

Designing and Teaching an Anti-Violence Course in the Year 2020: Navigating the Pandemic, Protests, and Politics

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Abstract: The year 2020 proved to be incredibly challenging for educators and students as we navigated a global pandemic, protests in response to police brutality and violence, and a presidential election. This narrative reflection shares an intimate glimpse into my role as an educator responsible for designing and teaching an anti-violence course to graduate-level social work students during unprecedented times. By utilizing elements of the pedagogy of vulnerability, such as not knowing and the co-creation of knowledge, the course became a place of healing and connection for both the teacher and students. I believe educators would benefit from exploring and conducting further research on how models such as the pedagogy of vulnerability can enhance students' learning experiences in anti-violence coursework. This *different kind of learning*—one not solely focused on outcomes—encourages us all to relax into the mystery of lifelong learning that often begins with a deep dive examination of ourselves.

Keywords: education, social work, technology, pedagogy

In the months leading up to the fall 2020 semester, I scribbled down these thoughts on a Post-It note:

My dream to teach realized; my voice finally heard
Long overdue.
The student becomes the teacher, and the teacher the student
Exposed.
The forever healing of my own wounds
Stakes are high.
Growth is painful but so is stagnancy
No more hiding. No going back.

It is August 24, 2020. The first night of class. Mint tea in hand. Generations of familial trauma in my bones. Son's laughter in the background. Fourteen students. Fourteen more weeks to go. No going back, indeed.

Lobbying to add a course exclusively focusing on the various forms and tenets of intimate partner violence (IPV) to a social work curriculum had been years in the making. I originally pitched and agreed to teach my graduate-level class "Violence Across the Lifecourse" pre-COVID-19, pre-protests, and pre-presidential election. Prior to returning to the academy as a doctoral student, I worked as an advocate in a multitude of settings for and with survivors of IPV. Anti-violence work was not sexy; in fact, it was risky and yet profoundly necessary.

During my time as an advocate, I was forced to confront my own personal experiences. I have been told that when I was born, I attempted to exit the birth canal feet-first, an instinctual move that I believe signaled my preparation for a world I would soon enter. I spent many years

running. Running from memories I thought I had buried but that came to visit me in quiet moments like old ghosts. I knew the landscape of IPV all too well, as my Alabama kin's roots in violence run deep. Kin who chose to inflict harm on others; kin who at different points in time were all harmed themselves. As a child, I acted as the protector of my mother and younger brother, often placing myself between them and men's rage. I was a natural advocate before the word found its way into my lexicon. Working in this field, I have died a thousand deaths only to be rebirthed again and again. I am a survivor-turned-thriver—a metamorphosis in its own right.

Growing weary and frustrated with the mass injustice of violence against women and the lack of training for social workers, I knew I had to go back to the beginning: education. As a newly graduated social worker, I was ill-equipped to work with survivors of IPV. Throughout my entire educational journey, I was offered only one class that focused on IPV, and it was during my MSW program after I had already been a practicing social worker. I judged my work with survivors in terms of outcomes and binary ways of thinking (those who leave abusive situations and those who don't) rather than processes (safety is a series of steps, not a single step), and I did not realize the magnitude of exploring my own history in relation to my work as an advocate. I have traveled quite the path to recognize and admit to how my own experiences, values, privileges, and biases inherently shape my work, and how my own trauma mastery—what Lipsky and Burk (2009) refer to as a coping mechanism in which “we seek to turn a traumatic situation in which we once felt powerless into a new situation where we feel competent and in charge” (p. 156)—showed up in my work with survivors.

We all arrive at this profession with our own histories and stories just waiting to tell themselves no matter how hard we try to silence them. This baggage makes us human. Our job is to unpack it, responsibly and ethically, by engaging in our own work so that we can do *the* work. There was a disconnect for me during my educational experiences, and I wanted to move away from fragmented learning or learning without the whole person, including the emotions, the body, the mind, and the spirit (Miller, 2019). I set out to create and facilitate a collaborative classroom environment that I, myself, had always craved.

Almost nine years after becoming a professional social worker, my time to teach was finally here. I had always envisioned teaching in a classroom and interacting with students in person, but COVID-19 had other ideas. Safety protocols led me to facilitating the class via Zoom, which felt like a nightmare at first, especially for a highly sensitive introvert. For a second, I considered running and hiding. Not only did I have to prepare course content, but I now had to adapt to a new teaching format in a matter of weeks, all while attempting to stay afloat in the crashing waves of imposter syndrome. I incessantly worried about my ability to be an effective communicator in the virtual world.

The year 2020 was one of the strangest and most challenging years that I can recall from my time here on earth. We found ourselves amid a global pandemic; a presidential election; protests of the killing of Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC); and increasing rates of femicide, particularly against women of color. The social and political climate provided plenty of subject matter to debate and discuss. There were also extraordinary moments of hope and uprising as a surge of advocates banded together to call out the injustices plaguing our world. It

was not lost on me that there was no better time to lead this class. I no longer had the privilege of flying under the radar. All eyes were on me. As a White woman in the academy, I held incredible amounts of privilege and power and wanted to be intentional about not making my ego, thoughts, feelings, and opinions the focal points. I garnered strength through humility. I remembered Glennon Doyle's (2020) words and forged ahead knowing that I would need to accept that one of my privileges I would burn was my own emotional comfort. My whole house was suddenly up in flames.

Teaching during these times was an interesting predicament to find myself in. I was a doctoral student finishing up my last semester of coursework. I was also preparing to take comprehensive exams while struggling to balance the duties of being a mother, a research assistant, an author, a program evaluator, a partner, and a friend. All that academia entails significantly intensified. What I would later come to discover is that the identities I brought into the Zoom room created power dynamics that I consistently worked to address. At the same time, my disclosure created connection and shared experiences with the students because I appealed to their humanity.

Before the course began, I emailed each student an introduction sheet with the following quote attached [block style for emphasis]:

“As a classroom community, our capacity to generate excitement is deeply affected by our interest in one another, in hearing one another's voice, in recognizing one another's presence.” – bell hooks (1994, p. 8)

The purpose of this was twofold. For one thing, it was crucial that I know my audience. Questions asking about career interests, personal and professional experience with violence, and reasons for taking this course all served to inform me about who I was speaking to and how I could present information in safer and more intentional ways. Secondly, I wanted to convey interest in my students as people, to communicate that they mattered and were worth getting to know. I asked them to share with me information (that they were comfortable with and that remained within professional boundaries) that would help me to know them better. In my experience as a supervisor, I learned not to ask my employees to do something that I was not willing to do myself. The same principle applied to this class. I completed the exercise and shared my answers with them in an attempt to model feminist values, including collaboration and vulnerability, that the course would call for and encourage.

The actual course content utilized intersectionality as a critical lens to stretch our thinking of IPV beyond just individual acts and to open our minds to not only *what* is happening, but *why* it is happening. Given our country's longstanding complicity and tolerance of violence against women, it was imperative that IPV be viewed in the context of larger-level oppressions such as systemic racism, sexism, and classism. I credited Black women such as Patricia Hill Collins, Rosa Parks, Frances Beal, Anna Julia Cooper, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Sojourner Truth, Toni Morrison, Audre Lorde, and the women of the Combahee River Collective for how their advocacy and scholarship birthed out of Black feminist values shaped anti-violence work. I was also heavily influenced by the pedagogy of vulnerability (POV), a term developed by Brantmeier (2013) that includes the core components of mutual self-disclosure, not knowing, and

co-learning in the knowledge co-creation process as well as a melding of knowledge, abilities, skills, and experiences.

Borrowing from Brené Brown’s explanation of how she chooses to begin her team meetings (Mikel, 2020), we began each class with a two-word check-in, or temperature checks as I liked to call them, describing how we were feeling that day. I aimed to share power by assigning weekly discussion facilitators that showed an appreciation for the *lived curriculum* and contributions of every single person in the class. The lived curriculum—studying our own experiences of the world as valid sources of knowledge—challenges dominant forms of knowledge presented in the formal curriculum of various levels of schooling and decenters the power of official school knowledge (Apple, 1993; Styles, 2014). POV is about bringing the lived curriculum of both teachers and students alike into the classroom as a source of knowledge (Brantmeier, 2013). Essentially, the course structure mirrored that of a psychoeducational group in which the group members or, in this case, the students, formed a sacred space. Pulling from my experience as a group facilitator, I knew the class needed to feel a sense of ownership over the material to be invested in the process. I also recognized what it meant to make space for both extroverted and introverted learners; that participation could be expressed in ways beyond just speaking. Actions such as listening, using the chat box, and affirming body language were ways to effectively communicate. Together we created a virtual circle, a ceremony. I paid homage to the Black and Indigenous women who for hundreds of years have understood the sovereignty of creating places to learn and heal in unison with others. The students posed questions about the material and shared opinions and experiences with one another. I contributed, challenged, and validated when necessary. I did not want to be the sole holder of knowledge.

At a time when so much felt out of control, I implemented tiny ways of restoring autonomy and decision-making ability, such as fielding questions and comments using the Zoom whiteboard, polling, offering evaluations and feedback opportunities throughout the semester, and using discussion posts. Additionally, scheduled workdays in which students could utilize class time to complete assignments and vote/participate in the presidential election were important to the process of honoring their time. It was a three-hour evening class on Tuesdays from 5:30 PM to 8:30 PM that landed directly in the middle of my students’ lives and mine. They were also attempting to balance the demands of their lives and were carrying burdens of their own including personal and professional hardships. They were parents, professionals, and people navigating graduate-level education during a pandemic.

As a graduate student myself, I was well aware of Zoom fatigue. I worked consciously to address it by building in breaks, music, and meditation minutes; encouraging food and drink; and engaging in other self-care activities. Self-care was a verb, and it served as an accountability measure for all of us. Self-care was established as a necessary and integral part of this course as signaled by the completion of individualized plans by everyone in the class. I shared with the students [block style for emphasis]:

“Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare.” – Audre Lorde (1988, p. 131)

We discussed burnout and how rest is productive. I was careful never to promise absolute emotional safety in my class but did promise I would strive to create a safer and braver space. Outside check-ins with students became a regular occurrence, and reminders for self-care and flexibility were all a part of a compassionate teaching practice. I must have said the word grace 50 times and asked for it a few times myself. The class needed to be supportive as well as practical and useful. I called upon other practicing social workers both locally in the community and nationally to serve as guest speakers and to share their contact information. Networking increased confidence and decreased isolation.

I had come to experience firsthand how paramount reflexivity as a practice is to social work. Demystifying and decolonializing implicit and explicit biases that inhibit relationships and creativity empowers whole-person learning (hooks, 1994). By answering reflexive practice questions such as “Who are you in relation to this work?” and “How have your past experiences, values, and your multiple identities (in the context of power, privilege, oppression) impacted your understanding and/or reactions to the topic?,” the students began to grapple with the ethical practice of critical introspection into who they are and how this informs how they interact with clients. Their responses were nothing short of spectacular. They were authentic, raw, and courageous. Many revealed their own stories of survivorship, and throughout the semester I read evidence of tremendous personal and professional growth. I felt honored to be invited into their worlds. I encouraged them to view their experiences as assets that can strengthen their practice rather than impede it. The students also had the opportunity to reach audiences outside of the academy by writing blog posts and op-eds critiquing different media representations of violence. Even though at times it felt like a steep learning curve, each week the students showed up. There were nights when we were tired. Tired of being on camera, tired of life in a pandemic, tired of the brutality and violence, and tired of school. I echoed the words of Mariame Kaba: “Hope is a discipline” (Scahill, 2021, paras 61-62). We rumbled, we struggled, and, out of resiliency and a larger purpose, we rose. Turns out, self-discovery can be cathartic and a catalyst for recovery.

The topics and readings were by no means comfortable. In fact, the material was often excruciating. We were diving into the tragic parts of humanity from womb to tomb, experiences that almost all of us were familiar with on some front, whether it be personal or professional. We began the quest with reproductive coercion, abuse against children, and teen dating violence. We then ventured into how IPV affects individuals in underserved communities such as veterans, LGBTQIA+, incarcerated women, BIPOC, and aging adults. The content had a way of challenging our beliefs and perceptions about individuals experiencing violence and those who perpetrate it. Part of the challenge was having to inspect our own darkness more deeply than we imagined. As we became more informed and aware, we were slowly able to allow parts of our old narratives to fade, like embers from the past. We relied on research to inform our thinking and our practice skills. We read articles and poetry, we listened to podcasts, reviewed assessments and safety planning tools, watched videos, and pulled from multiple sources to enhance engagement and dialogue. Some of the most uncomfortable tasks, however, came from acknowledging this work as a calling and a craft that takes an understanding of the complexity and messiness of human nature. It takes the strength and sacred act of holding space without fixing, judging, pathologizing, or rescuing.

Addressing IPV and issues that exacerbate violence is a process, not an outcome. A realistic goal cannot be to end violence. We are not going to end all violence, but we can make progress. This can be grueling to accept and simultaneously freeing. It allows us to lean into the work in a more humble and empowered way. Just simply holding space—and, in our case, virtual space—is a gift, because what greater gift is there than to feel seen and heard? To feel a genuine connection? The unlearning is often harder than the actual learning because we have been conditioned to seek a single solution to dealing with multifaceted individuals and issues. I pushed the students to worry less about finding the right answer and focus more on honoring self-determination and autonomy—sometimes a difficult lesson for ambitious and eager social work students. I sought to shatter the misleading notion of mastery that only works to perpetuate paternalistic tendencies and false notions, assuring us that we are the experts. Instead, I encouraged them to use their voices and platforms to live out anti-oppressive values.

I remember when Kentucky Attorney General Daniel Cameron decided not to charge the police officers responsible for killing Breonna Taylor with murder. In a moment of rage and grief, I pinned a discussion post to the class sharing my guttural reactions to the injustice of how Black women are treated in this country. Concurrently, the femicide rates in our own state were increasing as women and women of color were being killed by current or former intimate partners at a rate of what seemed like one every other day. I had BIPOC in my class and had grown to care about all my students. I never could forget the weight and responsibility I felt as a White and highly educated course instructor. One of the difficult challenges in teaching this course was that violence was occurring in real time. That came with its own balancing act of leaning into/promoting the work and wanting to throw my hands up in surrender. This class was not just about case studies, anecdotal stories, or readings out of a textbook—it was about people's lives. The work always continued, and through the growing pains, we emerged as more compassionate social workers and human beings. I witnessed passions ignite that motivated students to want to tackle violence in their communities, in their workplaces, and in their lives. They found themselves in the work, and convictions were contagious. Lesson plans and agendas did not always take center stage as sometimes it was more important to pause, catch our breath, and decompress. We carved out moments to laugh and to celebrate one another. The students came to trust each other, evidenced by the comfort they displayed in communicating their thoughts, opinions, and experiences. Inward and onward, we pressed forward.

At different points in the semester, there were times where my son and dog made cameo appearances on the Zoom calls. I often scheduled a break around the time of my son's bedtime so that I could read him a story before rushing to admit a guest speaker from the waiting room. I consumed pouches of applesauce and fruit gummies on camera. I divulged my love of Taco Bell and students laughed and cheered. The \$5 nacho box served as a staunch reminder of class fragility and economic insecurity in a world where graduate students are just trying to survive. It was real and relatable. Authenticity was our way through. It served as our guiding light and splashed an element of humanity onto our country's inhumane canvas.

Although it could be terrifying to be radically challenged in the way we viewed these topics and the systems in which we all operate, it was thrilling to acknowledge how we can use our gifts to enact change and the possibilities that surround us when those of us with power choose to step

aside and share it.

This class allowed us to reconnect as humans and to engage in the hard work, the heart work, and the soul work. I witnessed the power of vulnerability, and it was transformational. It's amazing what happens when we treat each other as humans first and students second. Healing can and does take place virtually if you are intentional about the space you create. My role as an instructor reflected my work as a group facilitator, in that the students were encouraged to own their collective and individual experiences. Along with a virtual wellness kit, evaluations, and a sharing of gratitude, we ended the final class with this Toni Morrison quote:

I tell my students, “When you get these jobs that you have been so brilliantly trained for, just remember that your real job is that if you are free, you need to free somebody else. If you have some power, then your job is to empower somebody else.” (Houston, 2003, p. 4)

Social work educators need to collect more research on how models such as the pedagogy of vulnerability can enhance students' learning experiences in anti-violence coursework as they emerge as professional social workers. How can we as teachers use POV in conjunction with skills, assessments, and competencies? How can we prioritize both and work to create a more culturally humble environment? There are opportunities to discover and illuminate incredibly powerful data—data that moves beyond just a survey and captures lived experiences of practicing social workers and advocates. This information can strengthen curricula and can serve as a guiding tool for fellow educators interested in providing their own anti-violence courses.

Ultimately, I ended up teaching what I needed to learn and writing what I needed to read. I hope that future research collects information about how the POV creates a collaborative atmosphere that welcomes a different kind of learning. One that is not solely focused on achieving outcomes but one that welcomes students to relax into the mystery, to answer their call as lifelong learners, and to acknowledge that this learning begins with a deeper dive into themselves. I look forward to the continued journey of speaking truth to power as I have humbly accepted the honor of teaching this course again.

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