Expanding the View: A Look at Online Social Work Education through a Liberatory Lens

Rachael A. Richter

University of St. Thomas, Minnesota

Follow this and additional works at: https://ir.stthomas.edu/ssw_docdiss

Part of the Clinical and Medical Social Work Commons, and the Social Work Commons
Expanding the View:
A Look at Online Social Work Education through a Liberatory Lens

by

Rachael A. Richter

A Banded Dissertation in Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Social Work

St. Catherine University | University of Saint Thomas
School of Social Work

May 2019
Abstract

This Banded Dissertation explores the use of an alternative paradigm known as liberatory pedagogy in online social work education. Liberatory pedagogy has the potential to enhance the quality of online education because of its strong alignment with social work professional values, ethics, and required educational competencies. This compilation of research includes educator and student perspectives.

The first product of this Banded Dissertation is a Scholarly Personal Narrative that delves into the author’s development as an educator and her understanding of liberatory pedagogical concepts including body, mind, spirit, and voice. The author reflects on pivotal teaching and learning experiences and shares honestly about some of the opportunities, frustrations, and challenges she has encountered while teaching asynchronously in online courses.

The second scholarly product is a qualitative study exploring how online graduate students experienced the liberatory pedagogical concepts of body, mind, spirit, and voice while participating in an asynchronous policy course. Three themes—student focus on specific course content vs. student awareness of holistic learning process, concern for offending others, and lack of voice—have implications for educators who desire to use alternative pedagogies in the online environment.

The final product in the Banded Dissertation is a peer-reviewed oral presentation delivered during the Social Work in Distance Education Conference held in San Antonio, TX in April 2018. The author shared the results of her completed Scholarly Personal Narrative and some preliminary data from the qualitative study which she was conducting concurrent to the conference.

Despite the potential to enrich online social work education using liberatory pedagogy,
findings indicate the absence of face-to-face contact presents unique challenges for both teachers and students. This research suggests holistically engaging students in the asynchronous environment requires thoughtful consideration of the relationships between learners as well as strategies and tools which facilitate honest and meaningful dialogue.

*Keywords*: online social work education, liberatory pedagogy, scholarly personal narrative, bell hooks, critical pedagogy
Dedication

This Banded Dissertation is dedicated to my late father, R. Patrick Richter, who taught me to always do my best and believe in myself. I wish you were here to celebrate with me.
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my life partner, Carol. Your unconditional love and constant support ensured my success on this journey.

I am forever grateful to my mother Tinsley, my siblings Jessica, Rebecca, and Patrick, my sons Gavin and Tristan, and my best friend Kim. Thank you for encouraging me, loving me, and inspiring me to keep going.

Special thanks to my lifelong mentor and dear friend, Dr. Robin Johnson, for sharing his love, wisdom, and knowledge of professional academic opportunities.

Thank you to all my family and friends, my students and colleagues at Western New Mexico University, the faculty at St. Kate’s and University of St. Thomas especially banded dissertation advisor, Dr. Robin Whitebird, and “Coheart” 3 for your peer review and for cheering me on to the finish line.
# Table of Contents

Title Page ............................................................................................................................... i  
Abstract ................................................................................................................................. ii  
Dedication ............................................................................................................................... iv  
Acknowledgements ............................................................................................................... v  
List of Figures ....................................................................................................................... vii  
Introduction ........................................................................................................................... 1  
Conceptual Framework ........................................................................................................ 4  
Summary of Banded Dissertation Products ......................................................................... 6  
Discussion ............................................................................................................................... 7  
  Implications for Social Work .............................................................................................. 8  
  Implications for Future Research ...................................................................................... 9  
Comprehensive Reference List ............................................................................................. 12  
Product 1: Reflections of an Online Social Work Professor:  
  Illuminating an Alternative Pedagogy ............................................................................. 20  
Product 2: Liberatory Pedagogy:  
  Exploring Body, Mind, Spirit, and Voice in Online Social Work Education ................. 47  
Product 3: Liberatory Pedagogy:  
  Exploring Body, Mind, and Spirit in an Asynchronous MSW Policy Course ............ 75
List of Figures

Figure 1: Liberatory Pedagogy: Exploring Body, Mind, and Spirit in an Asynchronous MSW Policy Course presentation slides ..........................................................79
Expanding the View:

A Look at Online Social Work Education through a Liberatory Lens

Teaching social work—a profession that relies on communication within human relationships to effect change—in an online environment presents unique challenges. How can educators help future social workers value diversity and develop a critical awareness of oppression and social justice through online dialogue? While some educators may still contend that higher education should remain face-to-face, the reality is many students desire online programs. A review of recent college enrollment data confirms that online enrollments continue to grow; in 2015 roughly 30% of college students were enrolled in an online course (Allen & Seaman, 2017). Similarly, many social work programs accredited by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) currently offer online delivery formats (CSWE, 2018).

Critical pedagogy facilitates the development of conscious awareness about oppression, social justice, and cultural diversity that will serve students well in their efforts to achieve the primary mission of social work which is to enhance human well-being. One such critical paradigm which has inspired this author is bell hooks’ conceptualization of liberatory pedagogy as detailed in her 1994 publication, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. Within this text hooks (1994) endorses a model of transformative teaching and learning that is holistic, integrating body, mind, spirit, and voice. She also emphasizes reciprocal dialogue and shared responsibility of learners to engage in critical thinking to challenge the status quo and ultimately, connect what is being learned with life experiences. As this author learned more about liberatory pedagogy she began to realize its potential to enhance social work education. As an online professor, the author also acknowledges the enormous challenge of implementing such a pedagogy. Fifteen years of teaching online had resulted in frustration over
the lack of depth in online student dialogue. Reasonable questions arise as to whether using an alternative approach like liberatory pedagogy is even possible within an asynchronous classroom. What might this look like? How might this best be facilitated? To achieve a more holistic and engaged teaching and learning experience, it is necessary to explore the qualitative experiences of educators and students participating in distance education.

Not surprisingly, the scholarship of teaching and learning online has expanded in response to the rise in distance education. In much of the literature about online education, the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework is central to the investigation. CoI was initially theorized by Garrison, Anderson, and Archer; their 1999 article details a model which incorporates three structural elements—cognitive, social, and teaching presence—and presents a quantitative analysis tool with indicators for each element. Subsequently, many other researchers have studied distance education through the CoI lens (Akyol, Ice, Garrison, & Mitchell, 2010; Arbaugh, Bangert, & Cleveland-Innes, 2010; Archibald, 2010; Berry, 2017; Diaz, Swan, Ice, & Kupczynski, 2010; Dringus, Snyder, & Terrell, 2010; Garrison, Cleveland-Innes, & Shing Fung, 2010; Shea et al., 2010).

Additionally, there are comparison studies of face-to-face and online courses. Social work as a discipline is well represented in this area of research. Cummings, Chaffin, and Cockerham (2015) compared knowledge, skills, and student satisfaction across delivery formats within the MSW program at the University of Tennessee and found no significant differences for most educational outcomes. Results from a study conducted by Hostetter and Busch (2006) found no differences in online and face-to-face student perceptions of social presence. O’Neill and Jensen (2014) reported that student outcomes in an undergraduate research course were not statistically different between delivery formats. A mixed method study of BSW courses
discovered that while performance was the same for both online and traditional sections, there were some differences in student perceptions about a connection with the instructor and satisfaction with the course (McAllister, 2013). In one qualitative comparison study, graduate students identified some discomfort and anxiety due to the lack of face-to-face contact (Okech, Barner, Segoshi, & Carney, 2014).

Finally, there are studies that investigate the online educators’ perspective. Sawrikar, Lenette, McDonald, and Fowler (2015) used critical narrative inquiry to explore the perceptions of three social work professors in Australia. Instructors were frustrated with the lack of non-verbal communication and inconsistent participation from online students. Satisfaction with teaching online was also affected by factors such as personal preferences for interaction, time commitment, and availability issues. Extensive faculty time commitments for both course design and course facilitation were also noted by Noble and Russell (2013). Ferrera, Ostrander, and Crabtree-Nelson (2013) readily admit their reluctance to use an online format to teach social work practice courses and recommend the compromise of a hybrid model.

To summarize, current research on distance education includes the popular quantitative CoI model; comparison of course delivery formats, including educational outcomes; and studies of student and educator satisfaction. What is missing from this literature is research that explores qualitative online learning experiences with fundamentally different paradigms like critical pedagogy. This gap is significant for a profession committed to the development of values awareness and critical consciousness around diversity, oppression, and social justice. The research presented in this Banded Dissertation expands our understanding of distance education in social work thereby addressing this gap.
Conceptual Framework

The products presented in this Banded Dissertation are grounded in hooks’ (1994) liberatory pedagogical framework. This approach to teaching and learning involves dynamically engaging students and facilitating a critical awareness that challenges cultural hegemony. hooks’ (1994) was inspired by Paolo Freire, who first brought attention to the limitations of the ‘banking system’ of education and insisted that “education could be the practice of freedom” (p. 14). Freire coined the term, ‘conscientization,’ and encouraged educators to liberate their students through consciousness-raising and active participation rather than passive receipt of knowledge (hooks, 1994, p. 14). Similarly, teacher and Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh stimulated hooks to consider “a union of mind, body and spirit” in her pedagogy (hooks, 1994, p. 14). Both Freire and Thich Nhat Hanh emphasize “‘praxis’—action and reflection upon the world in order to change it” (hooks, 1994, p. 14). A primary goal of liberatory pedagogy is to transform students and teachers through the synergistic embodiment of body, mind, spirit, voice, love, dialogue, critical consciousness, community, and empowerment. Sensitizing concepts in hooks’ presentation of liberatory pedagogy, namely body, mind, spirit, and voice, were used as a guide for exploration and analysis and are central to the work of this Banded Dissertation.

hooks’ more recent narratives significantly deepen her pedagogical approach. In her book of essays about teaching community, hooks (2003) comments on the negative impact the current educational system has on connection with others. She suggests ways to build community and create partnerships within the classroom and between the academy and the larger world. In the final text of her teaching trilogy, she addresses the importance of teaching critical thinking: “Engaged pedagogy is a teaching strategy that aims to restore students’ will to think, and their
will to be fully self-actualized. The central focus of engaged pedagogy is to enable students to think critically” (hooks, 2010, p. 8).

The framework’s alignment with professional social work values makes it relevant for social work education. For example, empowering ourselves and striving for self-actualization prepare us to provide *service* to others. Engaging in social action and expanding access to education are a means of achieving *social justice*. *Competence* develops from the praxis of critical thinking. *Integrity* requires authenticity and awareness of bias through reflection. *Dignity and worth* are realized by valuing all voices, and shared responsibility for developing a learning community demonstrates the *importance of human relationships*.

These sensitizing concepts can also be considered in the context of the CSWE competency dimensions. Social workers need *knowledge* to recognize oppression and privilege and solve real-world problems. Professional *values* include an appreciation for diversity and social justice. Necessary *skills* for social work practice include dialogic skills for conversation as well as advocacy skills for creating social change. Critical thinking and reflection are two relevant *cognitive processes*; authenticity requires engaging one’s *affective processes*.

Therefore, it is this author’s assertion that successfully implementing liberatory pedagogy will enrich the quality of social work education, online and face-to-face. Applying a liberatory lens to an exploration of teacher and student experiences provides an opportunity to expand the view of distance education research to include alternative paradigms. Findings from the research contained in this Banded Dissertation can be used to address the unique complexities that derive from teaching students in a virtual space how to successfully practice within a profession that prioritizes critical awareness and dialogue within human relationships.
Summary of Banded Dissertation Products

The first product in this Banded Dissertation is a Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN). This methodology, founded by Robert Nash, involves a creative process of choosing relevant themes, sharing personal stories about those themes, linking the stories to scholarly works, and generalizing the personal to the universal (Nash & Bradley, 2012). The SPN presented here traces the author’s identity development as an online educator. The narrative also explores the author’s understanding of key liberatory pedagogical constructs and the author’s experiences teaching from this alternative paradigm in asynchronous online graduate social work education. In this paper, the author shares an introspective view about her own educational praxis which provides a foundation for her second scholarly product.

The second product is a qualitative, exploratory study that asks the research question: How do students experience body, mind, spirit, and voice in an asynchronous MSW policy course? Participants were graduate students from a small southwestern public university enrolled in the author’s online Social Welfare Policy course. The study includes three data sources: a web survey, discussion posts, and semi-structured interviews. A thematic analysis of the data suggests three themes: student focus on specific course content vs. student awareness of the holistic learning process, concern for offending others, and lack of voice. Students’ detailed experiences of the sensitizing concepts body, mind, spirit, and voice were integrated within these themes. The author discusses the implications for course design and discussion facilitation strategies when using critical pedagogies.

The final product in the banded dissertation is a peer-reviewed oral presentation delivered during the Social Work in Distance Education Conference held in San Antonio, TX in April 2018. In the presentation, the author shares the findings from her completed Scholarly Personal
Narrative and some preliminary data from the qualitative study which she was conducting concurrent to the conference. The presentation also includes a discussion of how liberatory pedagogy is congruent with social work values, ethics, and required educational competencies and the resulting implications for online social work education.

**Discussion**

The research in this Banded Dissertation is unique and important for three primary reasons. First, it is a qualitative look at online social work education using the alternative lens of liberatory pedagogy, something that does not appear in the current literature. Second, it explores online learning experiences from both the perspective of the instructor and the students. Third, the findings suggest specific adjustments educators can make to enhance online social work education.

Themes present in the data demonstrate both instructor and student frustrations about online dialogue. The challenges of implementing liberatory pedagogy (which calls for an authentic and holistic integration of body, mind, spirit, and voice) in a virtual space are very real. It is apparent that some members of the online learning community studied here had difficulty sharing honestly about themselves or their opinions and that a lack of face-to-face contact played a role in their discomfort. Students verbalized explicit concerns about offending one another with their asynchronous posts which unfortunately limited their participation in online dialogue. Although this finding had a negative impact on the critical discourse that occurred during the course, it also illustrates students’ respect for one another. In addition, while some students focused primarily on the course content (policy) when reflecting on their learning experiences, others did appear to experience the course in a more holistic way, integrating body, mind, spirit, and voice. This integration is potential evidence of the liberatory pedagogical framework in
action. Instructor engagement and timely, detailed, and personal feedback enhanced students’ sense of connection. Finally, both the instructor and students appreciated the flexibility of online access.

Findings from this exploratory research appear to support previous studies about the marginalization of politically conservative social work students (Flaherty, Ely, Meyer-Adams, Baer, & Sutphen, 2013; Fleck-Henderson & Melendez, 2009). The findings also confirm prior research on the impact of respect as a key factor for feeling safe in the classroom (Holley & Steiner, 2005). Furthermore, despite this author’s desire to move away from the focus on online tools and techniques to explore more ethereal and alternative pedagogical concepts (body, mind, spirit, voice), the students in this study are asking for concrete tools to enhance connection between members of the learning community—namely more video and synchronous components. In fact, some students explicitly described missing tone of voice and non-verbal communication such as facial expressions when participating in typical online discussion boards. These findings support the importance of research that has demonstrated how using strategies such as small groups, student facilitation, and interactive software like VoiceThread can enhance student online learning experiences (Delmas, 2017; Douville, 2013; Gibson, 2013; Kirby & Hulan, 2016).

**Implications for Social Work Education**

As an online professor with over 15 years of experience, this author readily admits designing and teaching quality online courses is extremely time-consuming but can also be very rewarding. As a first step, this research encourages educators to reflect on the philosophical foundation of their pedagogy and their own understanding and experience of themselves as “wholly present” beings in a virtual learning space. Additional introspection can help educators
identify their own frustrations about teaching online and candidly consider how they can adjust their online engagement behaviors to improve both quality and mutual satisfaction within the online learning experience. For example, are instructors present for unfolding online discussion or only at evaluation time? Do teachers provide their students with personalized feedback on discussions and assignments to ensure students feel valued (heard) for their contributions? This author recommends using a holistic and values-based approach like liberatory pedagogy to frame this self-evaluation.

Social work is a values-oriented profession that prioritizes critical consciousness and truthful dialogue within human relationships as a vehicle for change and well-being. Given this, the findings in this research suggest that online social work educators need to be even more intentional than those who teach face-to-face or other disciplines when communicating expectations for a culture of respect for all voices and for honest, yet critical discourse. This must be followed by teaching students how to effectively interact in the online environment with others who may be different from themselves without causing offense and modeling such behavior through active engagement. It is also important to monitor course interactions for opportunities to intervene or change the direction of the online conversation as needed. Course design decisions ought to incorporate available technologies to bridge the asynchronous connection gap. Purposefully helping students to develop relationships with others in the learning community will facilitate respectful and meaningful dialogue when difficult conversations occur within the virtual classroom.

Implications for Future Research

Further research with a larger sample of both undergraduate and graduate students enrolled in a variety of social work courses with other instructors is needed to explore in more
depth the experiences of online teachers and learners. Although most students who participated in this study were able to relate to the concept of voice within the online environment, some did not appear to resonate as much with the other sensitizing concepts of body, mind, and spirit. Do online social work students desire a holistic learning experience? Does this desire vary by type of student or type of course? What strategies work best to facilitate this?

It may also be of interest to more closely investigate factors that impact online discussions and which tools and strategies students find most engaging. Moving online dialogue beyond “great post!” and encouraging critical thinking are goals many online educators strive to achieve. It is likely some approaches are more effective than others at helping students overcome concerns about sharing their honest opinions and stimulating meaningful engagement in online discussions. Finally, it will also be beneficial to learn more about how online students might experience marginalization and to develop effective online strategies to prevent marginalization of students who identify as politically conservative or represent other types of differences, such as religious background or sexual orientation.

Conclusion

Despite the steady growth of online programs and enrollment, and notwithstanding the many practical reasons to embrace online delivery formats, distance education is a relatively new phenomenon in the history of professional social work education. In addition, digital technologies are developing at a dizzying pace. Our society has become increasingly polarized and the well-being of vulnerable groups continues to be threatened. The need for quality social work services, and therefore, quality social work education is ever present. Consequently, it is incumbent upon all online social work educators to advance the evolving scholarship of teaching and learning social work in the online environment. The scholarly work compiled here is a
qualitative look through the alternative lens of liberatory pedagogy and represents one way to expand the view of online social work education.
Comprehensive Reference List


doi:10.1080/10714410600873159


Qualtrics (2018) [Computer software]. Provo, UT.


Reflections of an Online Social Work Professor:

Illuminating an Alternative Pedagogy

Rachael A. Richter

St. Catherine University and University of St. Thomas

Author Note

The author is a doctoral student at St. Catherine University and the University of St. Thomas School of Social Work. The author is also a full time Associate Professor of Social Work at Western New Mexico University.

This article was accepted for publication in a 2019 special issue on distance education in the Journal of Teaching in Social Work. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Rachael A. Richter, College of Professional Studies, Social Work Program, Western New Mexico University, P.O. Box 680, Silver City, NM 88062. E-mail: Rachael.richter@wnmu.edu
Abstract

Research in distance education has investigated student satisfaction and learning outcomes, compared face-to-face with online delivery formats, and tested various technological tools, but has yet to consider alternative pedagogies. Liberatory pedagogy facilitates critical thinking, awareness, reflection, and social action around constructs such as race, gender, and class. This paper uses Scholarly Personal Narrative to explore opportunities and challenges of implementing liberatory pedagogy within a virtual classroom. Identified themes include identity, body, mind, spirit, voice, authenticity, and self-actualization. Liberatory pedagogy emphasizes critical consciousness of oppression, aligns with professional values and ethics, encourages societal well-being, and enhances online social work education.

Keywords: online education, alternative pedagogy, social work values and ethics, personal narrative, liberatory pedagogy, scholarship of teaching and learning
Reflections of an Online Social Work Professor: Illuminating an Alternative Pedagogy

*Urging all of us to open our minds and hearts so that we can know beyond the boundaries of what is acceptable, so that we can think and rethink, so that we can create new visions, I celebrate teaching that enables transgressions—a movement against and beyond boundaries. It is that movement which makes education the practice of freedom.*

—bell hooks (1994, p. 12)

The moment I read these words, I was hooked. I felt alive and energized about teaching in a way I had never experienced. I also felt intimidated. bell hooks’ conceptualization of a liberatory pedagogy—as detailed in her book, *Teaching to Transgress*—resonated with every fiber of my being but the idea of trying to implement this approach in my own teaching practice in an online Master of Social Work (MSW) program was daunting. Was it even possible?

In the weeks that followed, as I discerned my own teaching philosophy, I could not stop thinking about the concepts within this critical paradigm. I literally could not find the “off switch”; thoughts about body, mind, and spirit in virtual spaces raced through my sleep-deprived brain. Finally, I came to the obvious conclusion an exploration of liberatory pedagogy must form the basis of my doctoral research.

Excited and more than a bit anxious about the prospect, I began reading and re-reading the volumes in bell hooks’ Teaching series (1994, 2003, 2010). I became aware I had never read anything written by radical Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire; what kind of professor was I!? hooks’ work on liberatory pedagogy was inspired by Freire’s ideas about “conscientization” which hooks understood to mean critically aware and engaged pedagogy (hooks, 1994). So, I read some Freire and wrote question after question in my little brown “I Am a Scholar” notebook, a gift from our Doctorate in Social Work orientation session “Developing a Scholarship Agenda.” I searched for current literature that examined online education. Exhausted (in that good, I am a doctoral student in every sense of the word, kind of way), I
developed my dissertation proposal. To fully implement a liberatory pedagogical approach in the asynchronous online classroom, I needed an understanding of how students experienced key concepts such as body, mind, and spirit, during their online educational experience. So, I proposed a qualitative study to explore the student experience. Then I realized what I needed first was a better understanding of my own experience of body, mind, and spirit as an online professor to provide some context for this exploration. Sigh. More discernment, reflection, and sleepless nights followed as I wrestled with issues of vulnerability and lack of confidence. True, I had been involved in online higher education since I taught my first online course in 2002. Yes, I have been teaching full-time in an online MSW program since 2013. Okay, maybe I did have something to offer others by sharing my thoughts.

In the pages that follow, I will use a Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN) methodology to present my argument for using a liberatory pedagogy to enhance online social work education, explore my personal and professional development as an online educator, and reflect on my experience of liberatory pedagogical concepts. This type of scholarship integrates the writer’s personal stories and knowledge of theory and practice with other relevant scholarly works in a creative format that explores the larger implications of identified themes. Although the structure of SPN may vary, the process developed by Robert Nash contains four specific elements: (a) identifying topics and themes, (b) telling the stories, (c) connecting the personal to the scholarly, and (d) commenting on universal aspects (Nash & Bradley, 2012). Prior authors have used SPN and autoethnography to examine their experiences in social work education (Jenson-Hart & Williams, 2010; McGranahan, 2008; Sy, 2013; Tinucci, 2017). SPN is an appropriate method for my exploration because it honors my qualitative experience and allows for alternative ways of knowing and thinking.
Distance education is one way to achieve social justice regarding access to higher education. Additionally, the use of liberatory pedagogy enhances social work education because this paradigm is aligned with professional values and ethics, emphasizes critical awareness of injustices, and encourages social change. A liberatory approach improves on the “banking system” of education—a phrase coined by Freire (1970)—which describes a scenario where deposits of knowledge are made from the wise professor to the passive student. Unlike this model, liberatory pedagogy produces engaged, critically aware, empowered, and self-actualized individuals capable of achieving the mission of social work: to enhance well-being for all human beings.

However, implementing liberatory pedagogy in the online environment presents unique challenges. To successfully overcome these challenges, educators must understand how online participants experience philosophical concepts central to a liberatory pedagogical framework. The purpose of this narrative is to explore my development as an online educator and to illuminate my experiences of key concepts, relevant opportunities, and constraints within this educational approach. I may raise more questions than answers, but hopefully sharing my evolution as both learner and teacher will be useful to others who desire to expand their educational praxis. First, I will provide a brief overview of liberatory pedagogy and its value for social work education. Next, I will reflect on my identity and path to becoming an online social work professor. Finally, I will highlight my online teaching experiences around the themes of body, mind, spirit, voice, authenticity, and self-actualization.

**Liberatory Pedagogy in Social Work Education**

*The classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy.*

—bell hooks (1994, p. 12)
Education is an act of love, and thus an act of courage. It cannot fear the analysis of reality or, under pain of revealing itself as a farce, avoid creative discussion.
—Paulo Freire (1973, p. 38)

Taking a radical path requires bravery regardless of the context. In my experience, this is definitely the case in higher education. When my doctoral cohort was getting to know one another, we completed an exercise where we identified strengths we brought to the group and supports we needed from the group. Out of this process came the defining mantra for our cohort: Be Brave. So, here goes.

As the quotes above suggest, academia presents many opportunities for growth, but only if we are willing to be courageous and creative as we consider all the possibilities. Allowing our fear of what we might discover to blind us, does just that. Liberatory pedagogy is an alternative approach to education that emphasizes the shared responsibility of teachers and students to think critically, challenge the status quo, and connect classroom learning with life experiences. The goal of developing a critical consciousness—through reflection about oppression and privilege based on cultural differences—and the integration of this reflection with practice contributes to the mission of social work: social justice, social change, and well-being for all. In addition, this framework is holistic and aligns with social work values and ethical principles; an “engaged pedagogy” facilitates self-actualization of the professor, empowerment of students, and attention to well-being (hooks, 1994). To hooks, who was inspired by Freire and Thich Nhat Hanh, a Buddhist monk, engaged pedagogy incorporates praxis and wholeness, “a union of mind, body, and spirit” (p. 14).

Similarly, social justice as a core social work value is an integral part of social workers’ ethical responsibility to society at large (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2017). Offering professional social work education in an online delivery format is consistent
with this perspective; as Paul Abels (2005) suggests, distance education is not about technology, it is about access and opportunities that help students overcome economic or geographic barriers. Historically, social work education has evolved to meet ever-changing training needs; distance education is one more example of this appropriate and necessary evolution (Abels, 2005). Therefore, from a social justice perspective, social work education is enhanced by both a liberatory pedagogy and online access.

However, this method of teaching and learning has traditionally incorporated dialogue within a community of learners who are physically present to clearly see and hear one another, who are encouraged to negotiate the conflicts that arise as individuals from various social locations confront differences of privilege and power. In fact, hooks (1994) challenges the academic notion of a mind/body split by explicitly acknowledging the value of the physical body, voice, and emotion within the transformative learning process. Hence my significant dilemma in the asynchronous classroom. hooks might disagree with how I understand liberatory pedagogy and my insistence in the potential for online application, but for myself as an educator, and for my students, this exploration is both timely and worthwhile.

A Look in the Mirror

...good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and the integrity of the teacher.

—Parker Palmer (1997b, p. 16)

As I began to review my identity development as an educator, I realized September has always been my favorite month. Some people thought this was because my birthday is in September, but the real reason is that, to me, September represents the start of a new school year. I have always loved reading and learning; I wanted to be a teacher when I grew up so that I could always be “in school.” When my younger sisters and I played school together, I insisted on
being the teacher. My father, who started his career as a high school English teacher and then became a guidance counselor, was an early role model.

As a high school student, I developed an interest in psychology, and by the time I was ready to graduate with my bachelor’s degree, the practical aspects of achieving social justice through social work had caught my attention. After completing my MSW in 1991, I enjoyed a meaningful career practicing medical social work. As the universe would have it, in 1997, while working as the Coordinator of Client Services for the AIDS Foundation Miami Valley in Dayton, Ohio, I was contacted by Dr. Robin Johnson from Capital University about supervising a Bachelor of Social Work intern. Within a year I was teaching Human Behavior as an adjunct for Capital. Robin became a mentor and dear friend; his ongoing support has afforded me opportunities to share my social work expertise as a full-time assistant professor at two institutions.

Remembering my youthful desire to be a teacher, I realized I had many teaching roles including peer education and teaching Sunday School, which paved the way to my first formal teaching experience in the face-to-face college classroom. I loved everything about it! Well, I didn’t love grading papers late at night after I came home from my full-time job and my preschooler and six-month-old were finally in bed—for a few minutes anyway—who does? But I loved interacting with students, the energy we created in the classroom, learning new things, the smell of new textbooks, and the feel of the highlighter gliding across the page. I loved the privilege of witnessing lightbulb moments when just the right idea pops into your mind, you share it with the students, and you can actually see the wheels turning as cognitive connections emerge. I will never forget the day students in my Diversity class realized their service-learning experiences, facilitating educational groups in a residential facility for previously incarcerated
women, mirrored research they had just read about the gender differences of group development. Most especially, I loved being able to blend my identity as a social worker (this is who I am not just what I do) with my newly developing identity as a professor.

I have always appreciated the importance of integrity. My parents taught me to tell the truth no matter what and obey laws; my father never drove over the speed limit (which was maddening during family vacations but made a lifelong impression). The social work professional Code of Ethics (NASW, 2017) has much to say about integrity and competence and has guided my professional life for many years. So, despite what educator Parker Palmer (1997b) says about technique and good teaching in the quote above, the perfectionist in me was desperate to do it “right.” I felt uncomfortable and inexperienced. To compensate, I searched for direction, worried I might negatively impact my students’ future careers—and even more horrifically, their vulnerable clients—if I didn’t cover all the required content or give comprehensive feedback on assignments. Clearly, I was an imposter; where’s the integrity in that?

The truth is, I am always asking questions and rarely satisfied with the answers. Although this can be overwhelming at times, it also means that I will never run out of research topics. So, I have muddled through over the years, learning from my mistakes and the wisdom of my mentors, but most of all from interacting with students. I am incredibly grateful for those opportunities to develop new skills and experiment with different ways of knowing, being and doing social work education. I have come full circle, a student again, in a doctoral program where education is honored as a form of social work practice.

These developmental steps I have recounted are only part of the identity Palmer is referring to. On a more personal level, I care deeply about equality, equity, justice, and people who are vulnerable and marginalized in our racist, patriarchal, capitalist society. I am a middle-
aged woman, a mother of two adult sons, a daughter, a divorcée, a lesbian who came out later in life, a partner in a committed relationship, an intellectual, an activist, an extrovert who occasionally needs quiet time. I am passionate and spiritual. I believe in the power of love and peace and the potential of both/and (as opposed to either/or). I am also—sometimes overly—responsible, and I pride myself on producing quality in all that I do. I acknowledge my white and class privilege but have personally experienced the pain of discrimination based on my gender and sexual orientation.

When contemplating Palmer’s (1997b) assertion that “we teach who we are” (p. 15) perhaps the more important question is not who am I, rather; how do my students’ perceive who I am? Can they determine my social location from how I teach? The comments I make? The personal information I choose to share? According to Palmer (1997b), “Good teachers join self, subject and students in the fabric of life because they teach from an integral and undivided self; they can manifest in their own lives, and evoke in their students, a ‘capacity for connectedness’” (p. 16). From hooks’ (1994) perspective being whole requires a willingness to be vulnerable with ones’ students and an active commitment toward self-actualization. Am I teaching from a place of integrity and wholeness? How does all of this occur in the online environment?

From Face-to-Face to Virtual Space

The next logical stop on this personal and professional development part of the journey was to review how I became involved in distance education. In 2002 and 2003, I had the opportunity to participate in a series of online training modules about how to teach online. The training required a significant amount of time spent reading and posting to the asynchronous discussion board. I will fully admit I did not initially embrace this gift with open arms; I was working one full-time job, one part-time job, and had two young children at the time, how could
I possibly add homework to my already overloaded schedule? In addition, I was very skeptical about teaching social work, a profession that places a very high value on human relationships, in an online format. Could aspiring social workers learn anything about how to work with real people over the internet? Thankfully, I decided to dive into this pool of enormous possibilities. While completing the training, I developed hybrid and online courses and subsequently facilitated faculty workshops at my institution. At the time I did not feel worthy of the “resident online expert” designation I was given, but in hindsight, what I was doing was cutting edge and provided a solid foundation for my academic career.

Reflecting on the last 15 years of teaching online, I realized that my approach to developing effective learning communities in the virtual classroom is not representative of a specific technique, although there are many suggested tools and techniques documented in the distance education literature (Dietz-Uhler & Hurn, 2013; Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 1999; Gibson, 2013; Kirby & Hulan, 2016) and I certainly use some of them. Rather, it is evidence of my commitment to social work values and ethics in action. My dedication to a timely response to student emails, and the energy I invest providing constructive feedback on discussion posts and assignments illustrates my belief in the dignity and worth of all human beings, the importance of relationships, and my obligation to competent practice. My unwavering support for an online delivery format is consistent with my opinion that all students deserve opportunities for access to higher education.

Nevertheless, there is always room for improvement. In my doctoral studies, I have been exposed to a variety of teaching and learning paradigms and required to discern my own teaching philosophy. I have examined social work literature that investigates online education. This literature compares face-to-face to online offerings and finds no major differences in educational
outcomes (Cummings, Chaffin & Cockerham, 2015; O’Neill & Jensen, 2014) or student perceptions (Hostetter & Busch, 2006) regardless of delivery format. In addition, Saleebey & Scanlon consider the possibility of a critical pedagogy in social work education (2005). What I did not find was any research that investigated the exciting and engaging promise of liberatory pedagogy in the virtual social work classroom. I will begin to address this gap in the literature by reflecting on my experiences of liberatory pedagogical themes of body, mind, spirit, voice, authenticity, and self-actualization in online social work education.

Is Distance Education Dis-embodied Education?

Liberatory pedagogy really demands that one work in the classroom, and that one work with the limits of the body, work both with and through and against those limits: teachers may insist that it doesn’t matter whether you stand behind the podium or the desk, but it does.

—bell hooks (1994, p. 138)

Although I was captivated from the very first chapter of Teaching to Transgress, it was this passage that sparked my interest in exploring liberatory pedagogy within the scholarship of teaching and learning online. Just visualizing hooks at work in the classroom made me tingle all over—this was exactly the kind of teaching and learning I wanted to facilitate! Questions quickly threatened my enthusiasm. How is the body represented and experienced by professors and students in online education? How can one be virtually fully present? I also mused about whether the absence of “real” bodies in the virtual classroom reinforced the mind/body split; a Western philosophical dualism that hooks (1994) argues must be challenged through conversations about power differences and oppression based on gender, race, class, and sexual orientation. From this perspective, ignoring our bodies and emotions in the service of the “Academic Mind.” is a betrayal of self; the antidote is to enter the classroom whole. Easier said than done.
When I think about “the body” in the online classroom, my first thought is of profile photos. I think about students as real human beings and what I know about them from their introduction posts (partner/kids/pets, work/field experiences, geographic location, etc.). I realized that I feel more connected to students who share both a photo and a rich description of themselves. Should I more actively encourage students to post a profile picture? Or, do profile pictures facilitate implicit racial and gender bias?

As I reflected more deeply, I also concluded that my understanding of the concept of body includes active engagement. As I read students’ work, I visualize them posting to the discussion board, interviewing policy experts, and completing their real-world advocacy projects. In lieu of warm bodies in a circle of chairs, attendance is noted by timely posts and submission of assignments. If students are missing deadlines (in other words, not coming to class), I reach out with an email to inquire about their absence and offer my assistance. This is one way I show respect for students as human beings with dignity and worth; every voice matters, and I want them to know I miss them and their contributions to our learning community.

Contemplating hooks’ thoughts about the location of the teacher’s body in the classroom, I considered what I do in virtual space to “move around rather than stand behind the furniture.” I don’t like to lecture; when I taught face-to-face, I often rearranged the chairs to facilitate dialogue. In my online classes, I make an intentional effort to engage in the discussion as it unfolds, sharing my opinions as appropriate, asking thought-provoking questions, providing affirmation and encouragement. Although my comments are typically brief, this effort reminds the students that I am “present” with them as the conversation is occurring, not just when it is time to evaluate what they said.
Another way I am aware of the body in the asynchronous environment involves students’ potentially traumatic physical and emotional responses when exposed to readings and videos about difficult subjects. Currently, this is a controversial topic in higher education (American Association of University Professors, 2014). My use of content warnings in my Human Trafficking elective is an exhibition of ethical and professional social work behavior and shows care and concern for my students. As hooks (1994) suggests, “to teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin” (p. 13).

I have also spent some time thinking about students’ impressions of me as a person, and how my presence influences them within and beyond the course experience. Do they feel any connection with me? How would I know? This is where the constructs of body, mind, and spirit overlap significantly for me. I post a profile picture and introduce myself to the class on the discussion board. If I am honest though, what I currently choose to share in the asynchronous environment is more guarded than what I think might occur face-to-face. I will explore this more when I address authenticity. Recently, I have begun posting introduction videos to engage another human sense (voice); this allows me to show passion for the topic, and hopefully encourages students to feel excited. It feels like a step in the right direction, but I’m not entirely satisfied.

**Mind Meld: Developing a Critical Consciousness in the Classroom**

*Conditions of radical openness exist in any learning situation where students and teachers celebrate their abilities to think critically, to engage in pedagogical praxis.*


In her work, hooks (1994; 2010) advises an emphasis on critical thinking is central to an engaged pedagogy that liberates students. When I examined my experience of mind in online
education, the process of critical thinking was prominent. Following this train of thought led me
to ideas about conflict, posing questions, playing devil’s advocate to get students to think outside
the box, group conversations, critical awareness, reflection, and students’ different learning
styles. As the free association continued, I pondered about the trust required to share one’s
honest thoughts. To create an environment where all this intense mind activity can occur, it is
crucial to develop a welcoming learning community and, as the teacher, it is my responsibility to
initiate this process. However, a liberatory pedagogical approach calls for the co-creation of
learning opportunities so course design decisions must allow for shared responsibility as well.

In my experience, getting to know one another virtually requires additional intentional
effort. Space for introductions and encouragement to share personal information is only the
beginning. For some, perhaps not being face-to-face makes it easier to share what they really
think about controversial topics. On the other hand, those who express themselves better orally
might be intimidated by the need to write everything they want to say. Posting also means there
is a permanent record of what has been said. Add to all this the emphasis on interrogating
cultural hegemony and learning from conflict that is inherent in a critical paradigm and the
challenges might seem formidable.

Having a virtual dialogic conversation takes considerably more effort as well. One of the
benefits of online learning is the opportunity to carefully think about what you want to say before
you say it. Time to ponder theoretically allows for more meaningful learning. But reading
everyone’s comments can be tedious for both professor and student, and the conversation often
feels disjointed even when everyone is responding to the same prompts. To be honest, I find
myself disappointed when student posts don’t show evidence of higher order thinking, and even
though I try to monitor and facilitate the process by commenting and asking follow-up questions,
by the time students respond (if they respond), it almost seems beside the point. According to Freire (1973), true dialogue is necessary for developing critical consciousness. He defines dialogue as “a horizontal relationship between persons. A with B = communication [and] intercommunication. Relation of ‘empathy’ between two ‘poles’ who are engaged in a joint search.” He continues, “when the two ‘poles’ of the dialogue are thus linked by love, hope and mutual trust, they can join in a critical search for something. Only dialogue truly communicates” (p. 45). Does the kind of conversation that takes place on the discussion board allow for true dialogic communication?

I believe the answer to this question can be yes, but as I thought about specific examples of true dialogue in action, I realized that more of these instances have occurred in my online exchanges with highly engaged and self-motivated students and less frequently between the students themselves. What can I do to change this? My gut tells me this goes beyond setting an example and designing discussion prompts to promote critical thinking. Mind, as a construct, is also about students’ cognitive abilities and motivation for learning. Still, there must be something I can do to inspire connections that achieve deep, lasting learning. Educational experts Arthur Chickering (2006) and Freire (1970) both suggest a holistic approach which includes students solving personally relevant problems. Chickering also argues that deep learning requires learners to reflect on the ways new ideas build, connect, and challenge existing understanding and knowledge. “Reflection is the absolutely necessary intervening activity that converts input—whatever the experiences are—into meaningful working knowledge that can then be tested in other settings” (p. 143). My real-world approach in the policy course, with assignments and conversations centered around student identified policy advocacy topics that are meaningful to them, is a start toward shared responsibility for deep learning. This approach is not unique to the
online environment, but it can be used to transcend distance. It seems reasonable to expect that students who are encouraged to study and follow their passions will also be motivated to dialogue with one another about their interests regardless of delivery format.

**Moved by the Spirit**

*The emphasis on rational empiricism, on conceptions of truth as objective and external, and on knowledge as a commodity delegitimizes active, public discussion of issues of purpose and meaning, authenticity and identity, spirituality and spiritual growth.*

—Chickering, Dalton & Auerbach (2006, p. 30)

I was baptized Catholic and attended Mass regularly until I was in my early twenties. For many years and reasons, I did not participate in organized religion, although occasionally I searched for a spiritual home. I also studied Reiki, an energy healing practice. I don’t think it is a coincidence that shortly before I started my doctoral endeavors, I discovered Science of Mind (SOM). SOM honors the wisdom of many religious and spiritual traditions and feeds my post-modern soul. Joining this spiritual community of individuals who collectively strive to create a world that works for everyone, and personally committing to daily positive affirmations and meditation have significantly contributed to my success as a student and my continued growth as a person and an educator. In retrospect, the holistic emphasis on body, mind, and spirit taught in this tradition set me on this very pedagogical path before I even knew where I was headed. I am grateful for the synergy yet reminded by Chickering, Dalton, and Auerbach (2006) that the academy does not always embrace spirituality.

However, there are models, such as liberatory pedagogy, that insist spirituality can and must be a part of the process. hooks (2003) writes, “I can testify to the meaningfulness of spiritual practice and that such a practice sustains and nurtures progressive teaching, progressive politics, and enhances the struggle for liberation” (p. 164). Similarly, Cynthia Dillard comments, “what is spirituality in education? Spirituality in education is education with purpose, education
that is liberatory work, education that is emancipation…” (as cited in Dillard, Abdur-Rashid, & Tyson, 2000, p. 447). Both Freire (1970, 1973) and Palmer (1997a, 1997b) have written eloquently about the pedagogical importance of spirituality and related concepts of authenticity, love, emotion, purpose, and meaning. In the social work education literature, a qualitative study of Canadian student and professor perspectives on spirituality and religion found that participants identified connections between social work values and spiritual values and believed classroom discussions about spirituality were worthwhile for developing self-awareness and appreciation for diversity (Coholic, 2006).

My passionate commitment to social justice is one way I express my spirituality. I learned values of care and concern for others, generosity, and social justice from my parents and extended family. Our family get-togethers always include people who are not biologically or legally related to us in any way as there is always room for one more at the table. Rooting for the underdog is a family creed. As an educator, I try to share this perspective with my students. The energy I feel when engaging with students is sacred. Each learning community has its own vibe: the collective spirit of this unique group of individuals together in this time and space. I feel jubilant when students share their passions, and the discussion board is alive with connections and activity beyond the required weekly post. But as I critically examined my current pedagogy, I concluded that I am not as explicit about my perception of spirituality as I want to be, nor am I overtly asking students about theirs.

**Can You Hear Me Now?**

One of the aspects I appreciate most within liberatory pedagogy is the value of each voice and respect for the diversity represented by those voices. hooks (1994) provides examples of how she teaches students to really listen to one another and creates intentional opportunities for
students to speak freely. She believes awareness of one another as individuals comes from hearing these voices. This is especially important for students who have been previously marginalized in academia as well as the larger society. It is here where power differences based on societally constructed ideas about race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and positions of authority may be confronted.

Reflecting on my teaching experiences, I thought about all those marginalized voices: students of color, women, first-generation college students, those for whom English is a second language, people with disabilities, and the LGBTQIA community. I thought about students who attend online because they also must work full-time to support their families or because they live in rural communities. Since there is no lurking quietly in the back of an online classroom, thoughts of students intimidated by the writing intensive nature of asynchronous courses filled my mind. Reading their posts, I can hear excitement, joy, understanding, and pride, as well as confusion, frustration, irritation, exhaustion, and anger; sometimes I even hear silence. I wonder how they hear my voice in this virtual experience. Do they perceive my frustration when the conversation lags or their comments don’t show understanding of connections that seem perfectly obvious to me? Do they sense my irritation when they ask a question before trying to find the answer themselves (did you even read the syllabus I painstakingly created?!). My insecurities flourish—have I clearly communicated that I value their voices? Do my students feel heard, encouraged, and respected by me? Or is my “professor voice” (as an evaluative authority) the only voice they hear? To mitigate this power differential, I include my teaching philosophy in my syllabus, post introductory videos, and make myself available by phone and video conference. I try to join in the conversation as it unfolds on the discussion board and start my
feedback on assignments with positive comments. But, the lack of verbal interaction available in an asynchronous delivery format remains a definite challenge.

**The Real Me**

*Authenticity is about knowing your truest, realest, juiciest self and honoring it.*

—Wind Paz-Armor (2014, p. 149)

This quote from Paz-Armor’s SPN really struck a nerve. At this point in my life, I am pretty confident I know my “self,” but less certain I am honoring that self in my online professor role. With most of my friends, family members, and colleagues, I am an open book. When I meet new people, while I don’t typically lead with “Hi, my name is Rachael and I am a lesbian, social work activist,” early on I mention my female significant other and, if the topic of conversation is at all political, my activism and advocacy for LGBTQIA rights and anti-human trafficking efforts. Every interaction is a teachable moment to normalize my reality and transform how others’ think. This feels authentic to me since honesty is one of my personal values. But somehow in the virtual classroom, this hasn’t happened yet—for some reason it seems awkward and contrived to post my sexual orientation in my introduction, even though when I was married to a man, I occasionally mentioned my husband. There have been a few times when I have referred to my partner in relevant online conversations with individual students, but never the whole class. I am not worried about rejection, I work for a university that is very inclusive, and I definitely do not have internalized homophobia. So, what is this reluctance all about?

One limitation of teaching online is the absence of context. If I were teaching on a campus, students would see a picture of my partner and me in my office; I would be involved with and supportive of LGBT campus organizations and events. Also, temporal constraints in an asynchronous structure can impede the flow of conversation. Appropriate self-disclosure would be more natural in the context of spontaneous classroom conversations about discrimination
where I could model exploration of personal bias as a strategy to develop professional self-awareness. I struggle with students who admit to their discomfort with gays and lesbians, especially when they mention this “choice” or “lifestyle” is against their religious beliefs. I am frustrated by students who comment that I focus too much on such topics in my courses. I am not teaching from a place of integrity and wholeness by keeping this part of my authentic self hidden from students. I am missing an opportunity to help them interrogate heterosexual privilege. I have a personal bias toward the need for social workers to develop cultural competence for this marginalized population to which I belong, and students have a right to know my social location. At the same time, I need to maintain balance, be respectful of different opinions and include discussion about all vulnerable groups. I realized reflecting on this theme has been quite an “A-ha” moment for me.

hooks (1994) remarks “…no education is politically neutral” (p. 37). As a social work educator, it is my job to expose my students to professional values and strongly encourage them to consider how these values fit with their personal beliefs. To truly implement a liberatory pedagogy, I must be willing to be vulnerable, to take risks and to “make [my] teaching practices a site of resistance” (hooks, 1994, p. 21) regardless of the delivery format.

**Journey Toward Self-Actualization**

...teachers must be actively committed to a process of self-actualization that promotes their own well-being if they are to teach in a manner that empowers students.

—bell hooks (1994, p. 15)

I remember studying the concept of self-actualization as an undergraduate psychology major. At the time the idea seemed nebulous, like Nirvana, was this something mere mortals could ever hope to achieve? But from my middle-aged vantage point, self-actualization means acknowledging my best self and bringing that self to every situation. Applying the lens of
liberatory pedagogy, it means prioritizing personal well-being, being aware of my intentions, teaching from a place of wholeness—with an integrated body, mind, and spirit—being authentic, speaking with integrity. It means allowing self-growth, learning, and transformation to occur alongside my students. What a relief to not have to know it all, very liberating indeed!

But, have I achieved self-actualization? As this narrative illustrates, some days yes, some days no. I am on the pedagogical path that is right for me. I am committed to the process of self-actualization that hooks recommends in the quote above. I have grown as a person and professor since my first adjunct experience. In addition, I am actively working toward bringing wholeness and authenticity into the online classroom. Reflecting on my successes and failures has empowered me to forge ahead.

As hooks (1994) suggests, liberatory pedagogy can lead to student empowerment. She advocates “making the classroom a democratic setting where everyone feels a responsibility to contribute is a central goal of transformative pedagogy” (p. 39). I think my teaching practices have successfully overcome some of the constraints the asynchronous online environment presents for a liberatory pedagogical approach. But do my students feel empowered to share responsibility for their learning? Since I am only one person in this co-creative process, the next step in my professorial journey will be to explore and understand the student experience with a qualitative study to answer the research question: How do students experience body, mind, and spirit in the asynchronous MSW classroom?

Final Reflections

As predicted, my reflective process has generated more questions than answers. Since I am a work in progress, I am okay with this. I have been honest about the unique challenges of using an alternative teaching and learning paradigm such as liberatory pedagogy in online social
work education. Some educators (even hooks) might argue these challenges are insurmountable. As a full-time online professor, I may be biased. However, I whole-heartedly believe it is possible to apply this holistic approach in the virtual classroom. I have argued that it is imperative to do so because the alignment with professional social work values and ethics enhances social work education, and because online access to education achieves social justice.

A critically engaged pedagogy produces critically aware social workers.

But, as I have illustrated, to thoroughly explore this application and expand my educational praxis required a genuine willingness to discern the larger philosophy behind the pedagogical approach. In this narrative, I have reflected on my identity as a person and a teacher, as well as my understanding of liberatory pedagogical concepts of body, mind, spirit, and authentic voice and connected my findings to thoughts from other educational scholars. In addition, I have ruminated about my experiences bringing this understanding to life in my online teaching practice. The result has been a very illuminating trip so far, and I can’t wait to see what discoveries lie ahead.
References


Liberatory Pedagogy: Exploring Body, Mind, Spirit, and Voice in Online Social Work Education

Rachael A. Richter

St. Catherine University and University of St. Thomas

Author Note

The author is a doctoral student at St. Catherine University and the University of St. Thomas School of Social Work. The author is also a full time Associate Professor of Social Work at Western New Mexico University. The author would like to thank all peer reviewers for providing feedback and editorial assistance on the manuscript.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Rachael A. Richter, College of Professional Studies, Social Work Program, Western New Mexico University, P.O. Box 680, Silver City, NM 88062. E-mail: Rachael.richter@wnmu.edu
Abstract

Little research investigates critical pedagogies in online social work education. Using a holistic liberatory pedagogical framework as conceptualized by bell hooks, this unique qualitative study explored student experiences of sensitizing concepts of body, mind, spirit, and voice in an asynchronous MSW policy course. Findings derived from surveys, interviews, and course discussion posts suggest three primary themes: course content versus holistic process, concern for offending others, and lack of voice, which have relevant implications for social work educators employing critical pedagogy in the virtual classroom.

*Keywords*: online social work education, liberatory pedagogy, critical pedagogy, scholarship of teaching and learning, bell hooks
Liberatory Pedagogy: Exploring Body, Mind, Spirit, and Voice
in Online Social Work Education

Online delivery formats are firmly entrenched in the higher education landscape. Although overall college enrollments continue to decline, online enrollments experienced growth with at least 29.7% of all students enrolled in at least one online course in 2015 (Allen & Seaman, 2017). Distance education in social work is no exception; there are numerous accredited online programs (Council on Social Work Education [CSWE], 2018). This growth has generated considerable research evaluating online pedagogy and technological innovations in teaching and learning (Akyol, Ice, Garrison, & Mitchell, 2010; Arbaugh, Bangert, & Cleveland-Innes, 2010; Archibald, 2010; Berry, 2017; Cummings, Chaffin, & Cockerham, 2015; Delmas, 2017; Diaz, Swan, Ice, & Kupczynski, 2010; Douville, 2013; Dringus, Snyder, & Terrell, 2010; Ferrera, Ostrander, & Crabtree-Nelson, 2013; Garrison, Cleveland-Innes, & Shing Fung, 2010; Gibson, 2013; Kirby & Hulan, 2016; Noble & Russell, 2013; Okech, Barner, Segoshi, & Carney, 2014; O’Neill & Jensen, 2014; Shea et al., 2010).

Little of that research has explored the online application of post-modern teaching philosophies such as critical pedagogy. Implementing this teaching approach in the online environment presents unique challenges because the achievement of desired pedagogical outcomes —interrogating cultural hegemony, developing critical consciousness, and creating social change —requires students to engage in meaningful reflection and dialogue. Using a critical pedagogy has the potential to enhance social work education; this is apparent in the clear alignment of pedagogical constructs with professional values and ethics (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2017) and CSWE Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards.
Also, delivering quality social work education online is consistent with our professional mandate for social justice (Abels, 2005).

In this exploratory, qualitative study I considered the use of liberatory pedagogy, a critical teaching paradigm as conceptualized by bell hooks (1994), in the online social work classroom. At the core of liberatory pedagogy is an emphasis on holistic integration of body, mind, and spirit through praxis (reflection which leads to social action). Additionally, students and teachers are asked to share responsibility for learning through a commitment to critical thinking, connectedness, and engagement. This method also recognizes the value of all voices and encourages a willingness to reflect on oppression and privilege (hooks, 1994). Since hooks places emphasis on elements more readily evident in a face-to-face setting such as physical presence, avoiding a mind/body split, expression of passion, and sharing one’s voice, more information is needed about how students understand and experience body, mind, spirit, and voice as sensitizing concepts in an online delivery format. This study was designed to answer the research question: How do students experience body, mind, spirit, and voice in an asynchronous Master of Social Work (MSW) policy course? I thematically analyzed survey, semi-structured interview, and discussion post data from two sections of an online policy course. Ultimately, a more complete understanding of these experiences may lead to improved and engaged pedagogical practice in the virtual classroom.

Background

Critical Pedagogy in Social Work Education

There is no known literature that explicitly explores liberatory pedagogy, as conceptualized by hooks (1994), in face-to-face or online social work education. However, some existing literature does support the use of critical pedagogy in social work education. Saleebey
and Scanlon (2005) encouraged educators to create opportunities for dialogic learning through
critical thinking, discussion, reflection, and social action. Similarly, Carroll and Minkler (2000)
reviewed how social work philosophy and practice is congruent with Paulo Freire’s (1970, 1973)
alternative approach to education which stimulates development of critical consciousness about
social conditions through reciprocal dialogue. In addition, students enrolled in a social welfare
policy course reported authentic dialogue and engagement in real policy advocacy activities were
critical to their learning experiences (Bernklau Halvor, 2016). Finally, Nicotera and Kang (2005)
offered a coherent argument for examining privilege and social location as strategies for helping
students to develop critical consciousness. The authors suggested these strategies be employed
across the social work curriculum. They also referenced hooks on the importance of educators’
awareness of the influence of power dynamics on the classroom conversation. Together these
articles highlight crucial general aspects of critical pedagogy, also found in liberatory pedagogy,
namely, dialogue, reflection, and praxis (hooks, 1994).

However, Holman (2012) cited numerous studies to support his contention that insisting
students develop a critical consciousness through such strategies may actually cause harm and
could be considered a violation of human rights. For example, the majority of MSW students
enrolled in a course on diversity and oppression reported experiencing intense negative emotions
after participating in the course (Garcia & Van Soest, 1997). Additionally, there is literature
which suggests neither students nor professors are adequately prepared to manage conflict in the
face-to-face classroom (Funge, 2011). According to Fleck-Henderson and Melendez (2009),
some social work students with differing political views felt marginalized in classroom
conversations. Although students reported being comfortable with political discussions, Flaherty,
Ely, Meyer-Adams, Baer, & Sutphen, (2013) found politically conservative students “…were
more likely to report that they perceived the classroom environment as less open and hence less conducive to debate” (p. 59).

These studies raise important questions about the application of critical pedagogy in face-to-face and online formats. How can a teaching method that relies heavily on critical discourse about emotionally charged topics such as race, class, gender, and sexual orientation best be implemented? Does the online environment make it more or less difficult for students to engage in these conversations? The emphasis of praxis (reflection and action) and the value of all voices inherent in a critical approach like liberatory pedagogy may help to mitigate concerns of harm.

**Overview of Liberatory Pedagogy as Conceptualized by bell hooks**

Liberatory pedagogy, one type of critical teaching philosophy, incorporates holistic attention to body, mind, spirit, and voice. Students and teachers share a responsibility for developing a learning community that emphasizes critical thinking, engagement, and praxis; desired results are to create positive social change and to achieve well-being for all (hooks, 1994). This approach is consistent with the mission of social work (NASW, 2017). In her text, *Teaching to Transgress*, hooks (1994) characterized the classroom as a “radical space of possibility” (p. 12) and “a democratic setting” (p. 39). As is evident throughout her writing, by holistic approach she means a physical presence well integrated with an academic mind, influenced by spirit and passion, that also values all voices. To be wholly present necessitates a willingness to be vulnerable by both teacher and student (hooks, 1994).

**Body.** hooks (1994) wrote about body in the context of concern that the academy has erased awareness of physical presence through an overemphasis on the academic mind and the power of the professor as the source of all knowledge. She claimed attending to the body (e.g., where one stands, how one moves around the room) can disrupt this mind/body split.
Furthermore, she referred to teaching as “a performative act” (p. 11) that cannot be separated from one’s culture, a notion reinforced by Cooks and LeBesco (2006) and Perumal (2012).

**Mind.** In addition to the mind/body split, hooks (1994) acknowledged the importance of critical thinking. “Conditions of radical openness exist in any learning situation where students and teachers celebrate their abilities to think critically, to engage in pedagogical praxis” (p. 202). hooks (2010) has characterized critical thinking as an interactive process that requires open-mindedness to new ideas and new ways of knowing, discernment, and mutual participation and learning by teachers and students.

**Spirit.** hooks (2003) did not consider any of these sensitizing concepts as truly separate from one another. In discussing her thoughts about spirit and passion she stated, “beyond the realm of critical thought, it is equally crucial that we learn to enter the classroom ‘whole’ and not as ‘disembodied spirit’” (p. 193). Other educators within and outside social work similarly attest to the value of spirituality in education (Chickering, Dalton, & Auerbach, 2006; Coholic, 2006; Dillard, Abdur-Rashid, & Tyson, 2000; Freire, 1970, 1973; Palmer, 1997a, 1997b).

**Voice.** According to hooks (1994), encouraging and allowing students to literally use their voices to share “…affirm[s] their presence, their right to speak, in multiple ways on diverse topics” (p. 84). Freire’s thoughts on dialogue are relevant as he was an inspirational force in the development of her ideas about liberatory pedagogy. From his perspective, true dialogue involved love, trust, and critical thinking connected to action, within a mutual relationship where power is shared (Freire, 1970).

**Liberatory Pedagogy in Online Social Work Education**

Aside from my own Scholarly Personal Narrative (Richter, in press), there has been no previous attempt to explore the application of liberatory pedagogy in online social work
education of which I am aware. In that work, I shared my understanding of liberatory pedagogical concepts in the context of 15 years of teaching online. After completing this personal exploration, I remained hopeful about the online environment but curious about whether my challenges facilitating passionate, authentic, and critical dialogue in the absence of a physical presence were consistent with student experiences. The research articulated here explores the student perspective and addresses this gap in the literature, thereby contributing to the overall body of scholarship about teaching and learning in online social work education.

Method

This qualitative, exploratory study sought to answer the research question: How do students experience body, mind, spirit, and voice in an asynchronous MSW policy course? Data were collected in two phases and comprised of three sources: a brief survey conducted using Qualtrics© (2018), course discussion posts (Phase I), and semi-structured interviews completed using video conferencing software (Phase II).

Participants

The study used a purposive sample recruited from students enrolled in an online MSW program at a small public university whose main campus is in the southwestern United States. Students can self-select from an eight-week or sixteen-week option for this course, and students who register early have some choice about which instructor they select as well. Study participants were enrolled in one of two eight-week, 600-level MSW policy courses in Spring 2018; the total enrollment was 28 students. Ten students completed the survey and gave permission to include their discussion posts in the study, and six of these also agreed to be interviewed. While this is a small sample size, the study is strengthened by the triangulation of multiple data sources (Patton, 1999).
The sample included nine female students (90%) and one male student (10%). Four students identified as Hispanic (40%), three students identified as White (30%) and three students identified as Other (30%). Two students were between 18 and 24 years of age, four students were between 25 and 34 years old, and the remaining four students were between 35 and 44 years of age.

Data Collection

This study received expedited institutional review board approval. To minimize potential coercion, since I was both the instructor and principal investigator, a colleague who teaches in the Bachelor of Social Work program assisted with recruitment of participants during Phase I. In the second week of the course, my colleague sent a recruitment email I had written inviting enrolled students to participate in the study; students were asked to electronically sign the attached consent form to indicate their agreement to participate. Phase I involved completing a five to ten-minute web survey at the end of the eight-week course and permission for me to include in my analysis any discussions they posted for their normal and customary participation in the course. Although the actual length varied by student and discussion, students were instructed to post a minimum of two paragraphs for their own response to the discussion prompt and respond to at least one classmate per discussion with another two-paragraph posting. A total of 16 discussions were assigned during the eight-week course. After submitting grades to the registrar, I sent a link to the web survey to the students in the course and my colleague emailed me the completed consent forms.

For Phase II, I sent all students who had completed the course another recruitment email inviting them to participate in a 30-40-minute semi-structured interview via Zoom video-conferencing software. Students were already familiar with this software as it is used by the
MSW program for weekly synchronous field seminar sessions. A separate electronic consent was obtained for Phase II participation. Students were offered a $10 Amazon gift card as an incentive for completing the interview. I conducted all interviews in my home office and students participated from a place of their choice which happened to be their home for all participants. I made field notes during and after each interview. The Zoom interviews were recorded, and the audio portion was retained for transcription. I transcribed all the interviews verbatim; the average length of the interviews was 38 minutes. All surveys and interviews were completed within six weeks after the end of the course. Study participants were assigned a study identification code which was applied to all surveys, transcripts, and discussion post data. All digital data were securely and confidentially stored on password protected flash drives and print materials were kept in a locked filing cabinet.

The web survey consisted of questions about demographics (race/ethnicity, gender, age), questions about technology access, Likert scale rating questions (assessing comfort with online courses and discussions, feelings of engagement and connectedness to professor and classmates, sense of mutual responsibility, active versus passive learning), and open-ended questions designed to follow up on the rating items. The purpose of the survey was to provide a starting place for the conversation that unfolded during the follow-up interviews. I deliberately chose not to ask students about the sensitizing concepts of body, mind, spirit, and voice on the survey because I sought their unique experiential definitions and did not want to predispose their responses with any written description or explanation that would have been required to provide the context for such survey questions.

During the qualitative interviews, I started by asking students open-ended questions about their general experiences participating in the course. Next, using their survey responses as a
starting point, I asked for more detail about their prior responses about experiences interacting with classmates, interacting with the professor (me), posting their honest opinions to the discussion board, and their sense of shared student/teacher responsibility for teaching and learning. Finally, I requested participants share what thoughts came into their awareness when asked to reflect on the broad concepts of body, mind, spirit, and voice in the context of the policy course and their experiences (if any) of these concepts (as they defined them) while participating in the course. Student perspectives about the liberatory pedagogical concepts of body, mind, spirit, and voice as revealed in interviews served as the primary source of findings, supported by survey responses and discussion posts.

**Data Analysis**

Open coding was initiated using the sensitizing liberatory pedagogical concepts of body, mind, spirit, and voice as a priori categories. Answers to the open-ended survey questions were compared with the coded transcripts to look for congruence and divergence. Coded data were then thematically analyzed (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To begin the thematic analysis, I closely examined interviews and surveys, noted some similarities and differences for each a priori category within the selectively coded findings, and compared these results to my initial memos. As I continued this iterative process, I became aware of thematic relationships across the four primary a priori categories; these themes were also evident in responses to other survey and interview questions. After completing the thematic analysis, I looked for specific examples within the discussion post data to illustrate the identified themes. Thus, this thematic analysis was both descriptive and integrative, used deductive and inductive coding methods, and achieved rigor through triangulation of data sources. According to Saldaña (2016), “themeing the data” (p. 200) is appropriate for qualitative studies that include participant documents and interviews.
Findings

Three key themes were identified. First, most students responded to the primary research question for the study in one of two ways: with an emphasis on specific course content (policy) or an awareness of a more holistic process. Second, study data suggest that some students’ participation in the course was impacted by their concern for offending others with their asynchronous comments. Finally, some students experienced a noteworthy lack of voice and reported feeling either unheard or uncomfortable about sharing. Student perspectives about the four sensitizing concepts of body, mind, spirit, and voice are illustrated within the following quotes that exemplify these themes.

Course Content versus Holistic Process

During the interviews, students were asked: When I ask you to think about the concept of body (mind, spirit, voice) in relation to this course what thoughts come into your awareness? In response, some students shared comments that were more specific to course (policy) content. For example, several students explicitly mentioned content specific words such as policy, social work, or advocating in their answers to this series of questions:

I immediately thought about the body of a policy. What a policy is and what it is trying to achieve.

…I think about the collective mind of the people and of the society, and I think about agenda, and I think about how policies form…what are these people thinking? …Why have they left all these things out and put all these things in?

Our spirit as social workers…and having to look for the issues and problems in our society that were most appealing to ourselves and that we thought needed to be changed and improved.

Having to use our voice to send our letters, to call our representatives, to use our voice for some of those people that don’t. And advocating for those people that don’t raise their voice and voice their opinions.
…the voice of reason…just doing the right thing and advocating for clients. …our social work duties and responsibilities to the client.

One of the strengths of liberatory pedagogy is the emphasis on a holistic perspective, the synergy of body, mind, and spirit. Several comments showed students were thinking about the course more broadly and suggest a more holistic learning experience:

…my overall experience, what was I able to learn, what was I able to take….this whole-body experience…it literally just meshed together into one, like all these little pieces…it just came together.

The growth aspect, I guess you could say. The being vigilant of, you know, where you were when you started versus where I was when I ended. ….the mind as far as I was unaware to enlightened.

I think that’s where you allow yourself to feel other people’s emotions and free yourself from constraints from your past. …When you follow your spirit it’s more open-mindedness, you’re willing to allow other things to free your mind, at least listen. …nothing is completely black and white…

Not just voice by speaking but communicating in other ways…It’s not just about…you speaking but speaking through other people so if you influence others it’s like a ripple effect.

Of interest in this exploration of asynchronous learning, most students did not appear to relate the concept of body to the presence or absence of a physical entity when answering explicit questions about body. However, most students mentioned missing a face-to-face presence in their responses to other questions during both the survey and interview. For example, one student remarked “Things get misunderstood through text of any kind. Opinions are easier to express when they can be explained in person.” On the survey, several other students suggested weekly video lectures, introductory synchronous video sessions, or weekly synchronous chats would increase feelings of connection with other students and the professor. Students reinforced these suggestions during the interviews.
Concern for Offending Others

Students were very explicit about their concerns for how their comments were received by their classmates as well as why a misunderstanding might be more likely to occur in the online environment. Evidence supporting this theme was found in interviews, answers to open-ended questions on the survey, and course discussion posts:

…in a discussion you can’t see my eyes, you can’t hear my tone in my voice, you can’t see my nonverbal cues where I am coming from so it may appear that I am trying to say something and because I don’t necessarily know how to express it… …these are all new concepts that I think sometimes I was misunderstood, and I was scared to offend anybody because at the end of the day I truly don’t care what people think as long as you’re happy and you don’t hurt anybody.

Topics/issues that have multiple perspectives and differing viewpoints makes it complicated to discuss when someone is not in front of you. Working through a screen takes away the human perspective and it blurs people’s intentions.

I require physical presence sometimes of a person. It makes me feel more connected than like ones who appear through the internet….I think you can get a lot from seeing somebody face-to-face and understanding how they respond with body language when you talk and everything else. You know, you can see if the person’s compassionate or if they are stone-faced. … I tried to be sensitive and decide when it was appropriate to share [my] opinions and when it wasn’t, so I think I more policed that myself to avoid any negative response.

I did read some stuff that my classmates were discussing, and even though when I read them I usually looked for others that I could provide something good to comment back instead of just disagreeing.

…I was trying to find a way to point out what our duty was as social workers without coming across as like I was bossy and just like a professional way.

In response to why she had stated on the survey that she was only moderately comfortable sharing her honest opinion one student explained:

I have the philosophy of you choose your battles when it comes to especially politics and specifically right now, so I could see that I read everybody’s posts and it’s very clear that some people are going to be left, some people are going to be right, and I was careful not to just voice my opinion on certain things because I didn’t want to be offensive… …if I was to put something and somebody read it at two o’clock in the morning and then put a
response because they are all upset and emotional about it because I put something that offended them and I didn’t know I did, and then I forgot to go back, and then I just left it like that, I would have felt kind of awkward about doing that.

In course discussion posts, even when students were asked to play “devil’s advocate,” some used clarifying language such as:

Please do not accept any of this as personal, or to be a criticism of your post. I understand your arguments and where you are coming from on this.

…for what it is worth, I feel there is absolutely nothing wrong with your strong convictions pertaining to this matter. [This same student repeated this sentiment again at the end of the post several paragraphs later.] I very much respect your feelings and perspective on this matter, and I hope I have not given the impression that I do not.

When indicating their disagreement with one another, some students used phrases like “with all due respect” or “correct me if I do not understand.” These caveats were more commonly found in discussions about potentially controversial topics, such as abortion or transgender policies. Additionally, in both discussions requiring peer review of infographics and presentations, most students made very few negative comments about others’ work and qualified suggestions for improvement they did share with words like “minor suggestion,” “maybe,” and “other than that.”

This apparent concern for offending others may be indicative of congruence between students’ personal values and professional social work values. Students’ responses clearly articulated the importance of respect for one another. This attention to respect may have been a protective factor for those times when students did choose to share honest opinions. Students who rated their comfort level for stating their honest opinions positively on the survey were also asked: What has contributed to your comfort? Five out of eight students used the word *respect* in their response to this question. These findings have significant implications for course design and facilitation of true dialogue required for effective critical discourse.
Lack of Voice

Comments supporting this theme appear to identify two primary reasons for the absence of a voice: a lack of feedback and discomfort about others’ responses to self-proclaimed conservative political views. Regarding the lack of feedback, one student stated:

You know online courses including this one, this policy course, sometimes feel like screaming into the silence and that no one can hear you. …I had the complete free ability to share my own thoughts, feelings and perspectives, but I felt like no one was even really hearing me. … And I think that as social animals we like to have that validation and appreciation from our social circles and in a lot of ways, school’s an extension of that circle. Sometimes it’s very dissatisfying.

[Later in the interview] Often as an online student I sit here and I’m thinking did the professor even read my paper? Not saying that is specific to this class, it’s actually all of them. I wondered did they even read it, did they even care that that’s what I wrote or is it just another check in a box, you know?

This student found the discussion prompts to be more assignment-based than encouraging conversation and described her struggles with attempting to connect to her classmates on the discussion board in this way:

I tried to provide responses in the discussion that were relevant to what they were saying and hoping I encouraged that ‘I really appreciate you sharing this information, you really didn’t have to and I appreciate that you helped my learning’ and I tried to not just focus on the subject, but also what the person said and why they said it as well. To kind of create a conversation, but again, it kind of stops there. It doesn’t really go any further if they don’t reply to me after my reply, you know? That’s just the end of that.

Two students referred to the impact of differing political viewpoints on sharing their voice and connecting to classmates. One student shared:

…I kind of got defensive, because I felt a little attacked when I felt that it was a political attack versus a policy attack, and I think that is what made it very uncomfortable because I don’t follow politics in the sense of Democrat or Republican, Liberal or Conservative blah, blah, blah, all that stuff, and I felt that in this particular situation it became political and not about policy. [This student reached out to me during this situation to get suggestions about how to respond to the student she was referencing in this comment.]
Another student spoke at length about her experience of lacking a voice multiple times during the interview:

I was uncomfortable sometimes because I didn’t want my classmates to think I was like this awful person because I get a lot of backlash for being a Republican. Especially since I’m going for social work, and I just don’t think it is necessary to be judged that way, especially from people that don’t know me. And that was part of the reason why I never really went deeply into my political views because I’ve just, in the past, I’ve received a lot of backlash. …That’s why I just keep it to myself, politics and religion I keep to myself, so yeah, I feel like if you’re not a Democrat, social work people judge you, and I don’t think it should be that way because social work’s about diversity, and I think everyone’s kind of being hypocrites when they judge me for being Republican and I just, you know, everyone is entitled to their own views so, it’s kind of a touchy subject there.

This student referenced her reluctance to share her beliefs when asked about the concept of mind and her lack of voice when asked about the concept of voice. When asked if she had any ideas about how to enhance sharing her voice in the asynchronous classroom, she replied:

No, I don’t. My plan is to keep the peace and do what I need to do and just keep everyone happy online. I don’t want to make enemies, you know, I just want to remain professional while doing my online courses.

In response to a direct question about when she had received the “backlash” for her political views, the student shared this had occurred in a face-to-face class and at her internship. She recommended all students should have “boundaries” and admitted, “sometimes classmates push my buttons, so it’s hard to keep cool online.” While it is encouraging one of the students with concerns reached out to the professor (me) during the course for assistance, it is concerning the other two did not. These results speak to the importance of decisions about course design as well as course and discussion facilitation strategies to achieve the goal of implementing a liberatory teaching philosophy.
Discussion

This exploratory, qualitative study sought to better understand students’ experiences of sensitizing concepts of body, mind, spirit, and voice in an asynchronous Master of Social Work policy course to improve implementation of liberatory pedagogy—a critical teaching philosophy—in online social work education. Three themes were apparent in the data: course content versus holistic process, concern for offending others, and lack of voice. Some students used policy and social-work specific language (course content) when responding to survey and interview questions while others provided answers that referenced course experiences more generally (holistic process). Responses indicated some students were hesitant to post certain types of comments on the discussion board. This hesitancy appeared to be related to the lack of nonverbal cues and, in the case of potential misunderstanding, the inability to clearly explain one’s meaning online (concern for offending others). Students who did choose to share honestly took great care to do so respectfully. The final theme, lack of voice, revealed student concerns about a lack of feedback from learning community members and discomfort and/or unwillingness to share self-identified politically conservative viewpoints in a class perceived to be filled with mostly politically liberal voices. These findings speak to challenges for facilitating meaningful conversation inherent in an asynchronous delivery format and provide a baseline understanding of online students’ educational experiences with critical pedagogies.

While most student responses to questions about the concept of body did not reference a physical presence, answers to other questions posed in the study clearly indicate students did miss some of the benefits of face-to-face contact, especially the lack of non-verbal cues. In some cases, this absence did impact their sense of connection to one another and negatively affected their willingness to share honest opinions about controversial topics. Responses to questions
about the concept of mind illustrated reflective awareness of new ways of thinking about policy advocacy which suggests evidence of critical thinking processes. Student conceptualizations of spirit indicated a sense of holistic connection to body and mind. Finally, findings of how students experienced voice showed some students found their voice through participation in the course, while others, unfortunately, relayed a definite lack of voice.

The unexpected lack of connection of the concept of body to physical presence as well as the content specific responses received may be related to how questions were framed; students were asked to consider the ideas in the context of the policy course. This might also indicate students do not think about a physical presence while in the online environment; however, numerous suggestions to add more video and synchronous content refute this explanation. Another possible explanation for the findings lends support to hooks’ (1994) warning about the dangers of the academic mind/body split. At the same time, the more general student responses support the possibility of facilitating a holistic experience even in an asynchronous learning community. Both hooks (1994) and Freire (1970, 1973) have written about the salience of wholeness in liberatory and transformative learning. The current results suggest room for improvement to help students achieve a more holistic learning experience.

Although professional behaviors such as sharing respectfully and professor encouragement for differing opinions appear to have contributed to student reported comfort, some students remained uncomfortable sharing their honest opinions and allowing such vulnerability. According to hooks (1994) willingness to be vulnerable is required by both students and teachers to be wholly present. Despite mostly high survey ratings about comfort sharing honest opinions during the course, four students admitted in the follow-up interview they
either moderated their comments carefully or felt a complete lack of voice for one reason or another.

These findings lend some support to studies of students with differing political views who either felt marginalized (Fleck-Henderson & Melendez, 2009) or perceived the classroom as less than receptive to diverse conversation (Flaherty, Ely, Meyer-Adams, Baer, & Sutphen, 2013). Although more information is needed to fully understand the phenomenon, student-reported feelings of discomfort in this study might also reinforce literature that has identified concerns about the impact of negative emotions in the service of developing a critical consciousness (Garcia & Van Soest, 1997; Holman, 2012). Additionally, student comments about the importance of respect demonstrated by self, peers, and instructor confirm findings by Holley and Steiner (2005) who studied student perspectives on “safe classrooms” and how perceived classroom environment affected learning. In their study, respect was identified by students to be an important characteristic of a safe classroom environment.

It is important to note while this study attempted to achieve rigor through triangulation of data sources (surveys, interviews, and discussion posts), the exploratory nature of the study and small sample size are limitations for drawing transferable conclusions about liberatory pedagogy in online social work education. Also, I was both the principal investigator and the instructor of the course. Although the study design included strategies to minimize concerns for coercion, this may have influenced student responses in some way.

**Implications for Online Social Work Education**

It might seem intuitive to assume students would be more willing to share honestly about controversial topics in an asynchronous discussion because of the appearance of anonymity and distance from the emotion of face-to-face conflict. However, the findings from this study suggest
otherwise. Further, the student experiences described here corroborate my own dissatisfaction attempting to facilitate meaningful dialogue in the online classroom (Richter, in press). This is of great relevance to the use of critical pedagogies in online social work education. This type of discourse, which requires relationship, is the foundation on which a liberatory pedagogy must be built (Freire, 1970, 1973; hooks, 1994). Some students participating in this study found the discussions to be engaging and respectful while others either felt silenced or silenced themselves. In addition, although the findings did not appear in the anticipated context of questions about *body*, some students shared concerns about the impact of a lack of face-to-face contact on feelings of connection and open conversation. Together these findings reinforce the importance of building trusting relationships within any learning community as necessary groundwork to facilitate difficult conversations inherent in interrogating cultural hegemony and realizing *Education as the Practice of Freedom* (hooks, 1994). Despite intentional efforts to facilitate a learning community that values all voices, it appears this was not entirely realized for all the voices present in these courses.

More research is needed to investigate student experiences in other online social work courses in the curriculum and to further understand the potential marginalization of students with differing political views from the perceived liberal mainstream of the social work profession. Additionally, more study with a larger sample is needed to gain a better understanding of how students integrate their whole selves into their online educational experiences and the impact this may have on their learning. At the same time, the results of this study support educator adjustments to online course design and discussion facilitation strategies. Students are requesting more video and synchronous components and discussions that stimulate more dialogue and less busywork. Finally, more attention is needed to set the initial tone of the course as one of mutual
respect and appreciation for all voices while also encouraging critical thinking to raise consciousness.

Conclusion

Given the recent increased growth in online social work education, the scholarship of teaching and learning online is paramount. To produce quality social workers in an online program, educators must be able to implement effective pedagogies. Liberatory pedagogy, as conceptualized by bell hooks (1994), is one such approach that aligns well with professional social work values and ethics (NASW, 2017) and required accreditation competencies (CSWE, 2015) and is designed to enhance student development of critical consciousness and skills for challenging oppression of vulnerable populations through social action. Although the importance of social justice maintains my commitments to online education and liberatory pedagogy, the themes identified in the current study reinforce the challenges of implementing liberatory pedagogy and achieving meaningful dialogue in the online classroom. Furthermore, this exploration has shed additional light on the potential marginalization of politically conservative social work students. While further investigation is warranted, adjustments to course design and discussion strategies that address student concerns about offending others and their experienced lack of voice and facilitate a more holistic learning experience are crucial to improving the quality of online social work education.
References


Retrieved from http://www.socialworkers.org/about/ethics


Qualtrics (2018) [Computer software]. Provo, UT.


Liberatory Pedagogy: Exploring Body, Mind, and Spirit in an Asynchronous MSW Policy Course

Rachael A. Richter

St. Catherine University/University of St. Thomas

Author Note

The author is a doctoral student at St. Catherine University and the University of St. Thomas School of Social Work. The author is also a full time Associate Professor of Social Work at Western New Mexico University. The author would like to thank WNMU Academic Affairs for financial support to attend the Social Work Distance Education Conference.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Rachael A. Richter, College of Professional Studies, Social Work Program, Western New Mexico University, P.O. Box 680, Silver City, NM 88062. E-mail: Rachael.richter@wnmu.edu
Abstract

Online education presents an opportunity to achieve social justice by transcending geographic and economic barriers. This presentation explored narrative and preliminary qualitative data grounded in liberatory pedagogy, an alternative teaching and learning paradigm (as conceptualized by bell hooks) that emphasizes mutual responsibility for critical thinking and connection with life experiences and presents the benefits and challenges for professors and students in asynchronous classrooms. Participants received information about holistic, engaged and critical approaches to education, that both challenge cultural hegemony and address the academic separation between mind and body. The potential for conscious awareness and transformation derived from liberatory pedagogy and its online applicability was discussed.

Keywords: liberatory pedagogy, scholarly personal narrative, bell hooks, scholarship of teaching and learning online, social justice
Liberatory Pedagogy: Exploring Body, Mind, and Spirit in an Asynchronous MSW Policy Course

This oral presentation was accepted and presented at the 4th Annual Social Work Distance Education conference (SWDE) held in San Antonio, Texas from April 11-13, 2018. The theme of the conference was *Advancing Social and Economic Justice Through Innovation*. The presentation occurred from 4:30 pm to 5:15 pm on Thursday, April 12, 2018.

The presentation began with an overview of the primary research methodology, scholarly personal narrative (Nash & Bradley, 2011). The presenter shared a qualitative exploration of key concepts inherent in liberatory pedagogy from the personal point of view of the instructor as well as the perspective of some students who had completed an asynchronous MSW policy course. As a teaching philosophy liberatory pedagogy is well aligned with social work values and ethics (National Association of Social Workers, 2017) and Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) competencies (CSWE, 2015). This alternative teaching and learning paradigm stimulates critical thinking, develops an awareness of privilege and oppression, and encourages students’ reflection on cultural differences such as race, gender, and class, thus furthering the goal of educating citizens for participation in a democratic society (hooks, 1994). In addition to an overview of liberatory pedagogical concepts, their alignment with social work education, and the research findings, the presentation also included a discussion of implications for online social work education. As online enrollment continues to grow, investigation into learning paradigms that facilitate co-creation of educational experiences of the highest quality for all students is a priority for online learning.

This presentation is consistent with the theme for the SWDE conference because exploring alternative pedagogies in online social work education is innovative and addresses a
gap in the current scholarship of teaching and learning online. In addition, providing online access to professional social work education is one way to advance social and economic justice by helping students to overcome economic or geographic barriers (Abels, 2005).
Liberatory Pedagogy:
Exploring Body, Mind, and Spirit in an Asynchronous MSW Policy Course

Rachael A. Richter

Context of Exploration: DSW

- My online experience
- Teacher
- Student
Context of Exploration:  
*Teaching to Transgress*

“Urging all of us to open our minds and hearts so that we can know beyond the boundaries of what is acceptable, so that we can think and rethink, so that we can create new visions, I celebrate teaching that enables transgressions—a movement against and beyond boundaries. It is that movement which makes education the practice of freedom.”

—bell hooks (1994, p. 12)

---

Context of Exploration:  
Banded Dissertation Proposal

- **Gap in Literature**

- **Conceptual Framework**

- **Research Question:**
  - How do professors and students experience body, mind, and spirit in an asynchronous MSW policy course?
Research Methodology

- Scholarly Personal Narrative
- Pre-search
- Me-search
- Re-search
- We-search (Nash & Bradley, 2011)

- Qualitative Study
  - Qualtrics survey
  - Semi-structured interviews
  - Discussion posts

Enhancing Online Social Work Education

“The classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy.”

—bell hooks (1994, p. 12)

“Education is an act of love, and thus an act of courage. It cannot fear the analysis of reality or, under pain of revealing itself as a farce, avoid creative discussion.”

—Paulo Freire (1973, p. 38)
Enhancing Online Social Work Education

- Social Work Values and Ethics
- Critical Pedagogy
  - Critical Awareness
  - Reflection/Action
  - Transformation

Liberatory Pedagogy in Online Social Work Education
Enhancing Online Social Work Education

- Achieving Social Justice
  - Access (Abels, 2005)
    - Geographic
    - Economic
  - Competencies
    - CSWE (2015)
    - Participation in a Democratic Society

Liberatory Pedagogy in Online Social Work Education
A Look in the Mirror

“...good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and the integrity of the teacher.”

—Parker Palmer (1997b, p. 16)
Findings: IDENTITY

- Social Worker
- Teacher
- My Personal Worldview

Is Distance Education Dis-embodied Education?

“Liberatory pedagogy really demands that one work in the classroom, and that one work with the limits of the body, work both with and through and against those limits: teachers may insist that it doesn’t matter whether you stand behind the podium or the desk, but it does.”

—bell hooks (1994, p. 138)
Findings: BODY

- Virtual Presence
- Mind/Body Split
- Engagement

Mind Meld: Developing a Critical Consciousness in the Classroom

“Conditions of radical openness exist in any learning situation where students and teachers celebrate their abilities to think critically, to engage in pedagogical praxis.”

Findings: MIND

- Developing a Learning Community
- Critical Thinking/Developing a Critical Consciousness
- Dialogic Conversation

Moved by the Spirit

“The emphasis on rational empiricism, on conceptions of truth as objective and external, and on knowledge as a commodity delegitimizes active, public discussion of issues of purpose and meaning, authenticity and identity, spirituality and spiritual growth.”

—Chickering, Dalton & Auerbach (2006, p. 30)
Findings: SPIRIT

➢ Spirituality in Higher Education
(Coholic, 2006; Dillard, Abdur-Rashid & Tyson, 2000; Freire, 1970, 1973; hooks, 2003; Palmer, 1997ab)

➢ Social Justice

➢ Passion

Can You Hear Me Now?
Findings: VOICE

➢ Value of Diverse Voices

➢ Marginalized Voices

➢ Evaluative Voice
The Real Me

“Authenticity is about knowing your truest, realist, juiciest self and honoring it.”

—Wind Paz-Armor (2014, p. 149)

Findings: AUTHENTICITY

- Social Location

- Lack of Context

- Vulnerability
Journey toward Self-Actualization

“...teachers must be actively committed to a process of self-actualization that promotes their own well-being if they are to teach in a manner that empowers students.”

—bell hooks (1994, p. 15)

Findings: SELF-ACTUALIZATION

- My Best Self
- Wholeness
- Student Empowerment
Implications for SW Education: Opportunities and Possibilities

- Incorporating Identity, Body, Mind, Spirit, Voice, Authenticity

- Shared Responsibility

- Critically Engaged Social Workers

Implications for SW Education: Challenges

- Writing and Time Intensive

- Limitations of Technology

- Mind/Body Split
Next Steps

- Continue Data Collection and Analysis
- Expand Scope of Study
- Changes in Teaching Practice
References


