

Commentary on "Radical, Skewed, Benign, and Calculated: Reflections on Teaching Diversity"

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Dr. Yellow Bird's article on teaching human diversity content to less than eager students describes well the various stances one might take to present the content. As a teacher of direct practice I take a different route, hopefully achieving similar ends. Social work students, by and large, seem to arrive and pass through their BSW and MSW programs with an understanding of the problems and issues that confront oppressed groups, particularly people of color. Some few even develop a passion for correcting the social injustices.

Many students, however, never see any of these groups as the people they are—how they view the world, how their families operate, their cultural nuances... As a consequence I have taken a different route than Dr. Yellow Bird's. I ask students to speak and write about a group without reference to any problems the group may experience. I want them to recognize any cultural insensitivity of the direct helping approaches they may use. Most approaches are insensitive to cultural nuances and need to be altered depending on a client's cultural home. If you don't understand a client's view of the world, how can you know what is insensitive?

And, yes, I do cover the nature and effects of oppression, but I first want prospective clients seen as people with

lives, lives that are culturally rich and sometimes alien to the social worker. I want students to have a curiosity about who their clients are, how they live, what they believe. I want this beginning understanding before I discuss issues for groups. Clients need to be seen as people first, before they are seen as an amalgamation of problems. We have so little time with students that I hope they develop a on-going fascination with learning about others, especially as they will be trying to help them soon also. One of the best statements I have ever heard made to client went something like this: "You are the expert on you. I need you to tell me what I need to know to understand you as a person." This shows an appreciation for the whole person.

Even when I taught a course in racism and discrimination, I also introduced the human faces of the groups oppressed. When else will students begin to see those different from themselves as real and human, and not simply as members of an oppressed group.

Dr. Yellow Bird has developed skillful ways to teach about fighting injustice. I want to teach students to see others as uniquely people first, as oppressed people second, especially in clinical courses. Hopefully all of our students will help others as they fight oppression. □

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