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Social Work Education: Developing Congruence Between Philosophy and Practice

by

Andrya Soprych

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

University of Saint Thomas
School of Social Work

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Abstract

Through this banded dissertation, I view teaching social work as a form of social work practice and employ a constructivist framework to engage in a process of self-awareness and critical thinking. I contribute to the scholarship of teaching and learning through three individual products as I explore how to strengthen congruence between my constructivist teaching-learning philosophy and my teaching practice.

Product one is a conceptual article where I argue that discerning and understanding the philosophy underpinning one's personal beliefs about how teaching and learning occur is crucial for coherent and effective teaching practices. I present constructivism as one philosophy that may resonate with social work educators and situate constructivism within a social work classroom to explore the parallels between a constructivist learning environment and social work practice.

Product two is a qualitative self-study that examines the impact of course structures on the development of a constructivist learning environment. Undertaken in a social work classroom, this study highlights opportunities to develop course structures that support congruence between teaching philosophy and teaching practices. Findings suggest that course structures do impact the development of a CLE, and that too many predefined structures impede the instructor's ability to decenter control.

Product three is an evaluation of practice that employs Grise-Owens et al.'s (2018) guide for an activated teaching-learning philosophy to evaluate the co-creation of an MSW practice assignment as one example of an activated constructivist philosophy. The primary purpose of the evaluation was to share what I learned as I intentionally sought to engage in a constructivist teaching practice.

Collectively, the three banded dissertation products contribute to a gap in literature regarding the congruence between teaching-learning philosophies and teaching practices. Developing congruence between teaching practices and beliefs about learning may improve classroom structure and positively impact students' learning. Reflecting on my own beliefs and practices as a social work educator, I examine congruence through the lens of constructivism, thereby, also offering it as a viable philosophical approach to social work education.

Keywords: scholarship of teaching and learning, teaching-learning philosophy, learning environment, constructivism, social work education

Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to the tenacious women who have been by my side each step of this doctoral journey. You inspire, support, and challenge me. Abigail, Ryleigh, Kristin, Toni, Allison, and Mari Ann, I am a better person because of each of you. Thank you!

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Social Work Education: Developing Congruence Between Philosophy and Practice

Boyer (1990) promoted the important value of the scholarship of teaching in his seminal report *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate*. It has since been expanded to the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) and broadly reflects a set of principles and practices that are critical to achieving student learning and success (Hutchings et al., 2011). Although many varied definitions exist, educators agree three criteria must be met for work to be considered SoTL: 1) It is made public, 2) it is open to critique from peers, and 3) it is accessible to other members of the scholarly community (Booth & Woollacott, 2018; Braxton, 2016; Grise-Owens et al., 2016).

Over the past three decades, SoTL has grown in scope and depth reaching across disciplines and encompasses curriculum design, specific learning activities, and faculty development (Booth & Woollacott, 2018; Hutchings et al., 2011). While the breadth of scholarship considered SoTL has grown, Fink (2013) notes a need for inquiry that focuses broadly on areas such as instructional strategy. Additionally, Fink (2013) recommends publishing scholarship that will increase replicability and translatability across courses and disciplines when engaged in the narrower, more common focus on specific course activities or assignments. Law, medicine, science, technology, engineering, and mathematics are some of the disciplines that have developed SoTL initiatives. Local and international organizations, as well as public and private colleges have taken up the charge to engage in the scholarship of teaching and learning (Austin & McDaniels, 2016). The current Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) *Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards* (EPAS) identify the scholarship of teaching and learning as important for the advancement of social work education (CSWE, 2015). Social work literature reflecting the language of SoTL is limited, however, suggesting the field

has yet to fully align itself with the SoTL movement (Grise-Owens et al., 2016). Explicitly acknowledging and using SoTL language, this dissertation contributes to the social work scholarship of teaching and learning literature.

Multiple authors have drawn connections between teaching and practice as they argue for social work educators to engage in scholarship directly related to teaching. In making a case for the place of SoTL in social work education, Grise-Owens et al. take a broad stance with the perspective that "social work education should model best practices" and "social work educators should mirror social work competencies" in the classroom (2016, p. 7). Wehbi (2009) focuses more narrowly on the need for social work educators to engage in critical self-reflection in the same way as practitioners, and highlights the scholarship of teaching as a vehicle through which this work can be accomplished. Bogo (2012) highlights a different link, the connection between research and practice, while arguing for the importance of pedagogic research in social work. These perspectives highlight some of the numerous parallels that can be drawn between the teacher and social worker values, roles, and responsibilities, which are all areas rich for SoTL inquiry.

Viewing social work education as a form of practice requires the educator to identify as a social worker and view teaching through a social work lens. In this view of the educator as a social worker, students are in roles analogous to clients (Dore, 1993; Mishna & Rasmussen, 2001; Webb, 1984). Although many social work educators may initially balk at this analogy and have likely surmised that they are not their students' social worker, this resistance may stem from a narrow view of social work practice as therapy and the term client as an individual. Social work instructors are not and should not be their students' therapists (Dore, 1993). The roles and boundaries of a social worker are context specific, which allows for a significantly broader

understanding of what constitutes social work. Social workers may agree that social work case managers, therapists, advocates, policymakers, and researchers all engage with their clients (and define the term client) very differently and have different roles and boundaries even while all being able to identify as social workers, espouse social work values and ethics, and broadly apply social work theories and practices to their specific settings. When viewed this way, it is both possible and useful to imagine social work educators and students analogous to social workers and clients.

Looking through the lens of social work education as practice, I see a disconnect between social work as it is practiced and social work as it is often taught. Social work as it is practiced is rife with uncertainty, conflict, and change. Flexibility, creativity, and learning from the client are necessary for effective social work practice (Feldman et al., 2009; Samson, 2015; Weick, 1994). However, social work as it is taught, too often follows the cognitive learning model seeking to provide students with concrete skills and assessing students with measures that attempt to be objective (Feldman et al., 2009; Neuman & Blundo, 2000; Weick, 1994). This disconnect leads to implicit messages that differ from the intended course content. In effect, teachers who do not attend to education as practice are conveying the message, ‘do as I say, not as I do.’ When teaching social work is viewed as a form of social work practice, how we teach students becomes a matter of attention requiring the same rigor and importance as how we work with clients.

With this banded dissertation, I contribute to the scholarship of teaching and learning exploring how to strengthen congruence between my constructivist philosophy of teaching and learning and my teaching practice. The conceptual paper grounds the reader in a constructivist philosophy of education and explores the parallels between a constructivist learning environment and social work practice. A qualitative self-study examines the impact of course structures on the

development of a constructivist learning environment. This dissertation concludes with an evaluation of practice that employs Grise-Owens et al.'s (2018) guide for an activated teaching-learning philosophy to evaluate the co-creation of an MSW practice assignment as one example of an activated constructivist philosophy.

Conceptual Framework

A constructivist paradigm serves as the conceptual framework for this dissertation. Constructivism is a postmodern philosophy that gained prominence in the 1970s and was widely accepted by the 1990s. Constructivist thinking stands alongside positivism and offers the academy a different way of thinking about the nature of being and the nature of knowing. Its development is most often attributed to the contributions of Jean Piaget (individual constructivism) and Lev Vygotsky (social constructivism) with influences by theorists including John Dewey, William James, Jerome Bruner and Ernst von Glaserfeld (Cooper, 2001; Liu & Mathews, 2005; Yilmaz, 2008). While the popularization of constructivism occurred in response to a dissatisfaction with positivist Western theories, constructivist ideas can be traced back to the philosophies of Giambattista Vico and Immanuel Kant in the eighteenth century (von Glaserfeld, 1989; Yilmaz, 2008). Giambattista Vico wrote about knowledge as a human construct and the social influence on meaning-making long before Piaget defined schemas or Vygotsky posited the importance of social experience in shaping our view of the world (Liu & Matthews, 2005; Vico, 1744/1948; von Glaserfeld, 1989). Immanuel Kant maintained that the same behavior can be validly interpreted in multiple ways depending on the cognitive perspective used and explored the impact of our experiences on our understanding of the world (Davidovich, 1993).

Constructivism as a paradigm is more concerned with epistemology, how we know, than ontology, the nature of being (Sharma et al., 2005). It posits that if objective reality exists, it is

too complex for us to discern at once, therefore, the reality we construct is based on what we choose to focus on – consciously and unconsciously (Rigoni, 2002). In this sense, the ontology of constructivism is that the nature of being is subjective. Humans construct reality by filtering what we see and experience through our personal and value-laden lenses (Graham, 1997; Weick, 1993). From this conceptual perspective, knowledge is neither fixed nor objective. Rather than being viewed as a product, knowledge is seen as a process that is ongoing (Barnett & Coate, 2005; Dybicz, 2015; Graham, 1997). As more and more people examine the same set of "facts" and draw conclusions, a socially and collectively constructed dominant reality emerges (Dybicz, 2015; Rigoni, 2002).

Constructivism is not a singular unified theory; it is a paradigm that encompasses multiple perspectives and has been applied across various disciplines including social work (Cooper, 2001; Yilmaz, 2008). Although it has been applied widely and is often delineated as individual or social constructivism, at its core, constructivism challenges the absoluteness of positivism and replaces truth with viability (Cooper, 2001; von Glaserfeld, 1989; Yilmaz, 2008). When scholars privilege viability over truth, a tentative approach ensues that continually seeks to sustain or refute existing knowledge.

In many ways, the notion of viability has always existed at the core of social work practice. Social work values of self-determination, inherent dignity and worth, and capacity for human growth and change require valuing the client's perspective and working within a reality that is co-constructed through the helping relationship (Weick, 1987). Social work practitioners do not seek to uncover some objective truth or move the client toward a singular right solution, instead they seek to meet the client where they are and work toward change envisioned by the client whether the client is defined as an individual, a family, community, or organization,

among others. In working toward change, there are typically multiple potential routes; therefore, the client and social worker determine interventions together based on what is viable given the unique circumstances. Constructivism is congruent with an approach to social work practice that is based on viability and works within the reality co-constructed through the helping relationship.

In line with social work practice, constructivist research seeks to confirm or refute the viability of ideas. It is through iterations of the cycle of knowing and learning that new understanding emerges, and constructivist research adds value to the field. Each inquiry presents the subjective reality of the researcher and research subjects at a given time and place. Through continued inquiry and conversation, a more robust picture can emerge. A constructivist framework positions me to engage in a process of self-awareness and critical thinking, exploring both my etic and emic perspectives, as I situate my knowledge in context as I explore and reflect on the viability of my ideas and embrace the strengths and weaknesses inherent in a subjective view of knowing and being.

Summary of Banded Dissertation Products

The first scholarly product is a manuscript in which I contribute to the scholarship of teaching and learning with a conceptual article that aims to raise the consciousness of social work educators around what constructivism is as a teaching and learning philosophy. There is a gap in teacher preparation (Cnaan & Ghose, 2018; Golde & Dore, 2001; Maynard et al., 2017), so grounding the reader in constructivist philosophy will provide an opportunity for educators to consider and recognize the extent to which they hold a constructivist philosophy of learning. I use my experience to argue that congruence between teaching philosophy and pedagogy is good for both teachers and students. I present constructivism as one philosophy that is a good fit with

social work values and practice and describe a constructivist learning environment within social work education.

The second scholarly manuscript is a qualitative self-study looking at my developing consciousness as a constructivist educator. According to Samaras & Freese (2006), self-study of teaching is “teachers’ systematic and critical examination of their actions and their context as a path to develop a more consciously driven mode of professional activity” (p.11). Self-study research emphasizes reflection, critique, and connection to the scholarly community, which makes it a good fit for social work educators like me seeking to engage in SoTL work. The goal of this inquiry was to reveal the impact of unexamined structures on teaching using a constructivist lens, thus discovering opportunities to enhance congruence between my teaching practice and my philosophy of teaching and learning. A secondary goal was to demonstrate the use of self-study research methodology as a viable tool for social work educators interested in SoTL. Through self-study, I first describe the extent to which the way I structure a course has changed since discerning my philosophy of teaching and learning. I then explore how to become more intentional in the use of structures to better reflect a constructivist learning environment.

The third academic contribution is an evaluation of practice. The primary purpose of the evaluation was to share what I learned as I intentionally sought to engage in a constructivist teaching practice. I used Grise-Owens et al.’s (2018) framework for an activated teaching-learning philosophy to guide my assessment. Grise-Owens et al. (2018) contend that evaluation is part of the scholarship of teaching and learning and assert that evaluation is enhanced by “dialogue with critical friends and the broader SoTL community” (p. 64). In applying their framework to evaluate activating my teaching-learning philosophy, I share my experience with

the broader SoTL community and demonstrate how educators can use the framework to assess the alignment of their teaching practices with their teaching-learning philosophy.

Discussion

The social work and general education literature affirm that the congruence between philosophy of teaching and learning and teaching practices is a valuable and understudied area of research (Caukin & Brinthaupt, 2017; Kearns & Sullivan, 2011; Owens et al., 2014) and Grise-Owens et al. (2016) beseech social work educators to engage in scholarship of teaching and learning work. This banded dissertation can be considered SoTL and each manuscript addresses the congruence between philosophy of teaching and learning and teaching practices. The conceptual manuscript situates constructivism within a social work classroom to examine the parallels between a constructivist learning environment and social work practice filling a need for social work educators who may be unfamiliar with philosophies of teaching and learning. In response to Fornaciari and Lund Dean's (2014) observation that there is a gap in research examining how structure impacts course management and the learning environment, I conducted research to understand the impact of three structures – the syllabus, assignment descriptions, and lesson outlines on the learning environment. My research also explored opportunities to improve the congruence between course structures and a constructivist philosophy of teaching and learning. Recognizing a need to evaluate the congruence between philosophy and practice, the final manuscript reflected on one instance of activating a constructivist teaching-learning philosophy.

Implications for Social Work Education

Multiple authors have made the case that constructivism may be well-suited for social work education (Dean, 1994; Heineman, 1981; Neuman & Blundo, 2000; Nylund & Tilsen,

2006; Weick, 1994). Delving into constructivist philosophy may be useful to social work educators who are seeking to examine their personal beliefs about how learning occurs and develop their philosophy of teaching and learning. For educators already grounded in a constructivist teaching-learning philosophy, developing a picture of a constructivist learning environment situated within social work education may be a useful guide for enhancing congruence between their philosophy and practice.

Self-study as a research method proved a viable approach for exploring my classroom as a research site to simultaneously improve my teaching and contribute to a body of insider research on effective social work educational practices. Examining the potential impact of often unexamined structures on teaching from a constructivist lens within my own classroom has demonstrated the challenges and complexities of supporting a constructivist learning environment (CLE). Attending to the challenges identified involves balancing structure meant to support components of a constructivist cycle of learning with maintaining sufficient space to truly decenter control and collaboratively share with students the creation of their learning environment.

Subsequent reflection on activating my constructivist teaching-learning philosophy through the lens of one discrete assignment demonstrates how educators can use Grise-Owens et al.'s (2018) framework to assess the alignment of their teaching practices with their teaching-learning philosophy. Continued experimentation with an activated teaching-learning philosophy, iteratively implementing and evaluating, will enhance my ability to articulate my philosophy and develop congruence between philosophy and practice. Reflecting specifically on an instance of co-creating an assignment demonstrates the potential richness in co-construction as a viable constructivist teaching method.

Implications for Future Research

Constructivist research, in line with constructivism, privileges viability over truth and seeks to confirm or refute the viability of ideas. Constructivist research adds value to the field as new understanding emerges through iterations of the cycle of knowing and learning. This banded dissertation shares my experiences through each product, thus contributing tentative knowledge of the fit between constructivism and social work education, the impact of course structure on a constructivist learning environment, and the benefit of an activated constructivist teaching-learning philosophy. This knowledge remains tentative as further research continually engages the iterative process of knowing and learning. Further research can include inquiry into the effectiveness of organizing one's teaching around a constructivist learning environment. Researchers can examine the effectiveness of constructivist methods across social work classrooms, how to overcome student resistance to involvement in directing their learning, and how to effectively and efficiently grade within a constructivist learning environment. Another area rich for future research is exploring how components of a constructivist learning environment fit together to support student learning. Further research can explore various approaches to activating a teaching-learning philosophy. Research designed to incorporate student experiences of constructivist learning environments and constructivist teaching methods are important areas of future scholarship. Congruence between one's philosophy of teaching and learning and one's teaching practices is an understudied area of social work research. A body of research that includes diverse voices and experiences needs to be developed to create a richer and more nuanced picture of teaching practices congruent with a constructivist teaching-learning philosophy.

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Parallels Between Social Work Practice and a Constructivist Learning Environment

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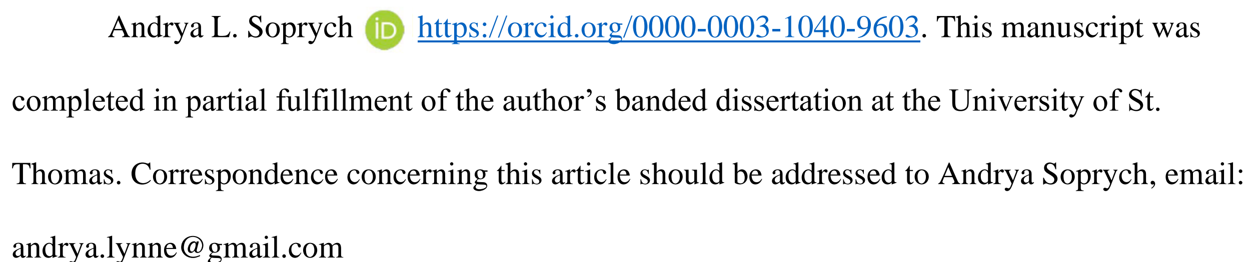

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Abstract

Many doctoral programs fall short in preparing candidates to teach, and many social work educators teach without any doctoral education, thus, leaving the responsibility for learning how to teach on individual social work educators. In this conceptual article, after summarizing teacher preparation in social work and making the case that teaching philosophy needs to be clear, conscious, and coherent, the author presents a teaching philosophy that supports teaching as a parallel practice process. Building on parallel processes in social work practice and constructivist teaching that require accepting and skillfully navigating complexities, ambiguities, and uncertainty, the author offers a philosophical approach that can "hold" these tensions in the classroom. "Goodness of fit" between social work and constructivism is based on several parallels between key elements of a constructivist learning environment and social work practice principles. This philosophy is synthesized and depicted in a visual model that educators might use to assess their teaching. Recommended is a shift from directive teacher to facilitative learner, requiring that students be actively engaged and empowered in their learning in much the same way that social workers seek to engage and empower their clients.

Keywords: constructivism, postmodern pedagogy, constructivist learning environment, social work education

Parallels Between Social Work Practice and a Constructivist Learning Environment

Social work educators partner with students to develop social work identities grounded in the values and ethics of the profession, while also building the knowledge base needed to practice competently. It is a privilege to be present as students become social workers and to create the learning environment required for that transformation. *How* we teach becomes as important as *what* we teach when we aim to graduate people who *are* social workers, not just people who *do* social work.

In this conceptual article, I explore the *how* of teaching from the metacognitive perspective of a constructivist philosophy of teaching and learning. I situate this article within the current research on social work teacher preparation, which reveals that the burden for learning how to teach often falls on social work educators themselves. Identifying the need for social workers to develop their identity and practice as teachers, I then use literature and personal experience to argue that developing clarity and consciousness around an educator's personal beliefs about teaching and learning is crucial for a coherent and effective teaching identity and practice. I then share a teaching-learning philosophy for social work educators, hoping readers will be able to find their beliefs, whether similar or different from the constructivist philosophy presented. Moving from philosophy to practice, I describe a learning environment that models social work practice so that readers can see how a constructivist philosophy of teaching and learning takes shape and can continue to explore their ideas about teaching and learning. I end by considering the implications of a constructivist orientation to teaching and learning for social work educators.

Background on Teacher Preparation in Social Work

Although there is a recognition that learning how to teach requires a specific emphasis on pedagogy, theories, and philosophies of teaching, a recent analysis of U.S. social work doctoral programs reveals a primary focus on research with significant variation in teacher preparation. A study by Maynard et al. (2017) found that only about half of all programs mandate a course on teaching, and less than 20% require a teaching practicum, despite 90% explicitly stating teacher preparation as a program goal. Consistent with programmatic statistics, Golde and Dore's (2001) study revealed doctoral students' feelings that their research-intensive training did not adequately prepare them for teaching. While teacher preparation is inconsistent across social work doctoral programs, there are also many educators without any doctoral training. Cnaan and Ghose, (2018) problematize the increased reliance on adjunct and clinical faculty for teaching as universities expect tenured faculty to focus on research grants and funding. The Council on Social Work Education's (CSWE) Annual Survey found that 29% of full-time and 77% of part-time faculty hold an MSW as their highest degree (2018). These statistics suggest that many social work educators, while subject-matter experts, may be underprepared for their teaching role. I entered a teaching-focused social work doctoral program, recognizing I was one of those educators.

As the 2018 CSWE Annual Survey results suggest, a significant number of social work educators will teach without any formal training, and as multiple scholars have demonstrated, even those with doctoral degrees may have had limited teacher preparation. In this current landscape, the responsibility for learning how to teach falls primarily to individual educators and their employing universities, thus, creating a need for social workers who enter education to locate resources to develop their identity and practice as social work teachers.

Need for More Clarity and Consciousness

Teaching is multifaceted and includes not only developing pedagogical approaches (methods for teaching) but also discerning a philosophy of teaching and learning (determining what you believe about how students learn). Many educators' philosophies may remain unconscious and implicit due to the gap in formal social work teacher preparation. There are arguments within the teacher education literature for encouraging social work educators to embark on a personal journey of discernment. Regardless of whether instructors' philosophies are intentional and explicit or unconscious and implicit, those philosophies directly influence teaching behaviors and choice of teaching methods (Brann et al., 2005). Additionally, a clear and coherent philosophy of teaching and learning helps create a more cohesive and effective learning environment (Çetin-Dindar et al., 2014).

When I started teaching, I had vague ideas about learning that I had primarily constructed from my experience as a student. I had neither the language nor concepts to understand what this meant for my philosophy of teaching and learning. I now see that making these connections was critical in my development as a teacher and in my identity as a scholar-practitioner. Situating myself in the broader philosophical context has allowed me to share and defend my beliefs with both colleagues and students. This intellectual discipline has also provided me with language and concepts by which I can measure the congruence between my philosophy and practice. Discerning and understanding the philosophy underpinning my personal beliefs about how teaching and learning occur has been crucial for developing coherent and effective teaching practices.

For example, when I used teaching methods misaligned with my constructivist orientation to learning, my students and I were frequently confused. I was often confident that I

had explained an assignment or activity clearly, only to discover a genuine lack of students' understanding through their execution on assignments. In other instances, students asked the same question over and over, staring at me with blank looks, clearly not confident they knew what I expected of them. All this left me puzzled. Had I not been clear? Simply blaming students for their lack of understanding did not feel appropriate when they put forth a good-faith effort. What was this disconnect all about? As I began articulating my philosophy of learning, and attempting to align assignments and teaching methods with my philosophy, a kind of synergy unfolded, much as Schreiber and Valle (2013) suggest.

Since there is ample literature describing the importance of articulating a clear philosophy of teaching and learning (Crooks, 2017; Kearns & Sullivan, 2011; Owens et al., 2014), and arguments for using one's teaching philosophy to improve the alignment between teaching practices and beliefs (Caukin & Brinthaupt, 2017; Owens et al., 2014), it is reasonable to assume that attention to philosophy of teaching and learning is a necessary step toward becoming a more critical, self-reflective educator.

A Teaching-Learning Philosophy for Social Work Educators

Looking through the lens of social work education as practice, there is a disconnect between social work as it is practiced and social work as it is often taught. The practice of social work is flexible, creative, and begins where the client is (Feldman et al., 2009; Samson, 2015; Weick, 1994), but when social work is taught, educators too often try to treat subjective knowledge as objective and follow the cognitive learning model seeking to objectively assess concrete knowledge acquisition and skill development (Feldman et al., 2009; Neuman & Blundo, 2000; Weick, 1994). This disconnect leads to implicit messages that differ from the intended

course content. In effect, teachers who do not attend to education as a parallel to practice may unintentionally convey the message, ‘do as I say, not as I do.’

Constructivism, as a philosophy, offers an approach to teaching that is congruent with social work values and practice. Some educators may identify more with individual constructivism, while others may resonate with social constructivist thought. After discussing each, I will show how these two approaches can be combined to support the person-in-environment perspective of social work.

Constructivist Philosophy in General. Constructivism is a postmodern philosophy about knowledge and a theory of learning that gained prominence in the 1970s and was widely accepted by the 1990s. The popularization of constructivism occurred in the twentieth century in response to dissatisfaction with positivist Western theories (von Glaserfeld, 1989; Yilmaz, 2008), but constructivist ideas can be traced at least as far back as the Age of Enlightenment. Eighteenth-century Italian philosopher Giambattista Vico wrote about knowledge as a human construct, and the social influence on meaning-making (Vico, 1744/1948) and German philosopher Immanuel Kant maintained that different cognitive perspectives lead to multiple valid interpretations of the same behavior (Davidovich, 1993). Kant also posited that we cannot know reality outside our own experience of it, thus, making the reality we know subjective (Kant 1781/2007).

In the present day, constructivist thinking stands alongside positivism and offers the academy a different way of thinking about the nature of being and the nature of knowing. Constructivism views knowing as an inherently personal and subjective process and treats knowledge as tentative. Reality can be compared to the mathematical concept of an asymptote. An asymptote is a line that the curve of a graphed function gets closer and closer to without ever

touching. The asymptote is objective reality, while the curve is an individual's reality. The more we learn, the more diverse perspectives we consider, the closer we get to a full picture of reality, but we can never fully experience objective reality, if it exists at all. Constructivists posit that if objective reality exists, it is too complex for us to discern completely because our experiences are filtered through our personal and value-laden lenses (Gordon, 2009; Graham, 1997; Rigoni, 2002; Weick, 1994), hence the metaphor of reality as an asymptote. See Figure 1 for a graphic example.

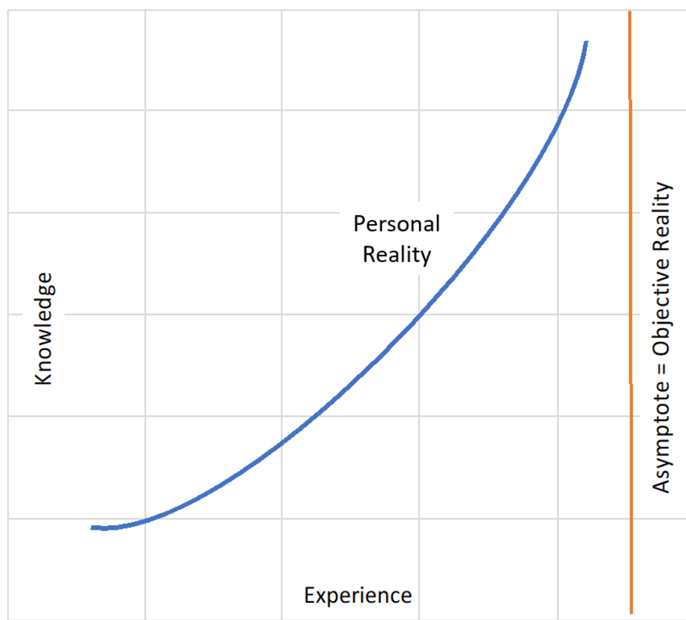

Figure 1: Asymptote Metaphor for Reality

This subjective view of reality is as concerned with epistemology, how we know, as it is with ontology, the nature of being (Sharma et al., 2005). From a constructivist perspective, a person's knowledge is neither fixed nor objective; therefore, rather than being viewed as a product, knowing itself is a dynamic and ongoing process (Graham, 1997; Yilmaz, 2008). This view challenges the absoluteness of positivism and replaces absolute truth with viability

(Cooper, 2001; von Glaserfeld, 1989; Yilmaz, 2008). Focusing on viability rather than on absolute truth results in an approach to teaching and learning that is tentative.

Two Kinds of Constructivism. The development of constructivism is most often attributed to the contributions of Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky with influences by theorists including John Dewey, William James, Jerome Bruner, and Ernst von Glaserfeld (Cooper, 2001; Liu & Mathews, 2005; Yilmaz, 2008). Piaget tends to be credited with *individual constructivism*, which focuses on the internal cognitive processes that lead to knowledge creation. Since Piaget (1972) theorized that learning is the result of either assimilating or accommodating new information within existing cognitive schemas, individual constructivists place considerable emphasis on the mental processes through which people create knowledge (Liu & Matthews, 2005; von Glaserfeld, 1989; Yilmaz, 2008).

Underscoring an external approach to knowledge creation is *social constructivism,* which is typically credited to Vygotsky (Liu & Matthews, 2005; Yilmaz, 2008). Social constructivism considers learning "to be a largely situation-specific and context-bound activity," thus, there is a strong emphasis on the influence of the environment and the social dimensions of knowledge-creation (Liu & Matthews, 2005, p. 388). Instead of looking at individual and social constructivism as competing views, social work educators grounded in the person-in-environment perspective are more likely to see these as complementing each other. Individual and social constructivism are both describing how knowledge is created, but from different angles –individual internal processes and external social processes. Both processes (individual and social) are relevant to not only teaching and learning but to social work practice as well.

Some authors (Caputo et al., 2015; Phillips, 1995) criticize constructivism as a mask for relativism, believing that it leads students to adopt a position that either nothing is true or

everything is true. Hyslop-Margison and Strobel (2008) and Kwan and Wong (2015) counter this criticism wisely distinguishing between knowledge and belief. According to them, learners distinguish knowledge from beliefs through continual comparison of what they "know" against other sources. Learners situate their knowledge in context as they reflect on the viability of their ideas, thus, creating a vital distinction between knowledge as tentative as opposed to relative. When treated as tentative, beliefs need to be critiqued, challenged, and supported with evidence to create knowledge. In a constructivist learning environment, it is not enough to merely convey facts to students; instead, the content of the course becomes the subject matter that learners examine, critique, and either integrate or discard, thereby, creating knowledge.

A Learning Environment that Parallels Social Work Practice

Having explored constructivism broadly, it is helpful to now consider the fit of constructivism with social work education specifically. Multiple social work educators have reasoned that constructivism may be a good fit for social work education (Dean, 1994; Heineman, 1981; Neuman & Blundo, 2000; Nylund & Tilsen, 2006; Weick, 1994) and others have experimented with developing constructivist teaching methods within social work classrooms (Cramer et al., 2018; Fire, & Casstevens, 2013). One argument for the fit between constructivism and social work is that a constructivist approach to social work education shares similarities with social work's ecological approach to practice (Neuman & Blundo, 2000). In a constructivist learning environment, the person-in-environment approach, which is fundamental to social work practice, can be reframed as a learner-in-environment approach to teaching. Developing an image of how learning occurs, allows for further exploration of the parallels between a constructivist learning environment and social work practice.

Features of a Constructivist Learning Environment (CLE). Several features of a CLE dominate the education literature (e.g., Alt, 2018; Baviskar et al., 2009; Kwan & Wong; 2015; Taylor et al., 1997). While each use their own language, when examining the learning environments described, more similarities than differences emerge. To begin with, there is general consensus that a CLE provides students opportunities to connect what they are learning to what they already know (Alt, 2018; Baviskar et al., 2009; Kwan & Wong; 2015; Neuman & Blundo, 2000; Taylor et al., 1997). According to Piaget, learners assess new knowledge against current schemas (von Glaserfeld, 1989), and Vygotsky posited that people construct knowledge via prior experiences and beliefs (Liu & Mathews, 2005). This literature suggests that the instructor is responsible for both drawing out the knowledge students bring into the classroom and building on it to teach new content. Starting with prior knowledge parallels social work practice in that through assessment social workers uncover with the client what they are experiencing, what they have already tried, and work to build solutions from where they are.

A second feature instrumental for a CLE is wrestling with contradictions and uncertainty. Whether termed encountering contradictions (Kwan & Wong, 2015), creating cognitive dissonance (Baviskar et al., 2009), or addressing uncertainty (Taylor et al., 1997), this process includes encouraging students to embrace multiple and conflicting perspectives, challenge normative assumptions, and identify inconsistencies to create new knowledge. These components of constructivist learning are also key skills for social work practitioners. Piaget advanced the idea that cognitive dissonance is necessary to facilitate developing new or altering old schemas (von Glaserfeld, 1989). van Bommel et al.'s (2015) study of differences between student learning in a constructivist setting also supports the importance of experiencing uncertainty. They determined that "constructive friction," which they defined as "a careful

balance between challenge and guidance," helps learning take place (van Bommel et al., 2015, p. 73). Connecting the first two processes, obtaining prior knowledge tends to reveal the lenses through which students are filtering information, which allows the educator to adjust the lesson as needed to create cognitive dissonance and set the stage for learning to occur. In a parallel fashion, the social work practitioner uncovers the lenses through which clients are filtering information, which helps them identify and introduce alternative perspectives to set the stage for client growth and change.

Active engagement in the learning process is a third feature of a CLE (Alt, 2018; Kwan & Wong, 2015; Neuman & Blundo, 2000). Learners must have the opportunity to apply what they are learning and receive feedback (Baviskar et al., 2009) from peers as well as the instructor in order to grapple with how to resolve the uncertainty and contradictions developed through the first two processes. The literature on both social and individual CLEs (Rust et al., 2005; Schreiber & Valle, 2013; van Bommel et al., 2015) recognizes active learning with authentic learning environments as essential features of constructivism. Feedback from the instructor and peers checks the viability of a student's construct, which addresses Phillips' (1995) criticism that constructivism is a slippery slope to relativism. Feedback also provides direct guidance, addressing Kirschner et al.'s (2006) concern that novice students need more direction than constructivist teaching provides. Through active engagement with feedback, very much parallel to what happens in clinical practice, students experience how others view their constructs, hear alternative viewpoints, and verify or alter their constructs as needed. Providing space for learners to wrestle with course content organically can lead the class in unpredictable directions. Therefore, a high degree of skill and subject-matter expertise is required of constructivist

teachers to manage the learning environment as students examine evidence and critique arguments to engage in the process of knowing (Gordon, 2009).

A metacognitive feature of a constructivist learning environment involves reflecting on the learning process itself (Baviskar et al., 2009) and internalizing patterns of thinking (Kwan & Wong, 2015), so that students gain an awareness of their new knowledge. A CLE helps students articulate their thinking so that they can be aware of their beliefs, assumptions, and thinking processes (Neuman & Blundo, 2000; Sharma et al., 2005). One way this occurs is through the development of assignments that require students to reflect on their learning (Kitsantas et al., 2001). Throughout the course, students need to be given opportunities to both formally and informally "reflect self-critically on the viability of their own ideas" (Taylor et al., 1997, p. 296). Explicit identification and reflection on learning reinforce the integration of new knowledge into learners' internal cognitive schemas. A parallel process exists in social work practice that helps clients embrace their progress and prepare for termination.

While the above features of a CLE build off each other creating an iterative cycle of learning, Taylor et al. (1997) identify shared control as a macro and foundational element of a CLE. Others (Alt, 2018; Graham, 1997; Neuman & Blundo, 2000) broadly address the collaborative interaction between teacher and student, suggesting shared control as a macro element to a CLE, which is similarly a core value of social work practice. Instead of maintaining a distinct separation between teaching and learning, the teacher and students come together as learners. This transformation into learners is crucial for successfully drawing students into the complexity of a CLE. The goal is for students to take responsibility for their learning so that they want to participate in collectively determining how to meet learning objectives and engage with course content (Neuman & Blundo, 2000). A collaborative relationship is maintained as the

teacher facilitates and guides instead of directs learning, and everyone has responsibility for both teaching and learning. See Figure 2 for a visual depiction of a CLE.

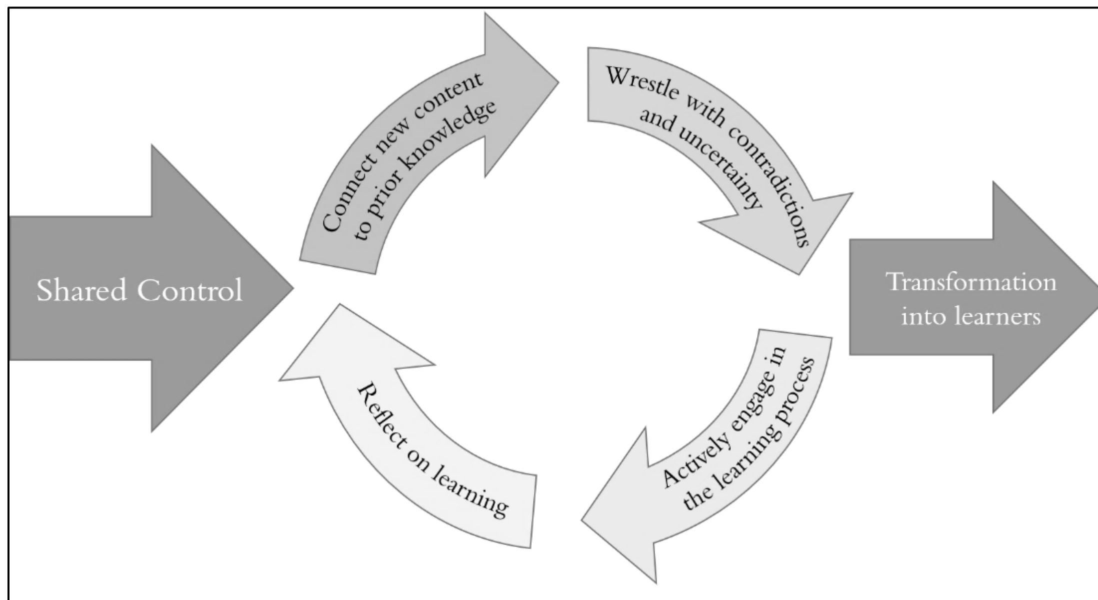

Figure 2: Constructivist Learning Environment

Constructivism's Fit with Social Work. A constructivist learning environment can create teacher-student relationships parallel to social worker-client relationships. To begin, the collaborative nature of constructivist learning is analogous to the relational nature of social work practice. Both education research (Cornelius-White, 2007; Kek & Huijser, 2011) and social work-related research (Ardito & Rabellino, 2011; Drisko & Grady, 2012) have found that a collaborative and robust relationship positively impacts student and client outcomes, respectively.

Working within the parallel between the teacher-student and social worker-client relationship, the teacher can model social work behaviors and skills such as shared control (Cooper, 2001), engaging the client/student as experts (Weick, 1994), empowerment (Nylund & Tilsen, 2006), and managing ambiguity (Valutis, 2015). Shared control is a foundational element for both social work practice and supporting a CLE. Students' experience of shared control

within a CLE may aid in their understanding of the concept and support their translation of it into their social work practice. For example, in collaborating with students to define the purpose and process of assignments, a constructivist teacher models how students can engage in shared decision-making as part of an evidence-based practice process or goal setting with clients.

Engaging the students as experts, a constructivist social work teacher “starts from where the student is” in similar ways to how a social work clinician would “start from where the client is.” In both instances, the social worker (teacher or clinician) designs opportunities for growth with the person (student or client) built from their prior experience and future goals. An example of this in the social work practice classroom is having students define the context, including the practice setting, their role, and who the client is, for an assignment where they apply a specific intervention to practice.

Social work is rife with uncertainty, conflict, and change, which parallels wrestling with contradictions and uncertainty in a CLE. Students struggle to manage the uncertainty inherent in social work practice, often wanting specific instructions telling them what to do, how to do it, and when. Instead of seeking to resolve uncertainty by identifying one course of action or clinging to one single reality, a CLE shifts towards the viability of options and tentatively accepts multiple interpretations as valid and legitimate. Viability is another concept shared between constructivism and social work practice. Social work values self-determination, the client’s inherent dignity and worth, and the capacity for human growth and change. Working within these values requires esteeming the client’s perspective and working within a reality that is co-constructed through the helping relationship (Weick, 1994). Therefore, social work practice does not seek to uncover objective truth with clients. Instead, practitioners aim to meet the client where they are and work toward changes envisioned with the clients. Goals and interventions are

not pre-determined; they are a collaboration between the client and social worker based on what is viable given the client's unique circumstances. As a philosophy, constructivism accommodates clients' circumstances rather than seeks to resolve the ambiguity inherent in social work.

Implications

Educators who want to help students manage ambiguity can demonstrate that management in a CLE. Valutis (2015) argues that the management of ambiguity is a necessary skill for effective practice and should be part of social work education. Students need to be able to find and reconcile information from multiple sources, integrate various theories and practice methods, and accept that there is rarely only one solution as they practice social work. A constructivist classroom could provide an environment for students to become comfortable and confident as social workers when faced with the complexities of human beings that rarely, if ever, dictate a one-size-fits-all approach. In a CLE, as students learn to challenge and question dominant frames, and look for additional perspectives, new understanding emerges, and students learn how to work within the ambiguity of human experience.

A constructivist learning environment prioritizes opportunities for students to apply what they are learning and receive feedback in order to grapple with how to work within the uncertainty and contradictions developed as a result of building from prior knowledge and bringing in multiple perspectives. Application and feedback parallel social work practice from both a supervision and client perspective. In a field where there is no black and white, just grey, social workers often rely on each other via supervision and consultation to talk through concerns and challenges and figure out the best course of action with clients. At the same time, in practice, the clients take what we talk about and implement it in their lives. Often then, the social worker

provides them with feedback, and they may make adjustments, try new things, or change what they think.

Flexibility, creativity, and learning from the client are necessary for effective social work practice (Feldman et al., 2009; Samson, 2015; Weick, 1994). Similarly, a CLE requires the instructor to be flexible and creative as they facilitate instead of dictate learning. Students concretize the learning that occurs as they make it explicit and internalize the knowledge they have created. Reflection on learning parallels work with clients in that part of our role as social workers is to reflect on the progress clients make and help them integrate gains made in their work with us into their everyday lives.

When the process of learning is made explicit in the classroom, students recognize the value of their experiences and the expertise they bring to the table, which differs from traditional classrooms that prioritize the teacher's expertise. Students may be able to replicate their experience in a CLE in their practice settings by drawing out clients' expertise, even in settings that traditionally prioritize the professional's knowledge. The goals of constructivist teaching and social work practice are a transformation in which students and clients can integrate their new knowledge and continue to progress on their own, no longer needing the social worker (teacher or practitioner).

Conclusion

How to teach is worth as much attention as *what to teach* as social workers develop their identity as a social work educator. Given the paucity of teacher preparation in many doctoral programs and the number of faculty who teach without any teacher training, my prior unfamiliarity with philosophical terms and inability to connect my beliefs about learning to broader philosophical movements is hardly unique. With the responsibility for learning how to

teach falling on individual social work educators, this article aims to support teachers who are interested in learning more about a constructivist teaching-learning philosophy and developing a classroom environment that is also congruent with social work values and practice.

The literature on constructivism may help some educators who had not previously identified their teaching-learning philosophy, but found their teaching practices congruent with constructivism, name what they have been intuiting so that they can share their approaches more effectively with others. At the same time, learning more about a CLE may help other educators who already identified as constructivist, but struggled to translate their philosophy into their teaching practices, develop ideas for continuing to enhance congruence. Being able to interrogate one's teaching practices, using principles from a CLE, may help educators who strive to model social work through their teaching, continue to refine their practices regardless of their teaching-learning philosophy.

Since flexibility is necessary for social work practitioners, teachers must be able to shift gears, alter plans, and make accommodations based on the unique makeup of each classroom. I encourage constructivist social work educators to assess, develop, and publish teaching practices congruent with a CLE. Research should examine the effectiveness of constructivist methods across social work classrooms, how to overcome student resistance to involvement in directing their learning, and how to effectively and efficiently grade within a CLE.

Teaching from a constructivist paradigm entails maintaining the complexity, ambiguity, and uncertainty inherent in both a CLE and social work practice. Since the features of a constructivist learning environment parallel social work practice, creating a CLE will generate natural opportunities for teachers to model social work skills within the classroom. Students can then transfer skills modeled in the classroom to their social work practice. Additionally, moving

between cognitive and meta-cognitive activities as learners actively construct knowledge and then reflect on their learning, may help prepare students to reflect both *on* and *in* practice. In modeling social work values and a person-in-environment approach to practice, students will experience social work as both the client (student in the classroom) and social worker (intern in their field placement), which will lead to a more comprehensive and coherent understanding of social work practice and development of their identities as social workers.

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Illuminating the Impact of Structure on Teaching

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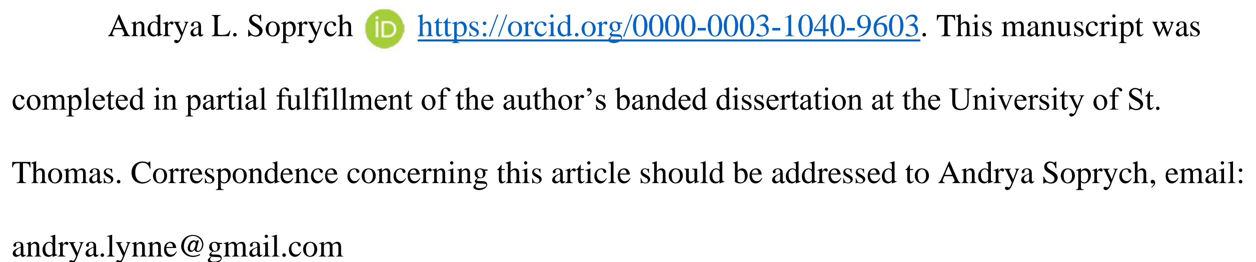

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Abstract

Congruence between philosophy of teaching and learning and teaching practices is an understudied area of social work education research. In higher education classes, course structures explicitly and implicitly convey messages that may or may not be congruent with the teacher’s philosophy about teaching and learning. Following the five foci methodological framework of self-study research, this qualitative study contributes to the scholarship of teaching and learning by examining the impact of the syllabus, assignment descriptions, and lesson outlines on the development of a constructivist learning environment. Undertaken in a social work classroom, this study highlights opportunities to develop course structures that support congruence between teaching philosophy and teaching practices. Six themes emerged: decentering control; treating the learner as an expert; encountering uncertainty; engaging in the process of learning; internalizing learning; and mixed messages. Findings suggest that course structures do impact the development of a constructivist learning environment and that less may be more because too many predefined structures impede the instructor’s ability to decenter control.

Keywords: scholarship of teaching and learning, self-study research, constructivist learning environment, course structure, social work education

Illuminating the Impact of Structure on Teaching

The question, how can I improve, inspired me as a legal aid social worker and now motivates me as a social work educator. I approach teaching as a form of social work practice, and therefore, devote the same attention and rigor to my interaction with students as I do with clients. I chose a teaching focused doctoral program in order to discover tools and build skills to improve my teaching. The program introduced me to various philosophies of teaching and learning, and I discovered that my philosophy is constructivist. For me, that means knowledge is created both individually in connection with our prior knowledge and socially as we are influenced by others and our environments. Knowing is tentative as we continually compare what we know against other sources and diverse perspectives. As I continued to study constructivism, I wondered about the connection between philosophy of teaching and learning and teaching practices, thus beginning my exploration of ways to support a constructivist learning environment.

Grise-Owens et al. (2016) and Wehbi (2009) make a case for more social work educators to engage in critical self-reflection, while identifying the scholarship of teaching and learning as a vehicle through which critical self-reflection can be accomplished. Broadly, they maintain that the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) refers to work that examines educational practice, is open to critique, and is accessible to the scholarly community. As a result, I created a SoTL project using qualitative self-study methodology to examine the congruence between my philosophy of teaching and learning and teaching practice.

This self-study examined the extent to which the way I use structures in my courses create and support a constructivist learning environment. Structures refer to course syllabi, assignment descriptions, and lesson outlines. I begin with a review of the literature to situate the

study within constructivism and at the intersection between philosophy of teaching and learning and teaching practice. I then define self-study research to contextualize the data collection and analysis that follows. Next, I articulate the findings using the themes I identified to better describe how course structures either reflect or fail to reflect my philosophy of teaching and learning. Consistent with self-study methodology (Samaras, 2011), I end with a discussion that considers implications for teaching, student learning, and social work education. The goal of this inquiry was to reveal the impact of unexamined structures on teaching using a constructivist lens, thus discovering opportunities to enhance congruence between my teaching practice and my philosophy of teaching and learning. A secondary goal was to demonstrate the use of self-study research methodology as a viable tool for social work educators interested in SoTL.

Literature Review

This literature review serves two purposes: First, to ground the reader in constructivism as a philosophy of teaching and learning and address the fit between constructivism and social work education. Second, I use the literature to make a case for developing congruence between teaching philosophy and teaching practices, highlighting the importance of considering course structures as part of teaching practices.

Constructivist Teaching and Learning

As a paradigm, constructivism encompasses and values multiple perspectives. One way to conceptualize a constructivist philosophy of teaching and learning is to think of it as seeing through a pair of glasses; each lens with its own, yet overlapping, range of vision. One lens represents social constructivism, most often attributed to Vygotsky and influenced by Freire (Gordon, 2009; Liu & Matthews, 2005; Yilmaz, 2008). From this perspective, knowledge is constructed socially through a process of inquiry that occurs within the specific context of

students' environments (Gordon, 2009; Liu & Matthews, 2005; Vygotsky, 1978). Learners need to engage multiple, even diverging perspectives as they together construct meaning. The other lens represents individual constructivism, most often attributed to Piaget and understood as the creation of knowledge as an internal cognitive process (Liu & Matthews, 2005; von Glaserfeld, 1989; Yilmaz, 2008). Individuals construct knowledge idiosyncratically building from prior experiences (Yilmaz, 2008). Caputo et al. (2015) and Phillips (1995) criticize constructivism as a mask for relativism due in part to this acceptance of multiple perspectives as valid and legitimate. However, instead of being relative, knowing remains *tentative* as learners continually compare what they know against other sources of knowledge and diverse perspectives. It is the continual comparison of knowledge against other sources to develop a more complete and complex understanding that maintains the distinction between treating knowledge as tentative, not relative (Kwan & Wong, 2015).

Looking through the pair of glasses, an image of a constructivist learning environment (CLE) begins to emerge. Students draw on their prior experiences (Alt, 2018; Baviskar et al., 2009; Kwan & Wong, 2015; Taylor et al., 1997) as they engage socially within the learning environment. They wrestle with uncertainty as learners consider diverse perspectives and actively engage with the course content (Baviskar et al., 2009; Kwan & Wong; 2015; Taylor et al., 1997). Individually, students determine how to integrate the knowledge created in the classroom into their personal constructs as they reflect on their learning (Kwan & Wong, 2015; Neuman & Blundo, 2000). The learning environment is supported by an element of shared control (Taylor et al., 1997), whereby, instead of directing students, the teacher facilitates and guides while engaging students to take responsibility for their learning (Alt 2018; Graham, 1997; Neuman & Blundo, 2000).

Multiple authors have made a case that constructivism may be well-suited for social work education (see, e.g., Dean, 1994; Heineman, 1981; Neuman & Blundo, 2000; Nylund & Tilsen, 2006; Weick, 1994). Neuman and Blundo (2000) assert that a constructivist approach to social work education brings it in line with social work's ecological approach to practice. Individual constructivism looks at the individual person and the internal components of knowledge creation, while social constructivism looks at the influence of the environment on meaning-making. Additionally, a constructivist learning environment supports teacher-student relationships that are parallel to social worker-client relationships that allow teachers to model social work behaviors and skills such as empowerment (Nylund & Tilsen, 2006), shared control (Cooper, 2001), and engaging the client/student as experts (Weick, 1994). Teaching from a constructivist philosophy of teaching and learning can enhance congruence between social work as it is practiced and social work as it is taught.

Congruence between Philosophy and Teaching Practice

Throughout the process of discerning my constructivist philosophy of teaching and learning, I asked myself several questions. How does my philosophy show up in my teaching? What barriers prevent me from implementing my philosophy? What can I do to strengthen internal congruence? While there is substantial literature describing the importance of articulating a clear philosophy of teaching and learning (Caukin & Brinthaupt, 2017; Kearns & Sullivan, 2011; Owens et al., 2014), less attention has been paid to how a teaching philosophy impacts teaching practices. A strong connection between philosophy and practice may lead to a well-organized and cohesive learning environment, which is reported to enhance student learning (Çetin-Dindar, Kirbulut, & Boz, 2014). Caukin and Brinthaupt (2017) recommend that educators use a teaching philosophy statement as a tool to reflect on the alignment between their practices

and beliefs. Owens et al. argue that "the instructor must ensure all aspects of the course are designed in accordance with the philosophy" (2014, p. 339) and identify designing and developing a classroom culture as part of implementing a teaching philosophy. Reviewing the social work and general education literature affirmed that the congruence between philosophy of teaching and learning and teaching practices is a valuable and understudied area of research.

According to Terhart (2003), the primary task of the teacher from a constructivist perspective is to set up and maintain the learning environment. Setting up the learning environment begins with the syllabus, which helps to shape class climate (Sulik & Keys, 2014) and includes other course structures such as assignments, class activities, and the physical classroom environment. Limited research exists examining how structure, particularly the syllabus, impacts course management and the learning environment (Fornaciari & Lund Dean, 2014). Hogg and Yates (2013) report that course structure impacts student perceptions of the quality of their learning, and Blinne (2013) identifies the syllabus as a starting point to incorporate the learner's input into course design. Owens et al. (2014) argue that implementing a teaching philosophy in the classroom also requires developing "class tasks, exercises, and assignments" that are congruent with the articulated philosophy (p. 339). Taken together, Owens et al. (2014) and Fornaciari and Lund Dean (2014) point to a need for rigorous and systematic evaluation of the potential impact of structures on teaching, in my case, from a constructivist lens. Therefore, this study sought to better describe how course structures I use reflect or fail to reflect my philosophy of teaching and learning.

The following two purposes guide this inquiry:

1. To describe the extent to which the way I structure a course has changed since discerning my philosophy of teaching and learning.

2. To explore how I can become more intentional in the use of structures to better reflect a constructivist teaching-learning philosophy.

Self-Study Research Method

Constructivist philosophy is not confined to the classroom; it permeates my beliefs about knowing, including knowing created through formal research. Therefore, I sought out research methods that fit within a constructivist paradigm. I chose qualitative research because it views the researcher as the primary instrument and subjectivity is embraced and made transparent instead of trying to be controlled and eliminated (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This approach to subjectivity is congruent with a constructivist lens that believes knowledge cannot be separated from the knower. Furthermore, according to Merriam and Tisdell, "qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (2016, p. 15), which is exactly what I was seeking to explore within my teaching practice. Self-study, as a form of qualitative research, was a good fit because it turns the focus on understanding, construction, and meaning inward as the researcher becomes the subject of the research (Samaras & Freese, 2006).

Since self-study methodology is more common in teacher education than social work, an overview of self-study research follows to provide context for data collection and analysis. Samaras and Freese (2006) define self-study as "teachers' systematic and critical examination of their actions and their context as a path to develop a more consciously driven mode of professional activity" (p. 11). Shifting research from something that is done *to* teachers, self-study is research done *by* teachers (Samaras, 2011; Samaras & Freese, 2006). To enhance quality and promote systematic inquiry, while supporting its recursive nature, self-study research uses a five foci methodological framework. The framework "includes the following components: (a)

personal situated inquiry, (b) critical collaborative inquiry, (c) improved learning, (d) transparent and systematic research process, and (e) knowledge generation and presentation (Samaras, 2011, p. 70). Personal situated inquiry contextualizes the experience of the researcher-subject for research that is personally meaningful. While personal, self-study research is also collaborative. Critical friends are used in self-study research to “provoke new ideas and interpretations, question the researcher’s assumptions, and participate in open, honest, and constructive feedback” (Samaras, 2011, p. 75). It is also collaborative in the sense that it goes back and forth between examining the etic and emic perspectives of the subject. The purpose of self-study research is to improve student learning. Creating a transparent and systematic research process and sharing the research publicly allows others to critique, replicate, and apply the methods in their own classrooms promoting improved learning beyond a single classroom.

Self-study research with its emphasis on reflection, critique, and connection to the scholarly community makes it a good fit for social work educators interested in SoTL work. Self-study research provided a way for me to situate inquiry in my classroom to explore what Whitehead (1989) called a living contradiction, which is a disconnect between beliefs and practice.

Study Context

The study site is a public, research-intensive university in a metropolitan area of the Midwest region of the United States. In higher education classes, there are structural pieces that exist before a teacher with a philosophy comes into the picture. Structures, along with instructor control over structures, differ between universities and often include the length of the course, when, where, and for how long classes will meet, student enrollment, grading and late policies, competencies assessed within the course, and course topics. Structures themselves explicitly and

implicitly convey certain messages that may or may not be congruent with the teacher's philosophy about teaching and learning. I am interested in examining the messages conveyed by course structures.

For the purposes of this study, the structures I examined were course syllabi, assignment descriptions, and lesson outlines. The syllabus was chosen because it is often seen as a contract between the school, teacher, and students (Fornaciari & Lund Dean, 2014). Assignment descriptions convey to students how they will be graded, and thus, expectations around what should be learned. Lesson outlines, while they do not necessarily reflect what took place in the classroom, offer a way to be transparent about how I prepare myself for the process of teaching. To design the study, I used Samaras' (2011) research design planner to encompass the seven key design components she articulated in her work. A limitation of this study design is the exclusion of student voices. While it is a strength for me to be able to reflect on and analyze my etic and emic perspectives through the documents I use in courses, I am unable to report on how my words and actions were interpreted by students.

Data Collection

Data for this study were drawn from existing documents from Master of Social Work courses and did not involve human subjects; therefore, no institutional review board approval was necessary. Using the five foci methodological framework of self-study research as defined by Samaras (2011) to guide a rigorous research process, I collected data from two different courses taught multiple times from Fall 2017 through Fall 2019. One course was taught three consecutive times each fall semester (Course A1, A2, and A3) and the other was taught two times consecutively during the spring semesters (Course B1 and B2). Data collected included syllabi, assignment descriptions, and lesson outlines. To obtain the data, I went through my

electronic files for each course and copied relevant documents to a data collection file renaming them to distinguish from which course, which year, and what type of document they represented (e.g. A1 Syllabus, A2 Lesson Outline Week 1, B2 Assignment 3). I also kept a methodological journal, which I shared and discussed with my critical friend team documenting all decisions made from study design through data analysis including identifying the documents that were both included and excluded during data collection. Most documents were clearly marked by their titles. All documents with the words syllabus, assignment, and lesson outline in the title were automatically included. Other documents were reviewed to see if they were relevant to any of the three categories of data being collected. Documents that were excluded included student rosters, grade sheets, and papers along with course readings and documents shared by faculty partners. For the documents that were included, I addressed authenticity through a critical friend memo answering the questions laid out by Merriam and Tisdell (2016, pp. 176-177) addressing qualities of the documents including history, completeness, and intention.

As I collected documents, I uploaded them to NVivo for analysis. I created an inventory and organized the data, as recommended by Merriam and Tisdell (2016), using both the case and file classification systems in NVivo. Each case represented one year of one course and every file was classified as either syllabus, assignment description, or lesson outline. Using these two organization systems, I was able to view all documents related to one course or all documents of a specific file type. This was useful for allowing different views of the data during the recursive data analysis process. In total, seventy-three documents were collected and analyzed.

Data Analysis

To begin data analysis, I read each document line by line highlighting phrases, using the sentiments feature in NVivo that stood out as defining the learning environment. Focusing on the

material highlighted using the sentiments feature, I then created initial codes inductively following the process outlined in Samaras (2011), supplemented by Merriam and Tisdell (2016). I chose to code inductively using the constant comparative method because I wanted to look broadly at the environment the structures appeared to be supporting, not only look for evidence of a constructivist learning environment. Recognizing obstacles to a constructivist learning environment was as important as identifying how it was supported. While I did not create *a priori* codes, I read a substantial number of research and conceptual articles regarding constructivism and constructivist learning environments going into this study; therefore, I was mindful of my ideas of what supported and impeded a constructivist learning environment as I coded.

I coded the data in two stages to improve consistency. I first coded documents course by course, using NVivo nodes as preliminary codes in order to get a holistic picture of each course. I then went node by node reading everything categorized by each node to examine consistencies and inconsistencies and develop a working definition of each node. I captured node definitions in my methodological journal and discussed the definitions with a critical friend to improve clarity and look for bias. Then, with a working definition of each node, I re-read the documents file type by file type, to compare similar documents and improve consistency in coding. Continuing to use my methodological journal, I organized codes into themes, which I also discussed with a critical friend to strengthen coherence and reduce bias.

I analyzed the presence of themes and connections between themes in two phases. In the first phase, I sought to understand the extent to which the way I structure a course had changed since discerning my philosophy of teaching and learning. Since I began intentionally discerning my philosophy during the Spring of 2018, I compared data from the 2017-2018 academic year

(Courses A1 and B1) to my data from the 2018-2019 and Fall 2019 academic years (Courses A2, B2, and A3). Looking at the presence of themes and connections between them during the two time periods helped create a picture of how the structures began to change as I discerned my philosophy of teaching and learning. In the second phase, I looked at the entire data set to explore how to become more intentional in the use of structures to better reflect a constructivist learning environment. Through reflection, analysis, and discovery I was able to identify ways to improve the structures of my courses to better support a CLE.

One limitation during the first phase was that I had to exclude most of the lesson outlines for the spring course (Course B) because I failed to date these documents and was uncertain whether they were created during the first or second year of data collection or used for both. For some sessions, I also discovered that I revised some lesson outlines and did not save them as separate documents and for other sessions, used the same lesson outline for both years. In consultation with a critical friend, I decided to include Course B lesson outlines in the second phase, discovering how I can continue to improve, because I only needed to be confident they were used in at least one of the two years of data collection.

Findings

Through this self-study I sought to understand the extent to which the structures I use support a constructivist learning environment. I examined the course syllabi, assignment descriptions, and lesson outlines for two courses taught multiple times beginning Fall 2017 through Fall 2019. Interpreting my data through six themes, I first describe the extent to which the way I structure a course has changed since discerning my philosophy of teaching and learning. I then explore how to become more intentional in the use of structures to better reflect a constructivist learning environment.

Impact of Teaching-Learning Philosophy on Course Structures

The first purpose of my inquiry was to describe the extent to which the way I structure a course has changed since discerning my philosophy of teaching and learning. In comparing the syllabi, assignment descriptions, and lesson outlines from the 2017-2018 academic year (Courses A1 and B1) to the syllabi, assignment descriptions, and lesson outlines used during the 2018-2019 and Fall 2019 academic years (Courses A2, B2, and A3), I discovered noticeable differences across the identified themes that emerged: decenter control, learner as expert, encounter uncertainty, engage the process of learning, internalize learning, and mixed messages.

Decenter Control. This first theme addresses power-sharing in the course. It involves including students' voices in defining content and structure and creating a collaborative learning environment. This theme demonstrated the most significant change across the two and a half years from which data were collected. It was virtually absent in the syllabi, assignment descriptions, and outlines for Course A1 and B1. The syllabi for Courses A2, B2, and A3 progressively developed the concept of decentralized control. The syllabus for Course A2 introduced the language that "we all have something important and valuable to contribute to our learning environment." In the syllabus for Course B2, language was included that the course was designed to be an "open forum," an attempt was made to engage students in proposing how they would make up missed class sessions, and student selected readings were introduced, however, they were not defined. The syllabus for Course A3 incorporated and built on those changes. Language was included noting that together we would finalize assignments, student selected readings were defined, and course participation was expanded to include more than just class participation to accommodate different learning styles and individual circumstances. In addition

to changes in the syllabi, assignments in Course A went from four out of five assignments being fully dictated by me to students determining the client and context for all five assignments.

Learner as Expert. This theme encompasses invitations for students to share what they already know about a topic as well as requests for them to use their prior knowledge and experience to participate in a discussion, exercise, or assignment. The focus is on teaching from where the students are, which requires being able to use students' prior experience to inform class sessions and define the context of assignments. The primary change in the demonstration of this theme appeared in the assignments for Course A. Students were progressively asked to use their prior experience to choose a client and setting within which to apply the practice model. It was not until Course A3 that students were regularly asked to share what they already knew about a topic prior to the week's session so I could build from and tailor class time to focus on questions and uncertainties instead of going over what students already knew.

Encounter Uncertainty. The third theme refers to structures that set up the expectation for students to wrestle with course material. It captures exercises where learners were asked to identify gaps in their knowledge, consider conflicting perspectives, and embrace vulnerability in the learning process. The syllabi for the second and third years note a focus on encountering uncertainty, wrestling with course content, and making ourselves vulnerable so we could learn from and with each other. Assignments and lesson outlines rarely reflected a focus on managing uncertainty or cognitive dissonance. One exception was the discussion boards for Course A3, where students were asked to share "one thing that challenges or expands what [they] already know, and one question [they] have" about the topic for the week.

Engage the Process of Learning. This theme embodies an active approach to learning. It refers to applying course content through practice, feedback, and reflection. It focuses on

constructing knowledge through analysis, critique, and discussion. This theme is substantially present across all five courses. Applying content through practice, feedback, and reflection was present in almost every session outline. Application of practice models were the focus of course assignments and the syllabi identified analysis, critique, and discussion of content as the focus of class time. One change over time was a slight increase in the emphasis on feedback – both peer and instructor.

Internalize Learning. Reflecting on and articulating learning that has occurred is the essence of this theme. It includes structures that place students in the role of teacher to share their learning with peers. In the first year within which data were collected, I asked students to reflect on and articulate their learning in a way that was unconnected to the activities surrounding the reflection. In the second and third years within which data were collected, a pattern emerged in session outlines where I connected reflection to application and feedback. Activities in class, for example, would begin with reflection on learning from the readings, move into application of the skill with peers, and then circle back to reflecting on the process and articulating what they learned, thus, engaging students to internalize learning.

Mixed Messages. While the first five themes support a constructivist learning environment, the final theme addresses an impediment to a CLE. Mixed messages reflect instances where one exercise or paragraph undermines or conflicts with another and tends to center on a failure to include student voices in my courses. In early courses, I laid out the structure of the course in the syllabus, assignments in their descriptions, and sessions in their outlines. In some ways, those courses had fewer inconsistencies because I had not and was not trying to articulate and incorporate a philosophy of teaching and learning into my teaching

practices and course structures. In later years, I attempted to use positivist structures to convey a constructivist ideal, which often resulted in more mixed messages than originally existed.

Overall, as described above, there were notable changes in the course structures examined after the Spring of 2018 when I discerned my constructivist philosophy of teaching and learning. At the same time, there were notable areas for improvement and opportunities to further support a constructivist learning environment, which will be described below. Table 1 presents an overview of the six themes identified through this research.

Table 1

Overview of Research Themes

Theme	Description	Examples
Decenter Control	Including students' voices in defining content and structure; creating a collaborative learning environment	• "We each have something important and valuable to contribute to our learning environment" (Syllabi A2, B2, & A3) • "Together as a class, we will finalize the details of each assignment" (Syllabus A3)
Learner as Expert	Teaching from where the students are; using prior experience to inform session focus and define the context of assignments	• Offering multiple ways to participate in the course to accommodate different learning styles and student circumstances (Session 2 Outline A3) • "Using an example from your last internship, describe and work through an ethical dilemma you encountered" (Assignment A2 & A3)
Encounter Uncertainty	Vulnerability to understand self; identifying gaps in knowledge, and considering conflicting perspectives	• "hear and wrestle with varying viewpoints and opinions…Being open to each other's ideas will improve classroom community and help us to grow as social workers" (Syllabi B2 & A3) • "Think of a situation where you do not know how to proceed" (Assignment A2 & A3)
Engage the Process of Learning	Applying content through practice, feedback, and reflection; analyzing, critiquing, and discussing content	• "our focus this year will be diving into the gray and *using* knowledge instead of just accumulating it" (Session 1, Outline A2) • Determine how you would target the attachment domain given the context chosen. Defend your decision. Identify alternative approaches. (Session 4, Outline A3)
Internalize Learning	Reflecting on and articulating learning that has occurred; student as teacher	• "Going forward, how will you integrate this interview (or version of it) into your practice?" (Assignment B1 & B2) • Distribute discussion board questions for students to work together in groups to answer and teach to the class (Session 5, Outline A3)
Mixed Messages	One part of a structure undermining or conflicting with another	• The syllabus in one place talking about including diverse perspectives, yet including few (Syllabi A1 & B1) • Beginning class defining knowing as a process and ending class treating knowing as a product (Session 1, Outline A2)

Improving Congruence between Philosophy and Practice

The second purpose of my inquiry was to explore how to become more intentional in the use of structures to better reflect a constructivist learning environment. Therefore, I looked within course structures to identify strengths I can build upon and obstacles I can work to dismantle to better reflect a CLE. I asked: In what ways can I continue to improve the structure of my teaching to better reflect a constructivist learning environment? Looking at the presence, absence, and location of themes across my data, which are summarized in Table 1, led to areas that need small adjustments and areas needing substantial change.

Decenter Control. Decentering control has proven to be difficult to build into structure. The language used across documents has increasingly sought to articulate a collaborative learning environment; however, including students' voices, particularly in the syllabi has not yet been achieved. In fact, using predefined structures to increase the focus on the themes *Learner as Expert* and *Encounter Uncertainty* in some ways stifled opportunities to share control in Course A3 because the structures were predetermined instead of negotiated with students. Tension remains in assignments where the school and accreditation standards dictate the content upon which students need to be evaluated. Within these confines, there are ways to include students. For example, with one assignment in Course A3, I started with an outline that included the required competencies and engaged students to develop it into a full assignment giving them some control over the form of the final product. I need to explore more creative ways to shift from rigid predetermined structures to something that is more flexible and inclusive of student voices.

Learner as Expert. Weekly discussion board posts related to required readings, which are only present in course A3, are the primary method through which I attempted to teach from

where the students are and treat learners as experts. Scattered through lesson plans in other courses were occasional attempts to inquire about student experiences, but with the exception of Course A3, there was a lack of cohesive effort to teach by building on students' prior knowledge. Additional and more creative methods may accommodate students with different learning strengths and help make stronger connections between students' prior knowledge and course content.

Encounter Uncertainty. Syllabi employed language letting students know that encountering uncertainty was an important vehicle for learning and would be part of the course. Assignments in the second year of both courses required students to self-reflect, and session outlines for both courses and weekly discussion boards for Course A3 focused on eliciting questions from students related to readings. In some sessions, particularly in Course B2, we set up debates between different points of view such as comparing the domestic violence to the child welfare approach to families or comparing harm reduction to abstinence models. One major area of improvement is to work to bring more conflicting perspectives into the classroom through readings, videos, speakers, and other creative avenues.

Engage the Process of Learning. Applying content through practice was prolific throughout my course structures. What was less evident is connecting practice to feedback and reflection and then practicing again. Applying content is one component of engaging in the process of learning. I need to create more opportunities for learners to engage in the full process as they develop social work knowledge and skills. Session outlines can be more intentionally created to have one activity build upon the previous one.

Internalize Learning. The primary way course structures supported internalizing learning is through activities that placed the student in the role of teacher. I have assumed that if

students are able to teach material, they would internalize what they learned. This may be a faulty assumption. One improvement would be to have students actively reflect on what they learned as they prepare to teach to their peers, thus, more actively identifying the learning that has occurred. Another approach is to do short reflections at the end of course topics where students identify the knowledge they've created.

Mixed Messages. Keeping the five pro-CLE themes identified through this research at the forefront as I revise, develop, and dismantle course structures, is the primary way I can work to minimize mixed messages. It will also be beneficial to continually reflect on the impact of structures on the learning environment. I have discovered that increased infusion of one theme into structures can impede another in ways I did not anticipate; therefore, regular reflection will be necessary as I continue to work on supporting a constructivist learning environment.

Discussion

A paradoxical implication of this research is that the more I articulated my philosophy of teaching and learning, the greater possibility there was for mixed messages to students and human error on my part. A constructivist learning environment requires flexibility, space, and acceptance of uncertainty and even human error to thrive. Trying to use course structures of any kind to create a constructivist learning environment appears in some ways to be a contradiction and could potentially suffocate the learning environment. I experienced this suffocation as I taught Course A3. I was so intent in building the elements of a constructivist learning environment into the structure of the course that in execution, I experienced inflexibility where I was trying to establish flexibility. Building structures to engage the components of a constructivist learning environment packed the course full of structures that ironically enough decreased opportunities to share control with students.

Admittedly, I am challenged to consider that less structure may provide more opportunities for learning, even though, it allows for more student involvement in defining what needs to be learned and how to engage in that learning. As Gordon (2009) asserts, removing structure requires teachers to be more competent in both content and teaching methods so that educators can organically turn student questions and ideas into effective learning opportunities. For example, in preparing for a session focused on empathy (in Course A3), I could not decide if I should plan a discussion based on questions students had posed or plan an activity to explore the components of empathy. I decided to let the students choose. When I brought the choice to the class, students identified a third option that I had not considered! Their idea was creative and would accomplish our goals for the session; other students agreed it was the path they would like to take, so I went with the impromptu exercise. Had I not given students the initial choice, it is unlikely that the new idea would have been shared and we would have missed out on what turned out to be a valuable learning experience.

More research on the impact of shared control through student choice in the learning environment is needed, not only to explore the impact of incorporating student voices in the development of courses and curricula (e.g. Boatright, & Allman, 2018; Bovill et al., 2011), but also to examine the utility of employing student choice in the midst of teaching (e.g. Wijnia et al., 2015). More research focused on teacher experiences could explore teacher preparation, execution, and follow up in each of these areas. Research involving student voices can explore how their experiences of choice impact their perceptions of their learning.

This research left me with additional questions worthy of further research. Does asking students to connect old knowledge to new, which I attempted to achieve by placing learners as experts, teach students to treat knowledge as tentative and something to be critically appraised?

Does that in turn open students up to encounter uncertainty and strengthen their ability to work within the ambiguity of social work practice and with people from varying experiences and worldviews? What supports are needed for students to incorporate feedback from the instructor and peers as they learn? Do students gain confidence in their ability to learn and their social work practice when they reflect on their learning? Collaborative self-study methods could be used to further explore student experiences across courses taught by multiple instructors engaged in similar teaching approaches. Participatory action research involving students is a viable method that could be used to help researchers examine what students deem important.

Examining the potential impact of often unexamined structures on teaching from a constructivist lens within my own classroom, has certainly demonstrated the challenges and complexities of supporting a CLE. And, by making my research process and findings public, other social work educators may see themselves in my research or become curious about how to employ course structures to support a constructivist learning environment. In my case, I noticed that when lesson outlines cycled from “learner as expert” and “encounter uncertainty” to “engage the process of learning” and then “reflect on learning,” they flowed in a way that seemed to be building knowledge. Other researchers could explore how these themes fit and interact to support deep learning.

Finally, the methodology of this study also has important implications for social work education. As previously noted, self-study is a relatively new approach to research that has predominantly been carried out in teacher education. Now, it is time for social work educators interested in exploring their classroom as a research site to use this method. Self-study research can be used to simultaneously improve teaching and develop a body of insider research on effective social work educational practices.

Conclusion

This qualitative self-study explored the impact of course structures on the learning environment. It reveals the potential impact of often unexamined course structures on teaching, demonstrating the use of self-study methodology as a viable tool for engaging in the scholarship of teaching and learning. As important as course structures are for helping students grasp what is expected of them, this research shows that in order to support a constructivist learning environment structures need to be as flexible as possible. Teachers need to expect and welcome our own uncertainty and human error as part of the teaching process so that students can genuinely encounter both the complexity and tentative nature of knowledge.

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Activating a Constructivist Teaching-Learning Philosophy

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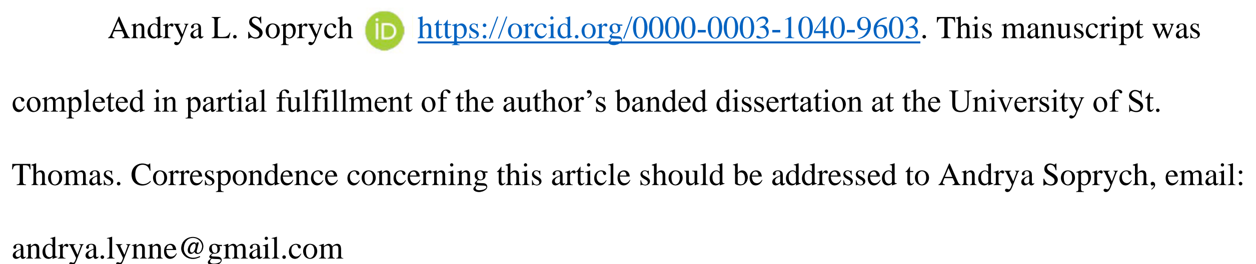

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Abstract

Teaching a first year MSW practice course during my doctoral education, while also discerning my philosophy of teaching and learning, provided opportunity to consider how constructivist philosophy manifested itself in my teaching. I began to see how a teaching-learning philosophy could be a thread sewing together my intentions, practices, and learning goals. Using Grise-Owens et al.'s (2018) guide for an activated teaching-learning philosophy, this evaluation of practice examines the co-creation of an MSW practice assignment as one example of such a philosophy. First, I articulate my constructivist philosophy of teaching and learning. I then describe implementation focusing on three key moments: the decision to co-construct the assignment, the class session spent co-constructing, and the student presentations of their final products. Using the tenets of my teaching philosophy and student reflection papers, I evaluate congruence and effectiveness of this implementation. Finally, I identify ways that this process helped me reactivate my philosophy and suggest implications for other educators wanting to maintain an activated teaching-learning philosophy.

Keywords: teaching-learning philosophy, teaching practices, constructivism, shared control, social work education

Activating a Constructivist Teaching-Learning Philosophy

I was asked to teach a first year Master of Social Work (MSW) practice course focused on families, groups, and communities at a point when I was also discerning my philosophy of teaching and learning in my Doctor of Social Work (DSW) program. Through that discernment, I began to think about how constructivist philosophy manifested itself in my teaching and how to embody said philosophy within the course. Curious about what Grise-Owens et al. (2018) call an activated teaching-learning philosophy, where one's philosophy permeates and informs instruction, I sought opportunities to implement a constructivist philosophy in my teaching. I readily identified the need to develop the details around an assignment described briefly in the syllabus as an opportunity to use constructivist philosophy to direct the creation of the assignment in tandem with students. This evaluation of practice examines the co-creation of the MSW practice assignment as an example of an activated teaching-learning philosophy using Grise-Owens et al.'s (2018) framework.

Activating a philosophy of teaching and learning transforms a teaching statement from a static document and potentially semi-conscious ideas about how teaching and learning occur to a dynamic process that can inform and mold teaching practices (Grise-Owens et al., 2018). Refining my teaching practices to enhance congruence between what I believe about learning and how I teach was important, even before I developed language to understand and discuss it academically. As a novice adjunct instructor, I would tinker with assignments trying to create opportunities for each student to make the material relevant to their prior, current, and future experiences. I designed class exercises to get students moving and finding their own voices for talking about and using social work approaches. I looked for chapters and articles that students could actively read and use as a jumping off point for class discussions. In all my experimenting,

however, I sensed something was missing, as if my teaching was fragmented. I felt like I was falling short in pulling my teaching practices together in a coherent way.

Studying philosophies of teaching and learning created new possibilities. I began to see how a teaching-learning philosophy could be a thread sewing together my intentions, practices, and learning goals. I started looking for ways to intentionally integrate and evaluate constructivist philosophy in my syllabi, assignments, activities, and language. Discovering Grise-Owens et al.'s (2018) practical guide for activating a teaching-learning philosophy provided a useful framework for reflecting on my progress.

Through this evaluation of practice, I use the framework of an activated teaching-learning philosophy to assess one experience implementing constructivist philosophy in my teaching practice. The four main phases of the framework are articulate, implement, evaluate, and reactivate (Grise-Owens et al., 2018). Beginning with articulate, I share my constructivist philosophy of teaching and learning. I then describe one instance of implementation by focusing on three key moments: the decision to co-construct an assignment, the class session spent co-constructing, and the student presentations of their final products. Next, I use the tenets of my teaching philosophy to evaluate the congruence between implementation and articulation. Finally, I describe how this process of articulating, implementing, and evaluating resulted in ways to reactivate my philosophy and suggest implications for other educators wanting to maintain an activated teaching-learning philosophy.

Articulating my Philosophy

The emphasis of this first phase is identifying what educators believe about how learning occurs and how they view their roles as teachers. Connecting core values and educational theory to teaching is common in teacher education, and articulation often culminates in a written

teaching philosophy statement (Caukin & Brinthaupt, 2017; Grise-Owens et al., 2018). What follows is an abbreviated form of my teaching philosophy statement in order to ground the reader in the philosophy I was trying to activate.

My philosophy begins with the presumption that social workers are tasked with being agents of change who think critically and creatively to address deeply engrained, social, economic and environmental justice issues. At the same time, social workers are part of the fabric of society, which perpetuates the very systems of marginalization and oppression that we seek to change. Teaching, as a form of social work practice, is therefore a radical process that attempts to motivate learners to use social work theory, practice, and research to deconstruct their worldviews, integrate their voices into the profession, and construct a more equitable society. The following five tenets organize my constructivist teaching-learning philosophy.

Embrace Ambiguity. Social workers encounter complex human and social problems that rarely, if ever, have simple and singular solutions. As a result, ambiguity permeates social work practice, which can overwhelm students who want to make sure they are doing “the right” thing for clients. Instead of becoming constrained by a singular right approach and mired in the uncertainty of which choice is correct, I normalize the ambiguity and attempt to generate excitement about the opportunities presented to social workers when they embrace ambiguity. I view reality as something constructed through our personal and value-laden lenses; therefore, shifts in perspectives can change the potential solutions available.

Engage Learning. I introduce the current body of social work values, research and practice not as immutable facts, but as a foundation upon which learners can actively engage with their own selves and experiences. Since constructivism views knowing as a process and knowledge as tentative, something that can be refined and revised (Sharma et al., 2005), using

the authority of students as well as teachers can create relationships that transform learners into teachers and vice versa.

Nurture Curiosity. "Be curious" is the mantra of my classroom. Constructivist teaching seeks to engage and appreciate multiple, at times conflicting, perspectives as valid and legitimate instead of seeing knowledge as fixed and objective (Graham, 1997; Yilmaz, 2008). Using curiosity to critique and challenge beliefs, we create a classroom atmosphere of creativity within which students see multiple ways to solve complex problems, develop their construct of social work, and establish their unique identity as a social worker.

Foster Openness. I invite learners (myself included) to be open to learn new things, be wrong, consider creative solutions and undiscovered perspectives, and accept that we can often be part of the problem even though we are simultaneously trying to be part of a solution. Valuing different ways of knowing, I consider the creation of knowledge both an individual and a social process. The balance between the individual and the social occurs as students open themselves up to draw on prior experiences, treat knowledge as tentative, and continually compare what they know against other sources while sharing and hearing diverse perspectives.

Tolerate Discomfort. Engaging learners in de-constructing personal and dominant perceptions of reality and what is considered "normal," is an uncomfortable process. By openly modeling my own uncertainty and discomfort with ambiguity, I encourage students to do the same. Together, we are intentionally uncomfortable as we critique conventional understanding and look for new ways of seeing, experiencing, and knowing.

Sharing my teaching-learning philosophy in each class with students and colleagues holds me accountable (Beatty et al., 2009), while also providing an important bridge between articulation and implementation.

Implementing my Philosophy

In the syllabus the college provided for a first-year graduate-level practice course, there was a paragraph defining an assignment intended to assess students' ability to engage in a task group and conduct a community assessment. I did not have the assignment outline or rubric to accompany the short description in the syllabus, and thus needed to build it out. Grappling with various ways to construct the assignment, I noticed that my focus was on what I wanted students to *do* while they completed the assignment more so than what they should *turn in* for a grade.

The Decision to Co-Construct an Assignment. Having implored students to be less grade-focused and more process-focused without much success in previous courses, I wanted to try an alternative approach. I needed to emphasize the process dimension differently. In teaching prior courses, I used detailed outlines of assignments while simultaneously trying to convince students that engaging in the work itself would lead to a competent and coherent final product even if that strayed from the outline I provided. I began to see a contradiction in telling students exactly what to do while also encouraging them to immerse themselves in the assignment. Perhaps students found it easier to follow the assignment description point by point rather than creatively engage in the social work being assessed? Multiple authors (e.g. Feldman et al., 2009; Graham, 1997; Neuman & Blundo, 2000) describe a collaborative relationship between teacher and students and support joint development of assignments and other course structures in a constructivist learning environment and I was intrigued at the possibility of trying something new.

The conscious purpose behind co-constructing an assignment with learners was to decenter control and draw students into the teaching and learning process, since ultimate authority over assignments and most other aspects of the course traditionally rests with the

instructor. From a constructivist perspective, the teacher's perspective is *a* source of knowledge, not *the* source of knowledge, and if students are to be active learners who take responsibility for their learning, the instructor needs to share control of the learning environment (Taylor, Fraser, & Fisher, 1997). Therefore, shifting this assignment from teacher-constructed to one that was co-constructed with students seemed to be a good opportunity to implement my teaching-learning philosophy.

The Class Session Spent Co-Constructing the Assignment. After explaining my constructivist philosophy and describing the dual purposes of the assignment, I invited students to become active participants in co-creating the assignment. I separated the conversation into two parts, first creating the community assessment piece and secondly defining the task group work. Knowing this was potentially the first-time students were engaged in co-constructing an assignment, as well as their first attempt at completing a community assessment, I wanted learners to have space to share partial ideas and build off each other in a low risk environment. I also wanted to create a smaller community where students who may not speak in the large group could provide input that would help shape their group's ideas, which ultimately could be shared with the whole class. Therefore, student discussions began in groups of four to five and we moved between small group and whole class conversations as we defined the project.

Through the back and forth between small and large group discussion, I saw that students heard my emphasis on process and were capitalizing on the opportunity to discuss not only *what* they needed to do to conduct a community assessment, but also *how* to do so in a socially just way. Conversations that began timidly, became animated and passionate. Groups critically examined ideas including exploitation, respecting the diversity of a community, entering a community as an outsider, and ethics of community assessment and intervention. Thus, while

determining the parameters of the assignment, we also engaged with critical content about community assessments.

Although the original purpose of the assignment was community assessments, in contemplating how to conduct the assessment in a socially just way, learners agreed that an engagement component was needed. Several students voiced strongly that their learning should occur outside historically hegemonic actions of the academy. Acknowledging a history of exploitation, where assessment and research was done *on* rather than *with* marginalized communities (Hacker, 2013), learners devised an engagement component so that each group would give back to the community on an equal or greater scale than what they received conducting the assessment.

Through the process of defining the assignment, students spent significantly more time determining the *process* of community assessment than on the *product* they would turn in for a grade. Calling attention to how students spent their time creating the assignment, I was able to reinforce that engaging in the community assessment would also require more time than developing the class presentation, which is what learners determined would be the graded product.

Once we agreed on expectations for community assessment and engagement, we shifted to expectations (process) and assessment (product) for the task group dimension of the assignment. I purposefully had students remain in the same small groups from the beginning of co-creating the assignment through completion of the project so that learners could begin engaging as a task group and collectively define how successful groups operated along with what would be expected of them as a team. I invited students to share past groupwork experience, to negotiate roles, and share both their strengths and challenges in doing groupwork within their

small groups. In this way, students were attending to engagement and group dynamics, part of the process of task group work (Hulse-Killacky et al., 2001), while also defining the project.

When I brought the class together, teams identified major group processes that were most important and ideas for how to demonstrate these in a product that could be graded. Recognizing groupwork as more intentional and complex than they had previously treated it, some students reflected on how the experience forced them to work together as a whole unit. Learners decided to complete a group paper to define each member's role and overall group functioning connected to related task group literature. They also included individual reflections grounded in literature on group processes. Students primarily used required and recommended literature from the syllabus to frame their reflections. Once we completed the process of defining the processes and products for the project, I shared a written assignment description, allowing students time for revisions and clarification during the next class session.

Student Presentations of their Final Products. The last class of the semester was reserved for group presentations of their community assessments and included how groups engaged their communities. Groups had engaged with five substantially different neighborhoods for various reasons. One neighborhood was chosen because of the diverse population and a current increase in the homeless population. Another group chose a southside predominantly Black neighborhood that sparked their interest due to its rich history and culture while also being a neighborhood none of the group members had any experience in. Two groups chose communities where team members had internships because they wanted to learn more about the neighborhoods they were working in through the eyes of the residents. Two groups chose predominantly Latinx neighborhoods where group members had close ties because they wanted

to have control over the narrative of communities they considered their own. For all groups, the decision of which neighborhood to engage was collaborative and deliberate.

Engagement methods were as varied as the neighborhoods being assessed. Some students interviewed community members and community service program leaders. Some students provided services through a community organization while others participated in community alternative policing meetings. One student reflected on learning about how communities advocate for themselves through the community alternative policing meeting. Community leaders were brought together through a potluck dinner and students participated in community service through an active neighborhood association. Another group worked with adolescent community members to discover and share how the youth viewed their community and its needs via a photography project, thus, integrating assessment with engagement.

The group that chose a neighborhood without any preexisting connections learned a hard lesson in the difficulty of developing relationships in communities as outsiders. Students spent the entire project time (eight weeks) trying to access community leaders and attend community meetings; however, they were unable to make any direct connections. Students learned about the neighborhood through informal observation, eating at a neighborhood restaurant, and reading about the community's history and current events. Ultimately presenting on their attempts, failures, and ideas for how to engage in relationship building, was as valuable as the groups that had rich conversations with community members.

Evaluating Congruence and Effectiveness

The evaluation phase of Grise-Owens et al.'s (2018) framework assesses the implementation of one's teaching-learning philosophy across two dimensions: congruence and effectiveness. To assess the congruence between articulation and implementation, I looked at

how I saw evidence of the five tenets of my teaching philosophy in co-creating the assignment. To evaluate the effectiveness of implementation, I reflected on what I saw of students' experiences that spoke to how they had experienced the five tenets of my teaching philosophy during the project.

Embrace Ambiguity. The project was a microcosm of the ambiguity permeating social work practice. Each group engaged and assessed their community from different perspectives and used different approaches. They also all operated somewhat differently as task groups. I wanted learners to recognize that they were experiencing only one of many ways to approach their practice and be contented knowing they chose one of several viable options. During the class session where we co-constructed the project, I could see both excitement and dread surrounding the flexibility in defining the project and the ambiguity of the final outline. For some, the experience was positive and helped learners experience their authentic selves. Others struggled with the ambiguity. Some students who were initially skeptical, came to appreciate it by the end of the semester. My assessment is that co-constructing the project was valuable in helping most students develop, at a minimum, more tolerance for ambiguity. For a few, they were able to perceive the opportunities present in the ambiguity as they experienced freedom to explore multiple interpretations and ways of seeing and doing social work practice.

I also reflected on the extent to which my behavior modeled this tenet. Modeling how to embrace ambiguity was hopefully evident in how I relinquished both real and imagined control of the project. Not having taught this section previously and not working from an outline or rubric, made it easier for me to remain genuinely uncertain about the outcome of co-creating the project. It would have been more difficult to let go of a project that I liked in order to construct it

alongside students. Even so, I did model acceptance of not knowing where we would end as we worked through the process.

Engage Learning. Course content about community assessment and task group work was the foundation upon which learners actively engaged to analyze, construct meaning, and apply themselves to community social work practice and task groups. Students wrestled with what community assessment is and how to conduct it within the constraints of the semester. They also refined and revised their understanding of authentic and ethical practice as they decided to use social work values as a guiding frame for the project. Students critically reflected on their texts and prior experiences when they merged their understanding of group work with course content defining task groups.

One of the emphases of engagement in my teaching-learning philosophy is that teachers and students become learners co-constructing meaning together. Making this tenet explicit in the classroom was one of the driving forces behind my decision to co-construct the assignment. I believed that developing the assignment in tandem with students would give them ownership and a sense of responsibility they may not have had if I dictated the assignment to them. Students responded positively to the opportunity to take responsibility of their learning and appreciated the experience of groupwork where every student was bought into the process and assignment. An aim of the co-construction was to create buy-in, and the quality of the final products exceeded my expectations.

Nurture Curiosity. By co-constructing the project, I challenged students to be curious about what made assignments meaningful and how to connect process to product in a way that supported learners from beginning to end. I demonstrated curiosity myself by asking questions that stimulated student thinking and drew out different perspectives. Reflecting on those

moments in class, I wonder now whether students actually experienced me drawing out and valuing multiple perspectives, or if instead, as Brookfield (2017) articulates, "behind my language of facilitation or encouragement to students [was] a clear exercise of institutional power" (p. 74). Were students free to share ideas or were they watching me closely, looking for signs that pointed them toward what I wanted or expected? Since this was my first time using this type of assignment and the first time constructing it in tandem with students, I did not have a preconceived idea of the outcome. Still, whether due to my actions or how students filtered my actions through the screen of their conditioning as students, it is hard to say how students actually experienced co-creating the project.

Final reflections from students suggest they approached the project with curiosity and experienced significant learning as a result. Describing their groupwork experience, students wrote about the challenges and complexities they discovered in groupwork as a result of the assignments emphasis on making groupwork processes explicit. Several students made comments around learning about the exercise of power within community work realizing the need to gain approval of the community and learning how to balance engagement so that the power remains with community members.

Foster Openness. Students articulated eight values to ground their work for this project; one of the eight was "take a position of not-knowing." I aided in selecting that specific language, but the idea it represented of humility, the community as expert, and being open to learn and receive instead of being the authority who dictates, came from students. We also discussed being open to process. One student who acknowledged struggling with the ambiguity of co-constructing the assignment shared that an emphasis on the process rather than the end product was a clear goal for the assignment. I told students that following the process of group work and

community engagement would lead them to a strong product, even if it led them in a direction they did not anticipate.

One group approached me less than a month before the final presentations thinking they needed to change neighborhoods because they had not been able to make any substantial community connections. As they shared their experience thus far, it seemed clear that the group had put in a substantial amount of work and had learned lessons different from their peers. Neither I, nor students, expected to discover a perspective of what not to do in community work, but here it was! Instead of supporting the group in changing neighborhoods, I encouraged them to adjust their presentation to account for this unanticipated perspective. Although hesitant at first, students embraced this new direction, and even though their presentation differed from their peers, it still met all the requirements of the assignment.

Tolerate Discomfort. As a good friend and colleague pointed out to me, teachers constantly ask students to be uncomfortable. We have them do role plays, ask them to share their self-reflection, and engage in myriad other uncomfortable activities. What is unusual is for teachers to model discomfort and share it with fellow educators or students (K. Lambert, personal communication, December 29, 2019). Co-creating the assignment, while uncomfortable for some students, was clearly uncomfortable for me. I was self-conscious. I worried students would see me as incompetent and unprepared. This was my first attempt at co-constructing an assignment. Would I do it correctly? What does "correctly" even mean? Would they see that I was a novice and discount the value of the exercise? I pushed through my discomfort knowing co-creating the assignment was intentional and it fit with my postmodern orientation to how learning occurs and how knowledge is created.

I do not recall a moment when my discomfort disappeared. Throughout the semester as students worked on their projects, my discomfort gradually morphed into concern about how groups were doing and whether I had given up too much control. It was not until the final day of class when groups presented their work that I was able to quiet the voice challenging my decision to stray from the norm and co-construct the assignment. Student reflections shared pride in their sense of accomplishment and gratitude in having the opportunity to participate in the project. Student reflections helped reinforce what I saw through the presentations, which was that the project fostered significant student learning. The success of the project has increased my confidence as I continue to look for opportunities to infuse constructivist ideas into my classroom.

Reactivating my Philosophy

The reactivation phase highlights that an activated philosophy is an iterative and dynamic process rather than a static outcome (Grise-Owens et al., 2018). Maintaining an activated teaching-learning philosophy requires continual reactivation in order to put into action what was learned during the previous three phases to create a continually activated cycle. Reactivation is the bridge between one cycle and the next making it one of the most important aspects of an activated philosophy.

This teaching narrative as a whole, is both a product of reactivation and a part of the process. It is an end and a beginning. As a product it contributes to the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) because it examines my educational practice, is open to critique, and is available to the scholarly community (Hutchings, Huber, & Ciccone, 2011). As an end, it represents the culmination of my evaluation of a singular instance of activating my teaching-learning philosophy. As a beginning, it demonstrates both the potential richness in co-creating

assignments with students and the usefulness of Grise-Owens et al.'s (2018) framework as a guide to improve congruence between my teaching-learning philosophy and teaching practice.

This evaluation demonstrates the process of reactivation because it reflects my attempts to develop congruence between my beliefs and practice and improve my skills as an educator. Evaluating this instance of implementing my teaching-learning philosophy through co-creating an assignment led to new ideas and refinement of current strategies, which I then used to reactivate my philosophy through further articulation, implementation, and reevaluation. In that way, this evaluation represents the beginning of the next cycles of activation.

Reactivation began by first articulating and making my constructivist teaching-learning philosophy public. In addition to making it public through this narrative, I have also started to post my philosophy of teaching and learning statement within the learning management system of courses and discuss highlights with students on the first day of class. I had sporadically shared pieces of my teaching-learning philosophy in prior classes, but this was my first attempt to share it fully and intentionally. Students seemed to respond well to hearing my beliefs about learning and appreciated having an orientation to the "why" underlying my expectations about course participation. Moving into new cycles of reactivation, I will continue to seek feedback from students around the extent to which I embody my beliefs in the classroom.

One insight gained during this process is that my decision to co-create an assignment was really about sharing control. I wanted to engage students in the learning process so that they would take responsibility for, and ownership over, their learning. I have continued to reactivate my teaching-learning philosophy through other experiments with sharing control. In two classes, I collaborated with students to define course participation and then turned control over tracking and scoring participation to each student individually. I also created space in the required reading

list for three courses so that students could choose their own reading to expand their knowledge of specific course topics in a way that was relevant and meaningful to each learner. Through these experiments, I have learned that the process of co-creating with students is critical for enhancing student participation and learning. I have tried to implement successful ideas from previous classes only to have them fail miserably; I suspect because the collaborative development process was missing.

An emphasis on the process of learning and multiple ways of practicing social work stood out in the evaluation phase and is another area I found important to reactivate. I have continued to explicitly build process into assignments and ask for student input to structure final products that will not impede their attention to the process. The graded product from assignments has often been a traditional paper. While students are still able to submit papers, I have revised assignment descriptions so that other formats are equally acceptable. Few students have taken advantage of this option on their own, but with my encouragement a couple have identified and begun to use alternative formats. In several instances, I asked students to orally answer the questions for an assignment so that their grade reflected their content knowledge instead of their written English language knowledge. These students were able to improve their writing skills throughout the semester separate from graded assignments and I saw significant growth. With another student, I asked them to visually map out their answers. Instead of a linear paper, what they turned in was a creative application of the requisite content. I have learned that for some students, simple shifts to the product allowed them to engage more freely with the course concepts and effectively demonstrate their learning.

Conclusion

I have reflected on having an activated teaching-learning philosophy through the lens of one discrete assignment. Through that singular experience, I defined a few of the ways I have reactivated my teaching-learning philosophy. The more I maintain an activated teaching-learning philosophy using an integrated framework for articulating, implementing, evaluating, and reactivating, I sense greater congruence between my philosophy and practice.

Congruence between teaching-learning philosophy and teaching practices leads to a well-organized and cohesive learning environment, which according to Çetin-Dindar et al. (2014) increases student engagement and achievement. Thus, regardless of one's teaching-learning philosophy, attending to the alignment between teaching practices and philosophy is a worthwhile endeavor. Grise-Owens et al.'s (2018) framework provides a useful process for educators of any philosophical orientation with its focus on assessing congruence and teaching effectiveness. Finally, this framework supports continuous improvement of teaching practices through an ongoing process of reactivation.

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