Learning to Teach through Self-Awareness and Acceptance

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Abstract

This article is an account of my first teaching experience as a PhD student. It is the story of my personal journey toward self-discovery in which I learned to integrate my clinical social work skills into my teaching. This article details a variety of emotions and struggles experienced both by my students and myself. This narrative describes how I came to be a more conscientious instructor, how I learned to link lessons from the clinical world to my teaching, and how my learning process included significant advances of self-discovery and personal growth. Through this experience, I came to understand that pedagogy and clinical techniques can dovetail, demonstrating the need to individualize interventions, build community with stakeholders, and foster trusting relationships.

Keywords: *teaching, instructor, self-discovery, clinician, social work*

Learning to Teach through Self-Awareness and Acceptance

When I agreed to serve as a graduate teaching instructor, I felt like I had embarked on a journey with no map and an ill-defined destination. This article is my story of self-discovery and growth as a first year doctoral student in the field of social work who was teaching for the first time. What follows are the annals of my decision to enter a PhD program along with details about my initial trepidations of becoming an instructor and the experiences I had in finding solace in the act of teaching from a clinical perspective.

My first opportunity to teach came unexpectedly. The suddenness left little time to prepare for the transition from being a student to being student-instructor. Likewise, the students in my assigned class were as unprepared as I was for my entrance into their classroom. This led to considerable discord and tension on both interpersonal and intrapersonal levels. As I struggled to find my footing as an instructor, I realized the importance of integrating my background as a clinical social worker into my role as an instructor. Through this experience, I gained a heightened awareness of the need to remain cognizant and acknowledge not only my own thoughts and feelings, but also those of my students. In short, I began teaching from an instructor-centered perspective where teaching was all about me, my need to get through a lesson, my need to give the students information, and my desire to teach well. I have since come to realize I should be more learner-centered where teaching is about the students, their experiences in the classroom, and our journey to learn and grow *together*.

Before I begin my story I feel it is important to discuss several concepts behind the art of becoming an instructor. Thoron, Myers, Harder, Stedman, & Roberts (2012) wrote that doctoral students are not required to show the same level of competency in their ability to teach as they are in their ability to conduct research. Additionally, when discussing first semester teaching experiences, Sandi-Urena, Cooper & Gatlin (2011) wrote "despite the training efforts" (p. 97) one graduate teaching assistant described their experience as having been 'thrown to the wolves' (p.

97). In contrast, Fairbrother (2002) reflected on her own teaching experience as a graduate teaching assistant. She noted how she felt "more secure in my teaching responsibilities than in my research work" (p. 354). Fairbrother however, experienced "an intensive tutorial system … where peer teaching and sharing were integral" (p. 354) to her undergraduate degree in education. Realities such as these raise questions about how graduate teaching assistants are trained and the methods that may improve the quality of their instructional experiences.

Gray and Buerkel-Rothfuss (1989) found a majority of graduate teaching assistants receive one week or less of training before they begin teaching a course on their own. Additionally, other researchers have found that graduate teaching assistants are traditionally mentored about how to teach (Brown-Wright, Dubick, & Newman, 1997; Park, 2004). Graduate students are increasingly becoming the instructors of record, however there is little evidence showing that graduate teaching assistants are prepared before instruction begins (Calonge, Chiu, Thadani,, Mark, & Pun, 2011; Jones, 2008; Thoron et al., 2012).

Thoron et al. (2012) stated that training about how to teach can greatly affect new faculty members' confidence and competence. For many, it can take several years to gain these skills. Faculty members reported that teaching as a graduate student increased their confidence in teaching, yet it left the desire for additional professional development (Thoron et al., 2012). One area of professional development that is often lacking for graduate teaching assistants is that of self-reflection. Fuhrman, Fuhrman & DeLay (2010) noted how students and teachers place more emphasis on how they *feel* during the course than on what they learn which indicates the importance self-awareness in understanding how to become both a *good* teacher and a *good* learner. Thus, graduate teaching assistant training might benefit from self-reflective practices (Calonge et al., 2011).

Bransford et al. (2000) reported that "developing teaching competencies is often the result of three different types of experiences: 1) personal experience, 2) peer-to-peer experience, and 3) professional development opportunities" (p. 1). It is the notion of 'personal experiences' that led me to think about how I utilized my experiences to professionally grow both as a social work clinician and as a graduate teaching instructor. Cornelius-White (2007) wrote, "person-centered education is a counseling-originated, educational psychology model …[additionally] positive teacher-student relationships are associated with optimal, holistic learning" (p. 113). Cornelius-White further stated that "positive relationships, non-directivity, empathy, warmth, and encouraging thinking and learning are the specific teacher variables that are above average compared with other educational outcomes" (p. 134). One common method used by practitioners to develop self-awareness is reflective practice. Reflective practice has been noted to be necessary to sustain behavioral change (Osterman & Kottkamp, 1993). It is the cycle of awareness and analysis of problems that encourages knowledge seeking, introspection, and ultimately, behavioral change.

Hattie and Timperley (2007) offered three questions to encourage self-awareness: "Where am I going? (What are the goals?), How am I going? (What progress is being made toward the goals?) and Where to go next? (What activities need to be undertaken to make better progress)?" (p. 86). In reality however, Rasanen and Korpiaho (2011) noted how doctoral students often focus on one task at a time as they proceed through their program. They suggested

incorporating identity work into training so that graduate teaching assistants are more aware of what they are doing and why they were doing it. Additionally, Zeichner and Liston (1987) found that graduate teaching assistants who were taught self-reflection did not change their views of teaching. They did however become "more aware of themselves and their environments" (p. 25). These graduate teaching assistants also became "more skilled in articulating and implementing their perspectives" (p. 36). When instructors are encouraged to use their own judgment, the learning experience is deeper (Zeichner & Liston, 1987). Social workers who are taught the art of critical self-reflection gain perspective of both the internally- and externally- created construction of the situation they and their clients face (Morley, 2004). This awareness enables social workers to empower their clients through education and insight, allowing the client to take control of their situation rather than the social worker giving power to the client (Morley, 2004). The research noted above supports the need for critical self-awareness both for social workers in the field and social workers as instructors.

My Journey from Clinician to Instructor

After many years working as a clinician I came to a crossroad in my life and I was unsure of where to go and which direction to take. On a whim, I applied to a PhD program in social work at a mid-Western research university. From there, I started the next leg on my life journey.

I did not plan to become a professor. In fact, I have a strong aversion to being in the spotlight and being the center of attention. Prior to graduate school I was a practicing licensed clinical social worker (LCSW) and I hadn't given much thought to teaching. On the rare occasion when I did, I was terrified. When I applied to a doctoral program, I knew that teaching and research were two aspects I would eventually have to master. However, the opportunity to teach came much earlier than I had anticipated.

As an LCSW, I enjoyed working with clients and supervising other therapists and staff, but I felt there was more that I could / should be doing. Despite a professor suggesting I pursue a PhD seven years prior to enrolling in my doctoral program, I did not give it any concerted thought. In fact, I frequently stated that I would never put myself through the grueling process of a doctorate program. Yet there I was - defiantly ignoring all of my past hesitations and applying for admissions into a doctoral program. During the admissions interview, I candidly discussed my need to gain experience in both teaching and research and how I had avoided both for the duration of my career.

Given these fears, my advisor and I agreed that I should not teach until my second year. Hence, I happily began my coursework and passively listened to my classmates talk about their teaching experiences, their students, and their preparation of lessons. Three weeks into my second semester, I received an unexpected request from my advisor asking if I would be willing to teach a course that was already in progress. I learned that the assigned instructor was unable to continue teaching the course but would remain involved to support me. While surprised, I thought that having two instructors in the room would help me transition into the role of a graduate teaching assistant. I was provided a copy of the syllabus and the textbook and started teaching the following week. The first lesson went surprisingly well. I felt confident with the material and relaxed lecturing in front of a class. The students were engaged, asked questions,

and actively participated in the discussions. For that moment, I was grateful I only had a few days to prepare myself for the experience. I even had the fleeting thought that this semester was going to be fun.

What I did not take into account at the time was that the students were surprised by the sudden change in instructors. While I was facing my fears and focusing on preparing the next lesson, I failed to grasp how this change, just four weeks into the semester, might impact the students and how they might process my presence. I naively assumed that it did not matter *who* taught the course, only that *someone* stood in front of them twice a week, lectured, answered their questions, and directed their projects.

The tensions in the class however soon heightened. As the course progressed and I trudged through the content, it felt as if several of the students were intentionally disruptive. Students were doing things such as talking across the table to each other during lectures and not participating in activities. Being new to the classroom I assumed I just needed to find a way to better engage the students and maintain their attention. Despite my efforts at adjusting my teaching style as well as the tasks, the hostility and defiance continued.

Several weeks after class started, I was made aware that the students viewed my entry into their classroom much like a coup d'état. They were under the impression that I had joined the class as an assistant to the instructor and believed I had intentionally pushed the instructor of record out of her position. After I came to this realization, I failed to directly address their misinterpretation thinking it would all come to pass. At the time, I did not realize how the change, along with no explanation, had broken the students' trust. At the time, I did not comprehend how the change must have made them feel. Hence, the semester proceeded with me trying to guide them through the course but it never felt as if we were in the struggle together. At the end of the semester I believe there was a collective sigh of relief that we had all made it to the end but I do not believe the students integrated the information. There was no sense of satisfaction or accomplishment. It was just over.

While actively engaged in teaching the course I was naïve to the fact that I had not earned my role as the leader in the learning experience. Pace (2007) addressed this issue when he wrote that traditionally, teachers are automatically assumed to be the leaders and students are expected to obey their directives. However, with a learner-centered approach to teaching it is no longer expected that the teacher's authority is automatic. Teacher-student relationships are constructed much like within the person-centered approach in social work practice where relationships are developed over time through interactions (Cornelius-White, 2007). Through reflecting on my first teaching experience, I realized that I neglected relationship development and had anticipated respect by proxy of my role.

In addition to the difficulty of having an instructor change several weeks into the semester the course pushed the students beyond their comfort zone. The class required the students to change their mode of thinking. Until my course, the social work curriculum had been focused on working with individuals (i.e., micro social work). My course was a practice course developed to expand students' ability to understand, identify, and promote community advocacy (i.e., macro social work). Thus, students struggled to conceptualize the differences, work

together as teams, and develop their own programs and policies. Acknowledging that the students were fearful and were having a difficult time transitioning should have been my first step. Additionally, each student was on an individual journey. Each had unique life experiences and learned differently. Thus each student uniquely conceptualized the material. Had I been reflective during the course and focusing on the intrapersonal facets of the teacher-student relationship, I believe it could have been a more productive and smoother transition for us all.

Getting Back to My Roots as a Clinician

As I look back at that first semester, it was a feat of pushing and pulling the students along and trying to get them to accept that I was there to teach the content I had been instructed to teach. It was only through retrospection and my own self-awareness that I was able to acknowledge that the experience was a one sided interaction with me providing information and them struggling to learn without any sense of purpose. I realized that I attempting to engage with students who did not trust me. The students were in fact enrolled in a mandatory class that may have been of little personal interest. As a clinician, I emphasize the importance of building relationships, maintaining open communication, and working in collaboration with clients to develop their own sense of control in their experiences and their growth. Through self-reflection, I had to accept that I failed to take into account my students' feelings and questions regarding the change in instructors. I did not nurture the interactive relationship.

By relying on my clinical experiences and training I realized I needed to work more collaboratively with my students. I had to find a way to lead and support them through the learning process in a way they felt empowered and in control of their learning experience. Much as I would with a client, it was necessary to engage the students and build rapport before they could trust me with their fears and anxiety.

What an epiphany! Despite journaling and talking about the experiences with my colleagues, I was not being reflective *myself*. The entire teaching process felt heavy. At the beginning, I told myself that I did not know what I was doing and that I did not know how to teach. I felt very little excitement, confidence, or fulfillment as a teacher. However, rather than run from that initial experience, I started attending all of the teacher trainings I could find and began reading books on how to be an effective professor. The one that really enlightened me was Parker J. Palmer's (2007) book titled *The Courage to Teach*. Palmer promotes self-awareness and acceptance. He describes how the best teachers identify both their strengths and weaknesses. As a clinician and as a teacher, Palmer's (2007) statement, "identity and integrity have as much to do with our shadows and limits, our wounds and fears, as with our strengths and potentials" (p. 13), resonated deeply with me.

Palmer's (2007) writings encouraged me to take a step back and analyze my own teaching experiences. Through this awareness I learned I needed to ground my teaching in what I did know and that was how to be a clinician. In my role as a clinical therapist, I allowed myself to be both vulnerable and confident. I needed to find a way to critically analyze my own teaching as an act of reflective practice and professional growth. Thus I began looking at my classroom and myself from a different perspective. I recognized that I was frustrated that the students were not sharing my passion for social work. I was bothered by their lack of apparent effort to study

and learn the material. I was focused solely on how I felt about the process and thus neglected to see the experience from their perspective. By changing my outlook, I gained empathy for the students and I found love of teaching.

The more I read the more I become mindful of what I am doing. I began to reframe the classroom situation much as I would if I had been working with a client. I was trained in the person-centered approach, which entails quickly developing a relationship with the client and ensuring the objectives and goals for treatment are based on the client's reality (Wong, 2010). Thus, I learned to stop and think about the experience from the student's perspective. I disrupted the connection they had with the initial instructor and did not take the necessary steps to build rapport and trust with them by entering an established classroom and not addressing the change directly or providing the students the opportunity to process their feelings. While their focus was on obtaining an 'A' at the end of the semester, my focus was on ensuring they learned and conceptualized the material. I now realize there could have been a way to merge the two. I do not believe in pouring knowledge into a student. In retrospect however, I think that was the approach I took. In contrast, I needed to find a way to better address and acknowledge their goals and fears while supporting them and moving forward with the material as a team.

I have since grown in the knowledge that learning to teach is not simply about knowing the material and lecturing to students. An integral piece in learning to teach includes finding yourself and developing your own method while using what you know and being who you are. Just as with each client, no two students are the same and no two semesters are the same. It is my responsibility to attend to their goals and fears and walk with them through the experience. It is much easier to tackle fear and step beyond what you know if you feel that you are not alone in the experience. I hope my students take this experience into their careers as social workers and realize that many of their clients will be coming from a similar place of fear. As future social workers, they cannot do the work for their client, but they can support and motivate the client toward their goals.

My journey of self-discovery continues with each class I teach. I realize that teaching is not a stand-alone skill. In fact, teaching is much like being a clinical social worker. Being a good instructor requires continual self-awareness and the ability to co-construct a trusting relationship with the students while supporting them through their individual learning processes and acknowledging my own process. While I once stood in fear, I now find myself in front of a class allowing students to teach me how to be a better instructor- and thoroughly enjoying the entire process.

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