

The Call to Teach

Philosophy, Process, and Pragmatics
of Social Work Education

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Contents

Dedication.....	vi
Preface.....	vii
Acknowledgments.....	xv
1. The Call to Teach.....	1
2. Pioneering Perspectives.....	9
3. The Teacher: Model, Mentor, and Mirror.....	23
4. The Competency Imperative: Compliments and Cautions.....	35
5. Setting and Reaching Goals.....	47
6. Styles of Adult Learning.....	61
7. The Essentials: Relationship and Reflection.....	77
8. Strategic Planning: Lesson Organization and Delivery.....	91
9. Distilling Methods for Instruction.....	103
10. Tweaking Critical Thinking.....	125
11. Beyond Making the Grade: Student Assessment.....	137
12. Teacher Evaluation: A Delicate Balance.....	145
13. Ethical Priorities: Intersecting Educational and Professional Mandates.....	155
14. Metaphors of Teaching.....	163
Epilogue.....	177
Index.....	181

Preface

Reaffirming the Centrality of Teaching

*Experience is the child of thought and thought is the child of action.
We cannot learn men from books. (Benjamin Disraeli, 1838,
Maiden speech to House of Commons, 1837)*

Teaching is the highest form of understanding. (Aristotle)

Perhaps we may not be able to “learn men from books,” but we can learn about people from personal presence, the impact of interaction, and the influence of reflection, which are the basic premises of this book.

This book proclaims the centrality of teaching. It advocates for valuing teaching, respecting it, seeing it as a professional activity meriting special status, resources, and acknowledgment. It advances the idea that teaching is a scholarly endeavor, a form of professional practice.

The Call to Teach: Philosophy, Process, and Pragmatics of Social Work Education focuses on improving the quality of teaching. It concentrates on the development of practical strategies as well as the refinement of existing ones. It addresses the task of your teaching in a manner that integrates conceptual knowledge, which involves rational awareness and analytical thinking, combined with actual experiential processes. It aims to boost confidence and improve expertise in the conveyance and assimilation of social work knowledge, values, and skills.

No one approach is perfect for all teaching, and I invite you to consider a repertoire of approaches. This book is directed at identifying which ones apply for which specific purpose, determining how to adapt them for particular situations and students, and then developing guidelines for incorporating and using them differentially. Integrating theory, personal style and experience, and student readiness are highlighted with particular emphasis on translating your field of study into competency outcomes.

Issues Abound

Teaching is the substantive business of academe. It is often viewed, however, as an expectable given, a routine function, an intrusion to be tolerated rather than an attribute to be cultivated. National reports suggest that most university faculty have largely been trained and

then hired as subject matter experts in their disciplines and that few have received any form of preparation for teaching. This pattern has also come to characterize the employment of social work faculty.

Institutional contexts incalculably influence the emphasis on research and teaching. The criteria for promotion and tenure in university settings and teaching-oriented colleges may differ; however, in both circumstances, you need to concentrate your attention on preparing students to enter their fields of practice, whether direct, community, policy, research, and so forth, ready to function in a knowledgeable and pragmatic manner.

Especially in a practice profession such as social work, the process of teaching and the content are reciprocals. Strain arises when instructors know much about content but little about the process of conveying it. Although good teaching requires command of the discipline, in education for social work it also requires

- an understanding of how people learn,
- reflection and reflection in action (Schön, 1987),
- artful and imaginative presentation,
- the ability to establish an environment conducive to learning, and
- an emphasis on competent *doing*.

There is little preparation for teaching before one enters the academy. Once new faculty are appointed to a position, moreover, it is unusual for them to hear of or attend meetings or seminars devoted to a discussion of teaching methods, sharing classroom events, or any reflection on teaching theory, practice, or research. Teaching seems to be beside the point. New faculty most often learn to teach the hard way, that is, either by circumstance or by necessity. As a result, they may proceed unaware either of how they teach or their effect on student learning. This state of affairs occurs at the surface level of recognizing and identifying *what* they do in the classroom; it occurs as well at the philosophical level of considering *why* they do what they do.

Although some professional and educational literature focuses on teaching courses in doctoral programs (Austin, 2002; Boud, 1994; DeCesare, 2003; Gibelman & Fast, 2001; Kroot, Jackson-White, & Kurtz, 2002), it is limited. Even less is written about faculty development programs to enhance teaching. The assumption seems to be that a background as a practitioner or graduate student automatically translates into effectiveness as a teacher. No formal preparation in the basic concepts and methods of instruction is deemed necessary. This book concentrates on an array of the principles, processes, and pragmatics inherent in teaching. It resembles two classics in the area of higher education, Banner and Cannon's (1997) *The Elements of Teaching* and McKeachie and Svinicki's (2011) *Teaching Tips*.

Long-Standing Educational Issues

Certain issues, posed as questions, that are not directly confronted but are implicitly addressed in this book have prevailed over a large expanse of time in the professional educational sphere. Should education be university or field based or both? Is the focus academic—theoretically and empirically oriented or functional—serviceable, and performance based? Is priority given to commitment to agency employment in the public sector, or is it inclusive of private practice? Is preparation geared toward generalized or specialized practice? What takes precedence, policy or practice? Do courses emphasize

community or individuals? What degree is vital at what level of employment: bachelor's, master's, doctorate? What is requisite for ongoing schooling and entry-level practice: a background in the social services, a liberal arts or social science degree? What constitutes the best curriculum: required courses, electives, a blend of both? Who makes that determination?

Even more far-reaching questions pertain to social work itself. Is social work a profession? What makes it so or not? Does it make a difference whether it is? Was social work a profession before the advent of advanced education? Is there a body of knowledge that is distinctively social work? What constitutes the basis of professional education or training? Is social work a hybrid? If so, what is the implication?

Students Seek Excellence in Teaching

It is probably true that social work students, as many students pursuing higher education, by and large seek admission to institutions having the best reputations, the ones with the most prominent faculty, with outstanding research credentials, and those profiled and ranked high in the popular press. Attending these institutions, however, guarantees neither the best education nor, certainly, the best teaching. Continuing and increasing emphasis is placed by institutions of higher learning on research over teaching, demanding that faculty members publish to become recognized authorities in circumscribed and specialized discipline areas. Research becomes paramount, because it enhances a school's reputation. This emphasis on research over teaching is further fostered by the fact that aspiring professors receive few if any incentives to advance their teaching skills. Teaching becomes instead a distraction from the substantive endeavor of knowledge development, and thereby possibly an also-ran. Financial incentives play a large role in fostering this circumstance because research grants produce income and status. Excellence in teaching enjoys no commensurate tangible gain. Likewise, although teaching is cited as a requirement for reappointment, promotion, and tenure, it is frequently viewed as an add-on.

A cyclical pattern often emerges. New faculty members are often hired, regardless of preparatory grounding in teaching, to conduct research and publish, thereby adding to the prestige and income of the school. Furthermore, professors communicate with their peers in publications and professional meetings using technical lingo, which is considerably different from the language required to reach students.

In the starkest terms, the question becomes: Why isn't equivalent attention given to teaching as is given to research in academic life? This means not promoting the conception of a two-tiered faculty but working toward a culture of teaching scholars, based on the ideas that effective teachers also need to be productive researchers.

A Personal Reflection

There are a number of ways to begin a book, a chapter, or a lesson. For example, you can cite relevant theoretical or research literature, tell an amusing anecdote, open with a provocative statement, or use a PowerPoint presentation. Although all are relatively effective, I'll do none of these. Rather, I begin with two other methods, opening with relevant quotations (which you'll find at the beginning of this preface and each chapter) and with a personal story.

Originally, my curiosity about what makes people tick led me to social work. I eagerly perused whatever literature existed pertinent to the problems, disorders, and diagnoses I worked with in direct practice. Eventually, as I began to teach as well, I undertook single-

subject designs, evaluations of intervention strategies, heuristic examinations of suicide and rape, and assessments of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders'* aptness of diagnostic categories. These mostly qualitative studies have not only amplified and improved my teaching and practice, but they have enabled me to contribute to the literature base through publication in both arenas.

The core of my approach as an educator, practitioner, and researcher differs decidedly from the dominant orthodox paradigms in each of these arenas. It necessarily includes the rational and conceptual, yet moves beyond these to incorporate the artistic and creative. I endeavor to link the scholarly, ethical, and humanistic into a well-rounded application in each. Seriously and conscientiously, I attempt to fuse the abstract with the pragmatic, to meld, as it were, the head and the heart. Doing so allows access to deep experience in very meaningful ways. It impels students toward critical thinking as it fosters an appreciation of the complexities and uncertainties, indeed, the wonder, of social work practice.

I know about logic, conceptual frameworks, supporting arguments, literature reviews—a strictly left-brain approach. I believe it's an important endeavor to focus as well on the intuitive subjective attributes of practice, teaching, and research to include a right-brain approach. Being a professional social work educator, practitioner, or researcher is not a purely intellectual endeavor. It is an *art*. I say art because between artists and their material lies a unique and special connection, just as there is between scientists and their subjects. Science and art are not dichotomous; they are complementary. Both move away from the sensory to the realms of the theoretical and abstract in the pursuit of truth. Both are enterprises of discovery, as one begins with observation, relies on similar forms of metaphor and analogy, goes beyond nature, endeavors to rise above the literal, translates data into higher orders of conceptualization, plumbs into deeper levels of significance, locates patterns and themes, deciphers underlying meaning, and seeks general truths.

And so, for example, I employ art in the form of literature even in scientifically based classes. For example, *The Little Prince* (Saint-Exupéry, 1943). is required reading for a doctoral course I teach, the Philosophy of Science. At first glance it seems to be a bizarre choice in a research program. Yet, when dissecting the book in a unit devoted to measurement, students immediately grasp its intent. Can all things be measured? What distinguishes quantitative from qualitative research? Is there only one true scientific approach? Does the heart know what the head can't? Are methods derived from the physical sciences appropriate in the social work research? In this course, steeped in Thomas Kuhn and Karl Popper, students are also required to read *The Alienist* (Carr, 1994). This novel captures, in a distinctive, fascinating, and remarkably memorable way, the course's major questions addressing strongly held preconceptions about science. These include the roles of objectivity, subjectivity, value freeness, and bias control as well as the influence of politics, culture, religion, power, gender.

Toward Conceptualization and Competency: The Distinctive Purpose of Social Work Teaching

I conscientiously ask bachelor's, master's, and doctoral students to rise above mere recapitulation of the obvious. I attempt to challenge them to reach for increased elucidation of the obscure, for more exposition of the unknown. The nature of teaching, practice, and research shifts from the act of realistic representation. Each and every practice and research course

attempts to challenge students to transcend surface and appearance, to seize the big idea, to intercept underlying quality, discern key motifs to synthesize beyond concrete experience and specific occurrences, to reduce a welter of diverse phenomena into identifiable regularities and themes. To question everything, to ask always, what does it mean? What is the essence?

Perspective plays a vital role in understanding ourselves as practitioners, teachers, and researchers. We all need to step outside of ourselves, even laugh at ourselves, as we examine and evaluate our attitudes, philosophies, and personal values. Of course, self-examination is never complete. Every time we discern something new about theory, learning, students, clients, about ourselves, doors fling open for new intriguing discoveries. Reflection, therefore, and introspection play an integral role in the teaching endeavor.

A Framework for Social Work Teaching: An Integrative Approach

Especially in a practice profession such as ours, the process of teaching and the content of the subject matter should go hand in hand. Command of the discipline, knowledge, values, and skill is essential. Teaching, however, also requires relationship building, knowledge of adult learning, and creating an environment conducive to learning. It also entails refinement of technique based on knowledge of learning and teaching styles, artful and effective delivery, and modeling of exemplary practice processes. In my opinion, teaching is itself a form of social work practice. Strain arises when teachers are experts in the knowledge base of their field but know little about how to convey it.

All the chapters in *The Call to Teach* combine conceptual and empirical backgrounds but emphasize the interconnectedness between knowledge and andrological methods that promote competence enhancement, methods that lend themselves to interaction and lived experience and transformative competencies and skills relevant to ongoing work with clients. Beyond addressing competencies for students to develop based on evidence-based and practice wisdom, it addresses demonstrable competencies as they apply to the activity of teaching itself. Although it is essential to attend to how students learn, their strengths, and command of skills, it is equally important to consider the strengths, skills, and diverse approaches of the educator. We teach the importance of evidence-based practice yet fail in a large way to examine the foundations of our teaching. Although it is important to demonstrate that our students learn, it is equally important to require the professoriate to demonstrate its competence.

An essential component of social work education is the relational and reflective foundation of the endeavor. It provides the context and model for professional helping. As Edwards and Richards (2002) aver, and as I have emphasized elsewhere (Fox, 2011), mutual engagement, rapport, and empowerment are pivotal in the teacher-student relationship.

An Invitation to Discovery

We are deeply immersed in a teaching mentality that slips into the background unnoticed and yet is presupposed to what we do in the classroom or in the field—expounding upon content. This book invites you, whether a veteran or novice, full-time or adjunct, university or college, classroom or field teacher, to challenge the existing order. We tend to see the world as we are trained to see it and resist contrary explanations and options. That is what makes innovation unwelcome and discovery difficult. We rely reflexively and heavily on certain generalizations in an effort to deal with our own anxieties and lack of familiarity with teaching. These then

unquestioned generalizations frequently govern and define what we consider to be acceptable teaching practice. Kuhn (1970) refers to the extent to which we become committed to accepted methodologies and explanations, which he identifies as paradigms. He asserts how difficult it is for them to be questioned even when facing anomalous information.

Endeavor to free yourself from automatically and perhaps unthinkingly accepting and implementing rigid and fixed paradigms. Keep your options and ideas open to generate fresh approaches, alternatives to established and ingrained ways of teaching. This implies a basic respect for diversity through acknowledging that many different perspectives are possible. There are many ways to achieve desirable outcomes. Question what you do, question the certainties you may cherish. All significant inquiry begins and ends in questioning. Keep an open mind to some unorthodox ideas this book proposes.

The Book's Genesis and Its Organization

The impetus for this book arises largely from feedback from faculty of various schools where I have conducted seminars in teaching methodology. As a result of this feedback, six overarching themes are advanced especially as they influence teaching in social work: the foundation of relationship and reflection; the pivotal place of competence building; the intersection of science and art, evidence-based practice, and experiential wisdom in advancing effective instruction; lesson design; andragogy and learning types; and assessment and evaluation of student as well as teacher performance.

Each chapter opens with a relevant quote and concludes with a metaphoric summary titled "Food for Thought."

The Self of the Teacher

Teaching for the profession involves a deliberate, conscious, and disciplined use of self. Your self is the medium of connection—what happens between you and students creates the groundwork for learning and meaning making. The essential constituent of all professional encounters is self, which is composed of personality, knowledge, values, skills, and culture.

Optimal teachers display strengths in rational systemization and in empathy. This allows them to render precise assessment and effective intervention as they make students feel heard, understood, and cared about. *The Call to Teach* posits that the rudiments of the professional encounter rely on conditions that encourage mutuality, engagement, and active problem solving.

As a former director of fieldwork and a former adjunct professor, I recognize the significance of such elements in the teaching function of field instructors and adjunct instructors. They constitute a vital role in preparing students to integrate the personal, professional, and practical dimensions of social work practice. This book offers solid proposals for ways to improve their participation as educators.

I hold fast to the belief that students prosper when you and they participate in a forum that is steady, safe, and consistent. Build a milieu conducive to honest, intensive, and meaningful interaction.

The overall message of the book is that you should be accessible to students. Allow them to influence your procedures and policies. Offer choice, provide variety, and establish and sustain an ambiance of sharing, openness, challenge, and change. Your power and authority as a professor derive from the human qualities you display and the care you exemplify. In this

paradigm, respect for students dominates.

The voice of this book is a personal one. I speak to *you*. The book provides illustrative material and instructive excerpts from actual teaching experience.

Food for Thought

Wherever a story comes from, whether it is a familiar myth or a private memory, the retelling exemplifies the making of a connection from one pattern to another: a potential translation in which narrative becomes parable...Our species thinks in metaphors and learns through stories. (M. C. Bateson, 1994, p. 11)

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The Call to Teach

When education is oriented to the person who is to learn plus the situation to be mastered, there is something more to teaching than proving to the learner that one knows the subject. (Berta Reynolds, 1942, p. 83)

Preach always and sometimes use words. (St. Francis of Assisi)

Teaching demands more than command of subject matter, it requires acute awareness of students' learning styles; one's own preferred manner of presentation, openness, and flexibility; and active modeling of one's expertise.

This chapter contains a mnemonic device beginning with the letter *C* from *call* in *The Call to Teach: Philosophy, Process and Pragmatics of Social Work Education*: contact, credo, context, considerations, conceptions, and contentions about teaching.

MNEMONIC DEVICES

Many mnemonic devices appear in this book as they do in my classes, and they serve a variety of purposes. For students, they establish associations to information, which in turn evoke mental images sparking the learner's memory, and they spur recall of content. For me, they permit covering subject matter without continual reference to notes. They enable me to elaborate on various relevant points without losing momentum or sacrificing the main point.

Contact

Social work education is about human contact, engagement, empowerment. Its singular defining and enduring mark is its intensely personal nature. It is characterized by the interconnection between you and your students, between students and students, and between students and their clients. Teaching is itself a human experience in which interaction, rapport, and reflection play vital roles. We endeavor to engage students' whole person—their thoughts, emotions, values, and creative reflections. Through relationships, an active, flexible, orderly, and disciplined process for learning emerges, which challenges students to confront the ultimate meaning and value of what they learn. Attentive to the situations, talents, pace, and learning styles of students, you heighten their grasp of content, propel reflective discernment, and foster competency development.

Credo

This credo departs considerably from how you may have been taught yourself. In other words, the way you were taught does not have to be the way you teach. You likely were drawn to excellent teachers by their personhood before it dawned on you that they were scholars or experts. I believe and ask you to consider

- that contact and connection take precedence over concepts,
- that challenge takes precedence over contentment,
- that conscious reflection takes precedence over content,
- that creativity (right brain) has equal standing with the characteristically rational (left brain), and
- that your constitution, who you are, is as essential as what you convey.

The classroom is a forum in which students read messages about practice via the nature of the teacher–student interchange. The degree to which you and students recognize and explicitly examine these messages influences the success or effectiveness of the learning process. In this regard you are an epitome of expertise in situ. To quote an old song, “T’ain’t what you do it’s the way that you do it.” *How* is as essential as *what*. When your actions match your words, you model the elements of the professional encounter and excite students.

Context

Social work education emphasizes an integrative perspective undertaken within a set of codified values and goals. Its basis is in ethical, empirical, and knowledge foundations ultimately manifested in competencies. It relies on students’ understanding the enhancement of human well-being and the alleviation of dysfunction through the application in practice of an array of theories and methods in a wide variety of settings. It draws from a broad spectrum of strategies and techniques with particular emphasis on the person–environment interaction, with special attention to delivering human service to the discrete needs of diverse populations.

It focuses on three central and interrelated practices:

- assessing, promoting, restoring, and maintaining the bio-psycho-social-cultural functioning of individuals, families, and groups, especially the most vulnerable, throughout the life cycle to resolve psychological and social problems, confront and resolve trauma and crisis, accomplish tasks, prevent and alleviate distress, and use resources;
- endeavoring always to evoke, highlight, and strengthen clients’ intrinsic and unique strengths, competencies, and coping abilities; enhancing their progress toward meeting basic human needs, and supporting the development of their full potential; and
- monitoring theory, knowledge, and skills as related to initiating and evaluating intervention in terms of evidence of its effectiveness.

Such a framework involves a situation in which contrasting elements and theories when taken together may add rather than subtract from each other and provide a balanced education tailored to the specific needs of students and, ultimately, clients. Instead of allegiance to one single theory, parts of many approaches may be combined in producing the most potent regimen of learning. The changing nature of practice as a result of shrinking resources, legislation, and managed care, coupled with the inexact science of service provision, dictates that students be familiar with a broad spectrum of theories, methods, techniques, and strategies

for effective practice provision.

Expectations for social work students are multiple, complex, and interrelated. Teaching then directs attention to issues involving people of color; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning people; women, families, and children at risk; and people with serious mental and physical disabilities. It compels us to be aware of an array of evidence-based approaches and findings and ways to apply them. It obligates us to incorporate the value foundation underpinning policy and practice and various ethical dilemmas—self-determination, preservation, respect for sex, age, gender, cultural, religious, and racial differences. It calls for an appreciation of social work as a blend of art and science. It impels us to identify accurately the emotional, cognitive, and behavioral dimensions of individual, family, and group interaction and intervention. It necessitates a demonstration of understanding the place of policy, research, and practice in social work's mission and history. Accompanying these emphases is the requisite inclusion of a global perspective of any modern-day individual through international intercession. Comprehending the importance of goal setting, contracting, drawing on client strengths and assessing political, family, and group dynamics including power issues, communication patterns, and roles are all components of first-rate teaching.

The final outcome of such inclusivity is the advancement of an integrated approach that facilitates students' competency in flexibly applying different theories, models, modalities, and techniques appropriate to client needs. Because the range and complexity of problems in which social workers intervene is vast, it is my belief that a wide range of concepts and theories serve as the foundation for effective outcomes in policy formulation and direct practice intervention. They contribute to a firm social justice and human rights foundation emphasizing the promotion of empowerment; well-being in the economic, political, social, mental, and spiritual arenas; and an ongoing consideration of strengths and assets.

Considerations

How is it possible to approach and teach such a far-reaching constellation? How are such an array of existing theories and research findings about the efficacy of various practice interventions reasonably presented? How is it possible to introduce new theoretical and practice syntheses to facilitate continued evolution and adaptation of social work practice? How can students be introduced to and encouraged to select an effective strategies based on various avenues for change? *The Call to Teach* responds to such queries.

Just as clients present a complex interaction among variables, and we ask them to be open and flexible, so too students are exposed to a variety of competing and conflicting viewpoints. As faculty, we likewise should not feel pressured to take sides, to declare allegiance to one particular school of thought, not one of which has cornered human experience. Be elastic, take them all in, and consider how they can be bridged or integrated in such a way that students can absorb and critique them. Rouse in students the aptitude to select what is paramount in them and what is most useful for clients.

Various approaches may not be as incompatible with each other as they first appear. Because we lack a generally accepted way to demonstrate the validity and efficacy of the contentions of each of these competing theories, the rational recourse is to remain uncommitted to any of them but familiar with all of them and develop the capacity to describe, explain, and deliver the same phenomena to yourself, your colleagues, and your clients in several different ways.

Such a stance facilitates a critical-thinking, self-reflective approach that ensures that our work remains responsive to student need and accountable to our professional standards.

Teachers, new and experienced, seek practical guidelines, systematic direction, and suggestions for creatively working with their students. A repertoire of varied suggestions and techniques are offered in this book, encouraging you to discover and further develop your own style.

You are the significant variable in influencing each of these components: contact, context, content, and students. You have your own teaching charisma based on experience, discipline, history, and personality. As you absorb new knowledge and experiment with new techniques, you will assimilate them into your own developing style.

The result of taking into account this assembly of factors is to bring students to the point when they have advanced toward the ability to practice with discretion, discernment, and discipline.

Figure 1 depicts this movement.

Conceptions of Teaching

Seriously reflect on your conception of teaching. Do you see your role as a teacher as someone to

- guide and direct students toward their own learning?
- share your own wisdom and experience?
- change students' view of the world?
- help them apply and use theory and research in a practical way?
- develop critical thinking, curiosity, and inquiry?
- impart information?
- nourish independent discernment?
- gatekeep?
- foment self-analysis?
- gain increased knowledge of humankind?
- challenge existing modes of thinking, feeling?
- encourage discourse and controversy?
- combine some or all of the above? Something different? What?

Contentions

You are called to provide students with a firsthand experience of interest, expertise, and, if possible, passion that you expect them to deliver in their own work. Whether you intend it or not, students read messages conveyed by your example about your competence as an “expert.” The nature and quality of your interaction, your purposeful and disciplined “use of self” (Fox, 2011) not only amplifies the lesson, but becomes a lesson in and of itself. Moving considerably beyond the didactic is implicit learning, what students absorb and intercept from your technical and relational proficiency, which calls for what I dub the eight Cs:

- Concern
- Commitment
- Compassion
- Creativity
- Conviction