my experience. It forced me to rethink how I was planning each class session. I reduced my lectures to short lecturettes (15-30 minutes), increased opportunities for students to share their own fieldwork experiences as it related to the course material, and added more hands-on practicing and engaging with the course content. This new approach reduced the number of concepts and skills I could teach each week, and I had to resist the urge to still try to cover everything that I found important. I needed to trust that an engaged experience with less material is superior to a boring experience with all the material. The subsequent formal and informal feedback I have received from students regarding this revised approach has remained consistently positive over the years. I now think back with regret for subjecting students to the old approach for so long.

## Guarding the Gate

Providers of social work continuing education have an obligation to their attendees to guard the gate against the old style of teaching and usher in more useful and engaging student-centered learning. But how? Over time, our approach has yielded certain useful beliefs that help ensure our programs are learner-centered. The first is to become skeptical of a central tenet of formal education: the belief that expertise on a topic means the expert is also a deft teacher. Think again. Many bona fide experts are the driest, most boring teachers imaginable, which means the transfer of knowledge typically breaks down—particularly if the event is longer than an hour. Teaching is more than expert knowing; it requires engaging learners so that knowledge is

successfully conveyed and applied. Learning stops when an expert shares their knowledge in a dry and unengaging manner that allows participants to lose interest or feel talked down to. The proverbial “sage on the stage” approach is a poor way to educate professionals. This approach is more effective with passive bank learners, but not with experienced professionals (Curran, 2014). Trainings need to be carefully vetted by continuing education programs prior to being offered, not just to ensure the instructor has the proper expertise, but also to assess their vision and ability to deliver the material in a learner-centered manner.

### **Who Gets in the Gate?**

Guided by an awareness that workshops need to be engaging and provide useful skills, continuing education programs should find instructors who have both subject matter expertise *and* a teaching approach appropriate for adult professionals. Easier said than done. Some instructors bring the whole package with them—they know a lot and they know how to deliver it in an engaging manner. Others, not so much. However, ignoring this second group entirely will significantly limit the breadth and depth of a program’s offerings. Remember, most experts have not been trained as teachers, so their blueprint for teaching is the old-style pedagogy.

In working with lots of instructors, I’ve found they can roughly be placed into two broad groups. The first includes those from academic settings, generally professors, who have a firm grasp of research and theoretical knowledge, but less practice experience and wisdom. The second group includes clinicians, who bring the lived experience of daily social work practice, but who are often less acquainted with current research and theory. Their direct experience often leads to more engaging teaching; however, teaching from clinical experience needs to be grounded in academic rigor. Often the “sweet spot” for an ideal instructor is one who has practice experience as well as a passion that leads them to stay current in the research and theoretical developments in a defined area.

Another group that can yield fantastic instructors includes subject matter experts who have a willingness and potential to work differently but who need help in unlearning some of the old educational conditioning we have all experienced. To do this, a program needs to establish workshop submission standards that are shared with potential instructors up front. This helps ensure instructors know the program seeks training that is engaging and delivered through a mix of learning modalities. The standards should ensure each proposal has a) sufficient scholarship to meet the needs of experienced professionals (e.g., instructor’s experience and training, a workshop reference list), b) clearly defined learning objectives, c) a plan to use mixed learning modalities (e.g., videos, lecturettes, group discussion), and d) built-in activities that involve participants (e.g., simulations, small group activities, discussions). To see the instructor’s plan for their training, programs should require all proposals include a timed outline of the training day that lists the learning modalities they plan to use and the specific times they will take place. A firm workshop schedule prevents long digressive lectures. Instructors unwilling to design a workshop with this level of detail will be dissuaded from submitting a proposal or screened out early. Others will get the point that a certain type of training experience is expected and rise to the challenge.

After each training, evaluation data should be collected from attendees to measure their

satisfaction with the design and delivery of the event. We have found qualitative responses to be particularly enlightening. This data is useful in determining which instructors hit the mark, which instructors to move on from, and which instructors are effective but need guidance to improve in specific areas. Our evaluation data clearly shows learners prefer engaging learning experiences, which helps us know which instructors to rehire.

### **Teaching the Teachers**

In addition to setting clear expectations for the format and delivery of a workshop, continuing education programs should be prepared to help willing instructors meet these standards. When a potential new instructor is interviewed, it is important to ask them to describe their teaching philosophy and approach, and then carefully listen to their answer. Do they describe an engaged group of professionals learning together or do they focus solely on the topic areas they plan to tell people about? If you do not hear an awareness of the need to engage the group, then the instructor will most likely need guidance to meet the standards. Our program has adopted a relational approach with instructors. We seek to develop a good rapport with them at the outset, learning about them and helping them to learn about our program. We purposefully share a vision for the type of experience we want our attendees to have—engaged and involved. Developing a working relationship yields many benefits, including making post-workshop feedback easier, allowing for new workshop ideas to emerge over time, and the creation of a sense of mutual loyalty that good relationships typically produce.

When an expert instructor needs guidance to meet your standards, it can be a delicate endeavor. Written standards or guidelines are extremely helpful. By referencing the established guidelines, it helps avoid a face-losing experience for the instructor when they are told their vision for the workshop does not meet the established criteria of the program. Statements can be tactfully employed like, “These are the guidelines we have for all of our workshops; it looks like some elements will need to be added to your proposal.”

Unfortunately, this process required our program to move on from some well-respected instructors who were unwilling or unable to adapt. This process ranged from simply not rescheduling some instructors to teach again, to having awkward conversations about how their approach or evaluation feedback did not warrant running their workshop in the future. Letting prominent experts go was not an easy process; it included a fair amount of self-doubt: “They have so much experience! Is moving on from them the smart thing to do?...Their evaluation scores aren’t bad—some people really like their teaching style.” The principle that helped sustain us in building this culture was to focus on the primacy of the attendee’s experience. If they leave informed and energized, it will likely transfer to their work with clients—which is the primary role of a continuing education program.

Our program has been able to develop many talented professionals who showed interest and readiness to take the career step into teaching. They have reached the point in their career where they feel a drive to share and teach what they know. Many diamonds in the rough can be polished into gems with the right support. On our website and publications, we often have ads stating, “Are you ready to teach? Contact us.” We have found many instructors with years of experience working in hospitals, schools, nonprofits, and mental health centers who are

brimming with rich practice wisdom. Others have specialized experience with distinct populations such as older adults, survivors of abuse and trauma, and youth in the adoption system. It is clear they can be a bright light in the classroom, but they are a product of the bank learning approach and need to learn how to teach adults. Their professional experience provided the basis for *what* to teach, but they now need help with the new skillset of *how* to teach.

It has been a deeply rewarding aspect of my career to see talented social workers move into the classroom and receive stellar survey responses from participants expressing how dynamic and helpful the training experience was. The development process involves providing a clear vision and coaching on a) what the learner’s experience should be in the training and b) exploring which engaging elements can be incorporated into their training design. After a few discussions and curriculum reviews, the instructor has a well-designed training. Initially they are usually nervous, but once they get into the classroom with a good delivery plan, their knowledge shines. Talking to a new instructor after they have successfully conducted their first workshop is a delightful experience. Participants are generally highly receptive to their knowledge, practice wisdom, and good preparation.

To further support instructors meeting our vision, our program created a booklet called *Best Practices in Social Work Continuing Education* (Behan & Donnelly, 2014) that includes section titles such as Preparing for Your Workshop, Mixing Teaching Methods, Engaging Your Audience, and Starting and Concluding Your Workshop. The document has proven useful for new instructors as well as for instructors whose evaluations show a need for improvement in some areas. We regularly receive comments from instructors like, “This was so helpful—it covered all the things I was nervous about,” and “This really helped me rethink how I am running the workshop.” The document is posted on the program’s website along with the workshop proposal guidelines. Documents like these help establish a program’s culture and standards, which can then blossom in the classroom experience.

### **Conclusion**

Social workers have a difficult and multi-faceted job that requires life-long learning. When social workers commit time and money for training, continuing education programs can best support them by offering training that is scholarly, engaging, and practically useful. Creating a program that primarily focuses on the learning needs of adult professionals is essential, but it can be challenging, as it requires a deliberate rejection of the deeply entrenched model of expert-led teaching that most of us have experienced throughout our lives. This article describes one program’s efforts to create the practices and culture to prioritize the adult professional’s learning needs.

Our process involved adopting a gatekeeper role to ensure instructors were capable and prepared to deliver optimized training. Proposal submission guidelines based on adult learning theory were established to shape the content coming in the door. Some potential instructors easily met these standards, while others simply were unable to adapt their approach. Others, particularly new instructors, required guidance and mentorship in developing their approach. Coaching instructors in building their presenting skills and knowledge can help ensure the training offered is in line with the organization’s culture of meeting the needs of adult learners. The outcome of

this approach is that attendees generally leave a training feeling energized and prepared to use the new skills they just experienced. By treating the social work professional as an active adult learner, training impact is increased, directly enhancing their work with clients.

### References

- Behan, D., & Donnelly, L. (2014). *Best practices in social work continuing education*. Rutgers School of Social Work.  
<https://socialwork.rutgers.edu/academics/continuing-education/workshop-proposals>
- Clapper, T. C. (2009). Moving away from teaching and becoming a facilitator of learning. *PAILAL*, 2(2). <http://tccid.dover.net/PAILAL.htm#News>
- Clapper, T. C. (2010). Beyond Knowles: What those conducting simulation need to know about adult learning theory. *Clinical Simulation in Nursing*, 6(1), e7–e14.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecns.2009.07.003>
- Curran, M. K. (2014). Examination of the teaching styles of nursing professional development specialists, part I: Best practices in adult learning theory, curriculum development, and knowledge transfer. *The Journal of Continuing Education in Nursing*, 45(5), 233–240.  
<https://doi.org/10.3928/00220124-20140417-04>
- Ebert-May, D., Derting, T. L., Hodder, J., Momsen, J. L., Long, T. M., & Jardeleza, S. E. (2011). What we say is not what we do: Effective evaluation of faculty professional development programs. *BioScience*, 61(7), 550–558. <https://doi.org/10.1525/bio.2011.61.7.9>
- Flint, T., Zakos, P., & Frey, R. (2002). *Best practices in adult learning: A self-evaluation workbook for colleges and universities*. Kendall Hunt.
- Freire, P. (2005). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (30th anniversary ed.). Continuum.
- Gibbs, G., & Coffey, M. (2004). The impact of training of university teachers on their teaching skills, their approach to teaching and the approach to learning of their students. *Active Learning in Higher Education*, 5(1), 87–100. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1469787404040463>
- Knowles, M. S. (1974). Human resources development in OD. *Public Administration Review*, 34(2), 115–123.
- Knowles, M. S. (1984). *Andragogy in action: Applying modern principles of adult learning*. Josey-Bass.
- Merriam, S. B. (2001). Andragogy and self-directed learning: Pillars of adult learning theory. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 89, 3–13. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ace.3>
- Ross-Gordon, J. M. (2011). Research on adult learners: Supporting the needs of a student population that is no longer nontraditional. *Peer Review*, 13(1), 26.

<https://aacu.org/publications-research/periodicals/research-adult-learners-supporting-needs-student-population-no>

Soney, R. (2003). Defining best practice in the administration of an adult learning institution. *Adult Learning*, 14(2), 17–19. <https://doi.org/10.1177/104515950401400205>

***About the Author:*** Douglas Behan, DSW, LCSW is Director of Continuing Education, Assistant Professor of Professional Practice, School of Social Work, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ ([dbehan@ssw.rutgers.edu](mailto:dbehan@ssw.rutgers.edu)).