

TEACHING NOTE

A SOCIAL WORK PROGRAM'S EXPERIENCE IN TEACHING ABOUT RACE IN THE CURRICULUM

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Teaching about race, racism, and oppression presents higher education programs with complex challenges. This article reports on the experiences of a new MSW program in designing a gateway "race, gender, and inequality" course. Embracing a theoretical base of culturally competent practice and solutions to the inherent difficulties of discussing race and oppression in diverse student groups is suggested along with six rules of engagement. Recommendations are based on the interactive experience of a highly diverse faculty and student body, literature review, student focus groups, faculty retreats, expert consultation, and curriculum refinement.

DESPITE DIRECTIONS BY the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE; 2004) to include content on racism and oppression in social work curricula, translating this into meaningful learning is complicated. The competing worldviews between students of color and of European-American heritage create divergent realities that confront instructors with pedagogical challenges. This teaching note is a case study of a newly established MSW program committed to infusing content on racism into its curriculum. The outlined strategy is based on

teaching experiences, student and field instructor focus groups, and professional consultation.

Beyond the Expediency of Abstraction: Creating a Curriculum

Confronting racism and oppression of diverse disenfranchised groups represented defining hallmarks of the new MSW program. The profession has grappled with teaching about race for years (Davis, Freeman, Carter, & Cartwright, 1983). Hence, in preparing the curriculum, faculty acknowledged the need to infuse

coursework with these issues rather than confining the topic to one module. After much discussion and consultation, faculty decided to anchor the material in a gateway, oppression-focused course and build upon it in every subsequent class. The program would culminate with an integrative seminar and capstone project, demonstrating student ability to apply information learned about racism, oppression, advocacy, and empowerment.

Retrospective conversations and a review of capstone projects from the first graduating class revealed that instructors varied in terms of what it means to teach about racism and oppression: Methods varied from instructor-led lectures to student-led projects as well as other methods. To create culturally competent practitioners, the program needed systematic, uniform student exposure to the same knowledge base, learning opportunities, and expectations. To this end, faculty (a) immersed themselves in discussions about and research on these issues; (b) conducted four different, 2-hour student-focus groups to explore experiences of learning about diversity; (c) conducted two field-instructor focus groups; and (d) sought expert, outside consultation. Focus groups were audio-taped, transcribed, and then analyzed for thematic content. Faculty concluded that a two-pronged approach was required: refinement of the curriculum itself and the development of unifying guidelines on how to productively engage students about these issues.

Curriculum Refinement

Gateway course. Senior faculty designed a gateway racism and oppression course titled *Race, Gender, and Inequality in Social Work Practice* to be taken by all 1st-year students during

the first quarter of graduate school. Important to the class gestalt, this course is always taught by a faculty member of color. Unique classroom opportunities arise when professors who teach about difference are themselves different from the majority culture (Laubscher & Powell, 2003). With this dynamic, sensitive challenges have to be addressed: issues of silence, withdrawal, interracial conflict, and fear or concern about the objectiveness of the professor (Bohmer & Briggs, 1991; Gillespie, 2003; Jackson & Crawley, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1996).

Students read McIntosh's (1990) article "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack" and reflect on its implications for their lives. Additionally, they develop a bibliography on racism, complete X number of readings, and discuss what they learned. Professors organize discussion groups that maximize student opportunities to interact with peers from other ethnic groups. Students also voluntarily participate in 8-week MSW Self-Discovery groups that promote interpersonal exploration. Led by a university counseling center therapist, these groups meet away from the presence of faculty; focus on values, ethics, and perceptions of self and others; and provide a confidential opportunity for students to self-reflect. Students describe this Self-Discovery assignment as a significant professional and personal growth experience.

Wider curriculum. To expand student learning, faculty redesigned course syllabi, adding readings on race and oppression and at least one related assignment per course. Often assignments embody a guideline of "two degrees of separation," meaning the student must explore the subject at hand in a popula-

tion that is in at least two ways different from his or her own. For example, a lesbian Chicana student might complete a psychosocial assessment assignment on a heterosexual Korean American, representing a difference in ethnicity and sexual orientation.

In the field practicum, approved placements must serve populations affected by racism and oppression, and students are given opportunities to work with clients different from themselves. Agency-based field instructors receive training on cultural competence and how to provide reflective supervision focusing on issues of racism and oppression. In focus groups field instructors requested the aforementioned training and recommended that the emphasis on racism, oppression, and cultural competence be made clear from the beginning of the university-agency relationship. University-agency paperwork now requires placement agencies to state how their organizations train culturally competent interns, as well as how they commit to issues of diversity in ongoing professional development, management, and operation.

Finally, students produce a capstone project in the program's Integrative Seminar. This provides the opportunity for students to integrate their MSW curricular studies with a topic of interest. Students complete a community project, a program evaluation, an applied integrative paper, an advanced case study, and a single-subject design or a secondary data analysis. Issues of oppression and social justice must be addressed in these papers, which are presented in a concluding, celebratory poster session.

Faculty support with curriculum. The faculty meet regularly to discuss adjustments to

the curriculum; share observations, articles, and new teaching strategies; and to provide support for one another. Furthermore, the faculty participate in an annual retreat where discussions focus on race, gender, and inequality.

Student perspectives. Students enter the program with a variety of perspectives on race, gender, and oppression. The gateway course has exposed significant anger, fear, guilt, and denial in some European-American students. For many, it is their initial experience with a person of color as a teacher, and they are expected to read, talk, and share ideas about these issues in an ethnically diverse setting. Many immediately fall mute. Ladson-Billings suggests that there might be communication style differences as well as unusual power differential issues at work across cultures. For example, when African-American students become concerned about something expressed in class, they may express anger, speak louder, and challenge ideas. White students are likely to become upset, quiet, and withdrawn. In this context White students judge African-American students as too emotional, confrontational, and argumentative. The African-American students describe White students as duplicitous, secretive, and not forthcoming (Ladson-Billings, 1996).

Another factor, about which little has been written, relates to professors of color teaching students of other races. In two instances authors state that students have been concerned about "fairness" or lack of "objectivity" from professors of color. Ladson-Billings' (1996) subjects noted that race is better taught by White male professors because they are seen as objective, scholarly, and disinterested, whereas African-American professors are seen

by students as "self-interested, bitter, or putting forth a particular political agenda" (p. 79). Clearly, the silence and concerns of European-American students may have to do with communication style and with fear of how professors and peers of color may perceive them. European-American students share their fears of being perceived as racists. On the other hand, a significant number of students of color come to class thinking of themselves as miniexperts, bringing lived, poignant experiences of oppression. Furthermore, they have done limited reading, been in few intellectual conversations, and had minimal or no tutoring from knowledgeable others. Scarring experiences of racism and oppression can inhibit conversations just as witnessing majority group denial can prove so agonizing that it can be difficult to participate. Creating a climate that acknowledges this reality, notably from a faculty of color, encourages students to overcome this barrier. A skilled instructor can manage intense student reactions and revelations, thus maximizing the learning experience and helping students to perceive the classroom as a safe place.

Unifying Instructor Guidelines on How to Engage Students

To effectively teach about racism and oppression in the social work classroom it is imperative that six guidelines for engagement be established. See Table 1 for an outline of the guidelines that are here described in more detail.

1. Be thoroughly prepared and foster an atmosphere of academic legitimacy. In many minds, the study of racism and

oppression is not considered legitimate, but rather a group complaint session that supports "victimology." Instructors must communicate immediately that it is a valid academic endeavor. A strong syllabus, an extensive bibliography, a good course text, and challenging readings are essential. In addition, using relevant media events such as the Jena 6 March (September 2007) and inspiring guest speakers supports this effort. The instructor must exude confidence coupled with skill at engaging students.

2. Establish clear class ground rules, including expectations for academic standards, attendance, participation, and mutual respect. Expectations and ground rules should be listed in the course syllabi and discussed in initial classes. Students must be engaged in the creation of an atmosphere of mutual respect as well as take ownership of this process.
3. Foster an atmosphere of openness, approachability, fairness, and safety. Central to growth surrounding issues of racism and oppression is the need for a safe, fair, and open class environment. The following strategies promote a protected yet inquisitive atmosphere:
 - Encourage and empower students to take responsibility for their learning.
 - Coach students to anticipate that the class material may be emotionally powerful.
 - Attend to class processes, recognizing the need for flexibility around content.
 - Interject appropriate humor to reduce a continually heavy atmosphere.

- Be physically mobile and interactive with the students to communicate accessibility and to remove barriers (such as the instructor's desk or a doleful lecture).
 - Model appropriate self-disclosure sharing snippets of one's personal journey.
 - Honor and validate students' experiences by encouraging them to tell their stories.
 - Allow for equal participation from all who express an interest by facilitating fairness and shared time, avoiding domination by any one person or group.
 - Show restraint and sensitivity in engaging students publicly. Often, students who need support are reluctant to speak in class and arrive early or stay late, hoping that the instructor will reach out to them. Take advantage of these opportunities.
 - Facilitate and oversee electronic discussion boards that open a host of possibilities for student-to-student and student-to-instructor interactions.
4. Early in the class, expose students to the concept of racial/ethnic/gender identity and encourage them to understand their personal racial and gender identification. The helping professions accept that effectiveness in working with a client different from oneself increases with greater self-knowledge and personal cultural awareness (Bohmer & Briggs, 1991; Vinson & Neimeyer, 2003). Thus, understanding one's racial/ethnic/gender identity proves central to culturally competent practice. Unquestionably, discussions of racial/ethnic/gender identities often yield a wellspring of tensions, but this dialogue, if skillfully crafted, can promote student growth (Miehls, 2001; Tatum, 1992). Preliminary research indicates that there may be a difference in the relationship between racial identity formation and the quality of culturally competent work in the helping professions for Whites versus people of color (Vinson & Neimeyer, 2003). Advanced levels of racial identity formation may be more important for Whites in order to achieve culturally competent work, perhaps because non-Whites necessarily experience daily immersion in their racial realities in American society.
 5. Provide students with empathic learning opportunities to explore and develop an understanding of racially sensitive areas on their own. If students are to empathize with the oppression of others, they must first understand the history of their own oppression. Handlin (2002) in *The Up-rooted*, presents an excellent history of European migration to the United States. Students analyze his treatise and the role of oppression in current treatment of populations of color in the United States. They also interview their oldest living relative about experiences of unfair treatment.
 6. Expose students to effective antiracist strategies and behaviors engaged in by White social work professionals. An important element of the course exposes students to how dedicated European Americans have worked for social justice and the elimination of racism. Very early

in the gateway class, students read about, hear from, and engage White civil rights activists and social workers who are com-

mitted to antioppression work. Efforts from the macro to micro spectrum are included, such as the broad, well-known work of

TABLE 1. Instructor Guidelines for Student Engagement

Guideline	Specific Tasks	Target Outcome
Thorough instructor preparation	Supply well-formed syllabus, strong text/readings, meaningful assignments, relevant media resources, inspiring guest speakers, up-to-date bibliography Communicate confidence & comfort with material, mastery of material, skill in guiding student discovery, comfort & strong self-knowledge of racial/ethnic identity	Basic: Student recognition of racism/oppression as a legitimate & critical field of study Advanced: Student enthusiasm, passion & commitment to this field of study
Establish clear class ground rules	Set expectations for academic standards, attendance, class participation, mutual respect List expectations in syllabus Discuss expectations in class Adjust specifics to accommodate student input, to promote student ownership of these boundaries	Basic: Student understands the importance of safe limits in the discussion of sensitive topics of racism/oppression Advanced: Student helps craft and embrace these limits, and self-enforce/monitor
Foster an atmosphere of openness, approachability, fairness & safety	Encourage students responsibility for learning Prepare students that material may be emotionally powerful Attend to class process Use appropriate humor Be physically mobile & interactive Model appropriate self-disclosure Honor student experiences Allow even participation for all Show restraint & empathy in engaging students publicly Facilitate, monitor, electronic discussion boards Hold accessible office hours Be available before & after class	Basic: Student experiences a safe/supportive environment in which to explore racism & oppression Advanced: In addition to the above, student learns how to provide a safe environment for such discussion & build a supportive class group

Continued

White leaders such as Jane Addams (1910/1990) or personal reflections as found in the recent self-examination by Saari (2006). This rule of engagement is particularly important in that the vast majority of social work students are European Americans. Nationally (CSWE, 2007), 63.3% of graduating MSW students are White. At this institution, 34.1% of the current MSW student body is White. European-American

students need to understand how to fight against racism and grasp its vicious effects on people of color, and students of color need exposure to majority group allies. Faculty communicate that this global struggle is everyone's business.

Conclusion

This teaching note outlined one strategy for addressing the critical issues of racism and

TABLE 1. Continued

Guideline	Specific Tasks	Target Outcome
Help students understand their own racial/ethnic identity	Early on, teach the concept of racial/ethnic identity	Basic: Student articulates personal racial/ethnic identity
	Encourage exploration of personal racial/ethnic identity	Advanced: With tolerance, student understands own identity in the context of those of their peers
	Skillfully facilitate class discussions about personal racial/ethnic identities	
Provide opportunity for empathic learning	Explore the racial/ethnic oppression of various groups, including European immigrants	Basic: Student awareness of history of own oppression will be validated
	If possible, have students interview oldest living relative to explore experiences of unfair treatment	Advanced: Student gains the ability to empathize with the oppression of groups beyond own; understanding the universal dangers of racism/oppression
Expose students to effective anti-racist strategies	Teach beyond the demoralizing realities of racism/oppression with the instillation of hope & examples of skillful change	Basic: Student understands the empowering possibilities of social change with regard to racism/oppression
	Expose to empowering work of professional social workers—White as well as of color	Advanced: Student commits to the global struggle for the fight against racism/oppression in the context of their own racial/ethnic identity and community reality

oppression in the social work curriculum. It stresses that one course is not enough if the objective is to prepare effective multicultural social workers. Challenges to racism and oppression must be infused throughout curricula and provide students with an academic starting point, a scaffolding body, and a culminating experience. Although quantitative evidence for this model is not yet available, the surrounding social service community has enthusiastically welcomed the department's focus on diversity and cultural competence for the multicultural, disenfranchised clients in local urban areas. The alumni report it to be the program's strength.

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