

# THE TEACHER'S TASK: EMPOWERING THE STUDENT

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*A key element in teaching is creating an environment in which students are taught how to learn. Rather than being fact oriented, it should be a setting in which one thinks about ideas. In many respects, teaching is a dialogue between teacher and learner. Yet, for this dialogue to occur, one needs to provide an environment that fosters students' abilities to think conceptually and critically about social work. Hence, teaching at its core is about engaging others in the great adventure of learning. It is an ongoing journey in which one is always looking to provide a setting in which one can take risks, engage in dialogue with one another, and have fun. The classroom should be a place where students look forward to coming and creating an environment that is collaborative and supportive. Ultimately, students are in charge of their own learning.*



## Introduction

In 1999 I wrote an article entitled "What a Long Strange Trip It's Been" (Johnson, 1999). The paper attempted to examine and reflect on my experiences of being a beginning social worker and teacher. In many respects they were painful experiences fraught with disappointments, frustrations, and, at times, loss, sadness, and anger. The article also addressed some of my fears, anxieties, and apprehensions. Yet, several years later I find myself no longer as preoccupied or concerned with making mistakes; rather, I am more cognizant of what I am attempting to achieve in my classes and how I can best go about ensuring that happens. According to Ambrose and Bridges (2005), research has shown that mastery or expertise in any domain takes at least ten years. Now with over ten years experience in higher education, my understanding of the profession and the importance of dialogue between students and faculty is vastly different.

In all of my classes, I have two central objectives. First, I want students to learn and second, I have to provide a setting in which this learning can occur. The intent of this narrative is to look at these two objectives and discuss how I believe they can be achieved.

According to the Council on Social Work Education:

*"Social work education combines scientific inquiry with the teaching of professional skills to*

*provide effective and ethical social work services. Social work educators reflect their identification with the profession through their teaching, scholarship, and service. Social work education, from baccalaureate to doctoral levels, employs educational, practice, scholarly, interprofessional, and service delivery models to orient and shape the profession's future in the context of expanding knowledge, changing technologies, and complex human and social concerns" (CSWE, Educational Policies & Accreditation Standards, Preamble, 2001).*

This statement connects well with current trends in education, from a rejection of the traditional transfer of knowledge model, to a greater emphasis on the integration of the scholarship and practice of teaching. In doing so, I believe, a more student-centered conceptualization of education that places student learning in the forefront occurs (Barr & Tagg, 1995; Hutchins & Shulman, 1999; O'Leary, 1997). In other words, andragogy is central to the approach for such transformation, as teacher and students move together from the known to the new.

In many respects, teaching is essentially a *dialogue*. Derived from ancient Greek

signifying a “word with, through, by means of, or among,” the word is replete with the philosophy of teaching’s essence. It evokes a reality of conversation within a community. As such, it bespeaks an art of communication and it is this art that I identify as the essential philosophy of teaching. It is an art which integrates knowledge and know-how communicating and sharing with others. While I accept that knowledge, proficiency, and experience are necessary, I would also assert that teaching requires one to be able to engage in a dialogue between teacher and learner. Such dialogue rests with an imaginative connection being made between learning context and content. In this respect, the objective of teaching and learning is not directed towards pure information but, rather, transformation.

### **Excitement for Learning**

I love to teach and take pride in the fact that I am a licensed social worker. I convey this through enthusiasm for what I am teaching. In my Introduction to Social Welfare class, I get excited about presenting the historical component of the course. Frequently, students have stated that they thought social welfare history would be “uninspiring” and not relevant to what was happening today. However, through many of their assignments, students have been able to make connections between what we have discussed in class and contemporary social welfare issues.

Examples include papers on individuals or events that are of particular interest and concern to students. Some of the subject matters are Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Rosa Parks, Jane Adams, Dorothy Dix, Janice Joplin, and Bob Dylan, and legal rulings such as the Civil Rights Act and *Roe v. Wade*. Regarding *Roe v. Wade*, many students refer to the current debates on abortion including the possibility of the present Supreme Court overturning it. Students also discuss a woman’s right to choose and look at some of the reasons why women are forced to make this difficult, personal decision; in other words, students are driving the process. My goal is not for students to listen passively but to develop critical thinking skills by questioning assumptions.

Relevancy of class material is helpful in creating dialogue. I have students break into groups and ask them to respond to the following:

- 1) A time in their lives when they personally experienced or witnessed discrimination.
- 2) A time in their lives that some significant event touched them personally.
- 3) What it must feel like to be poor.
- 4) A time in their lives when they stood up for something they believed in.
- 5) How they wish to be remembered after they die.

The objective of this exercise is to engage students in a dialogue with one another. It also reinforces the fact that the material is not abstract, that it has meaning, significance, and personal implications. This class assignment provokes, prods, and animates the students. When providing specific examples of personally experiencing or witnessing discrimination, many of the younger students will talk about an event in high school where they observed a classmate being humiliated by a school official. Students with more life experience talk about personal experiences of being discriminated against at work; for example, female students overlooked for promotion based on gender.

Regarding a time in their lives that some significant event touched them personally, older students recall the assassination of John F. Kennedy. They remark that they can remember exactly where they were when they heard he had been shot. This leads to discussion of other tragic national events such as the 1986 space shuttle explosion and the events of September 11, 2001. These conversations bring the subject of social welfare to a place less abstract and less dry, making it real and significant to the student.

### **Service Learning**

In the last few years I have incorporated service-learning into my Introduction to Social Work class. The intent of service learning is to connect classroom learning to real life applications in the community. Also, service-learning projects are designed to benefit

community organizations as much as students. By integrating service learning into the curriculum, educators do more than give students opportunities for hands-on experience. They are providing opportunities for encountering competing definitions of the common good, diverse viewpoints on the root cause of social problems, and questions about who and what knowledge is for. Courses that include service learning encourage students to ask the larger questions that lie beyond the bounds of most traditional courses.

Since incorporating the service-learning component into my class, I have been impressed with the passion, richness, and insight of class presentations. Several of the students stated that they wanted to declare their major as social work. They also talked about what a profound impact many of the clients/consumers had upon them and acknowledged that with this component, the theoretical material being presented in class was far more meaningful.

There have been a number of examples over the last few years that have impressed me. One student was very interested in volunteering at the Center for Grieving Children, which offers a multicultural program for children who have come to live in the Portland area because they had fled their own countries due to war and civil unrest. This particular student talked about how much he had learned from these children. For his presentation he put together a wonderful Power Point that displayed the children's art work and provided information about the Center. I have continued to keep in contact with this student who is now in his senior year in the program. He continues to volunteer at the program, and the Center has utilized his computer skills to put together presentations for possible funding purposes.

Some of my students had no initial interest in social work. One woman was taking this class because it fit into her schedule. However, several weeks into the course she inquired about possible agencies in the community that offered some flexibility. Another student who took the class with me last semester volunteered at the Preble Street Resource Center, a program that provides services for

individuals who are homeless. I was absolutely amazed by this student's presentation. She stated to the whole class that when she had started volunteering at the program, she had some negative and stereotypical ideas of what homeless people were like. However, she explained that this volunteer experience had completely changed her perception of social work. The staff had been very welcoming and she learned a great deal from the people who utilized the program. In addition to these two specific examples, a number of students have volunteered at Big Brothers Big Sisters, Camp Sunshine, the Special Olympics, and programs for the visually impaired. At the beginning of the course they had been extremely nervous about the class requirements but found the service learning to be one of the best components of the class.

### Facilitate Learning

In order for the aforementioned to occur, I need to provide an environment that facilitates learning. One of the resources that I utilize in the ongoing process of learning is humor. I strive to make my class settings a learning process that is fun, one where students are not afraid of failure and are willing to take chances. I also believe that using humor has numerous benefits. It creates community, relaxes students, and helps student engagement and retention. When I use humor I am consciously utilizing something that everyone can relate to.

The University of Southern Maine is predominately a "Red Sox nation." You only have to mention the New York Yankees and everyone has an opinion. Twenty seven World Series, the curse of the Bambino, Bill Buckner, Bucky Dent—mention any of these names and almost everyone has something to say. In class, many students will come in and tell me how the Yankees lost last night, or have I had a look at the box scores or standings that morning. In fact, many students will bring in the *Boston Globe* or the *New York Times*. Now, here's my opportunity! "Hey did you happen to read that article in the paper about social security, health care, homelessness, elder abuse, the high cost of prescriptions, or foster

care and adoption? That would be a great piece to incorporate into your paper.”

I'll also tell them how I can relate to their years of woe, how for countless years I have watched the English football team, cricket team, or rugby team be defeated in a major competition. In soccer it was usually the Germans who dashed our hopes. In cricket, it was Australia or the West Indies that beat England. In rugby, the numerous defeats were handed down by Wales at Cardiff Arms Park.

In addition to sports humor, I enjoy using music as a teaching aid. I will say, “I'm sure you remember the Beatles or the Rolling Stones.” At that point I will burst into a brief rendition of one of their songs. Immediately one of my students will reply, “I wasn't even born when they recorded that,” or “Hey professor, keep your day job.” Yet again, from this terrible rendition, we are able to make a connection with what we are discussing in class. Hence, going back to a previous rationale for my social welfare classes, students are able to make connections between what we have discussed in class and contemporary social welfare issues.

In my Introduction to Social Work class, when we are looking at empowerment and human diversity, I ask the class to share stereotypes of the English. Some of the favorites include: we are stuffy, drink tea, bad cooks, talk funny, drink warm beer, eat fish and chips out of newspaper. I then turn the tables on the students and proceed to tell them how people in England view Americans: loud, overweight, rude, pushy, aggressive and always saying “have a nice day.”

You can see that some students are somewhat taken aback by this. A discussion follows about how we formulate these fixed mental images of members belonging to a group based on assumed attributes that reflect an overly simplified opinion about that group. The outcome of this discussion is that our fixed mental images do not result from our personal experiences, but are socially constructed based on what we have heard family members say, seen on television, read in the newspaper, seen in a movie, or heard on the radio.

I then turn the issue back to my own experiences of living in America. I state that I

have made numerous friends here and that I have found people to be extremely kind, generous, warm, and loving. In other words, the preconceived notions that were based on secondary sources have been proven to be unreliable and inaccurate.

### **Research**

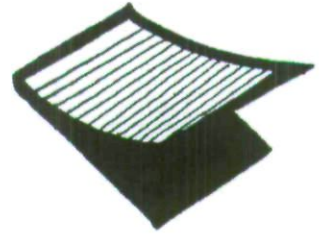
Another class I enjoy teaching is research. However, many students are afraid of research and feel a great trepidation about taking this class. I show them that what interests them or what they are doing in their field placements or their place of employment is all researchable. It's as if their whole perception about the subject changes. Rather than being based on fear and trepidation, it becomes real, manageable, and perhaps even enjoyable.

I have had students who volunteer or work with the elderly. One was interested in the importance of socialization programs in nursing homes. She started researching this and by the end of the first sequence had completed a wonderful literature review and had formulated several hypotheses. I also had this student in the second sequence where students operationalize ideas and analyze data using SPSS 13. My nursing home student's project was outstanding. Despite her initial fear of the class, she realized that the project was driven by her own interests and that it was not abstract or meaningless but real and relevant to her work.

### **Fieldwork Seminar**

In my fieldwork seminars, the learning goal I attempt to incorporate is to provide students with a forum in which they can share experiences and take risks. In this environment I see myself primarily as a group facilitator. The richness of the class comes from the students themselves when they are willing to share their successes and failures with their peers.

At the beginning of the academic year there is a great deal of apprehension, and the students talk glowingly of the agency and of their supervisors. Gradually they start to question the agency's philosophy, how they observe their supervisor dealing with particular individuals, or why the agency does things in a



particular way. The other intent of the fieldwork seminar is to provide the students with a forum in which they can draw on material from all of their social work classes, in other words, connecting theory and practice.

I am the first to admit that this does not always go smoothly. Students will often assert that the social work program stresses a strengths perspective, but their agency seems to be working from a deficit model. Another topic is social workers in the field not utilizing the theories and concepts that the students are talking about in their classes. There appears to be an inconsistency here. In addition, students encounter a wide discrepancy in placement settings. Some students are placed in very traditional settings while others are placed in agencies where social work is secondary.

Here, I introduce the concept of parallel process. I mention the fact that if they perceive the agencies in this way, then might many of the clients/consumer members feel. This I believe takes one's thinking to a different level. Students no longer talk about the agency, but start talking about their own practice and what they are doing.

### **An Empowered Voice**

**Brandi:** As Paul's student for two years and three classes—Introduction to Social Work (200 level), Research I (300 level), and Field Seminar (403/404)—I can speak to some of his teaching tasks and styles and their outcome as they pertain to my growth from student to professional social worker. I can also, from a student perspective, link academics to a real world context.

When I returned to college after fourteen years, I was anxious about what to expect. Paul's syllabus for Introduction to Social Work talked about andragogy. Andragogy? I wasn't sure what this meant but was surprised and pleased to know that a teaching style existed that put the responsibility of learning on the student, assuming there exists a certain level of self-concept, experience, readiness, orientation, and motivation for this learning (Knowles, 1998). There also exists a connective piece wherein the instructor is responsible for establishing, nurturing, and

monitoring a learning environment, the crux of what Paul discusses above.

My development began with the introductory course and included the basics of social work: key concepts and policy and history of the profession. Values, ethics, empowerment, and self-determination were discussed as a group and taught through peer presentations. Paul's use of humor helped create a casual and comfortable learning environment, which in turn helped students develop relationships as well as the strength to question and critique material.

Research seemed daunting primarily because I had no interest in "doing" statistics. Fortunately, Paul's knack of explaining things simply, as well as technological advances in data analyzing, enabled me to visualize my project with less distaste. His enthusiasm for the subject matter was infectious and, because of this, I successfully managed to incorporate an issue of interest into a working research hypothesis. Though I am not a baseball fan, Paul's playful banter encouraged camaraderie, resulting in a positive learning environment.

Fieldwork and its accompanying seminar was, for me, where all the substance of the social work curriculum lay. Earlier coursework was necessary, but for social work students, leaving academia and incorporating theory and ethics into one's practice on the "outside," is the ultimate educational experience. Early seminars included discussions on professionalism, boundaries, and agency philosophy. After a few months, the dialogue shifted more towards placement dynamics and personal experiences in the field. This shift began the essence of peer interaction as well as interaction with Paul.

The seminar is the stage for risk taking, both prepared and unprepared. Through much discussion with a trusted peer on levels of standards and discrepancies in theory and placement, we decided it was ethically imperative to question the actions and behaviors of our peers as well as to question Paul's facilitation techniques. Frankly, I thought that there needed to be more guidance through the initial phase of placement integration. This part of the social work curriculum is unique, and I strongly believe that we are all

responsible to each other to uphold the standards of the profession, student and teacher alike. I questioned Paul's absence in certain discussions and asked him to become more involved with ethical issues. Some groups may not have needed such support, but the dynamics of my seminar were such that this support was vital.

The integration of academic learning into professional skills was challenging until I became comfortable using my natural skills in a professional setting. I interned in a local nursing home that housed over one hundred residents, primarily elders diagnosed with dementia. It was apparent early on that my observations would bear fruit with regard to advocating for residents. I discovered an unacceptable gap in services that affects our elder population nationwide: oral hygiene. I used my energy and skills to promote a link to services and after months of research, meetings, phone calls, and letters, I was able to secure a non-profit oral hygienist organization to visit the facility twice a year.

I believe my advocacy skills interfaced with seminar discussion in upholding myself and my peers to the ethical standards our profession embraces, as well as the ethics we as individuals profess to hold. Basically, we created an environment where support and critique of our new skills was welcomed. One of the factors that made this possible was Paul's use of humor in the classroom. Humor clearly relaxes individuals, allowing for an easier transition into risk taking. I appreciated Paul's knowledge, humor, and unwavering support throughout my academic journey.

### Conclusion

Teaching, at its core, is about engaging others in the great adventure of learning. It is an ongoing journey. I am looking to provide a setting in which one can take risks, engage in dialogue with one another, and have fun. I want my classroom to be a place where students look forward to coming to class and together we create an environment that is collaborative and supportive. Ultimately, I believe that students are in charge of their own learning. My role and responsibility is to provide them with an environment that enables this to occur.

In many ways I see myself as a conductor of an orchestra. For me, being in the classroom is like having all these different instruments. Some of the students are like trumpets, others are like percussion instruments, and some are like string instruments. My role is to get everyone to play together and ensure that each one is heard.

At times that is frustrating and difficult. Some weeks we make mistakes but by the end of the semester, when everyone gets to present, all the rehearsals and practices have been worthwhile. Everyone has something profound and significant to offer the entire class and everyone gets a round of applause. There is no greater accolade than being acknowledged by your peers.

In summation, I believe the following poem by Lonnell Johnson (2003) captures my teaching philosophy. It reinforces and validates many of my own experiences of teaching.



### The Teachers Task

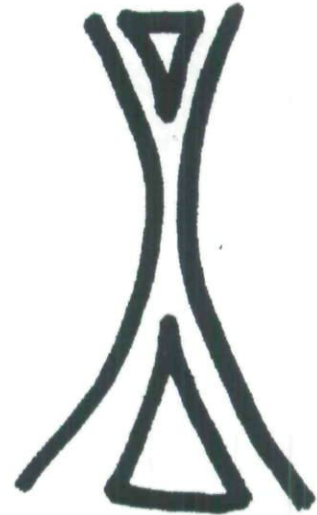
The smallest spark can kindle a desire  
Ignite a fire to stir and warm the heart,  
And through the years the embers from that fire  
Will glow with light inflamed from that same start.  
In the dark of night should a doubt arise,  
A question of the road less traveled by,  
Recall that same glow in a student's eyes  
Shall dispel the chill of questioning why.  
You who labored in the classroom have learned  
That report with student, colleague and friend  
Offers recompense beyond wages earned.  
You who loved the teacher's task we commend:  
May joy warm your heart and sustain you yet,  
With memories of success and no regret.

(Lonnell Johnson)

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