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Using Relational Pedagogy in Practicum Seminar; Notes from a Black Professor

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Introduction

As a Black, female professor, finding my voice has been a journey. I am continuously working to unpack internalized racism and interrogate my role in higher education. In resistance to transactional education, my approach to teaching is grounded in relational pedagogy and building community. These are ways that I have been intentionally co-creating the space that I share with students weekly, over the academic year. From my experience, the practicum seminar has served as a space that gives birth to personal growth and self-reflection for undergraduate social work students. It is a space that nurtures our connection as human beings, allows critical conversations and where moments of discovery that require vulnerability happen.

Community is at the core of the practicum seminar. Being grounded in relationships and connection liberates the practicum seminar from a transactional framework and thrives in stark contrast to the prevailing higher education business model perpetuating the commodification of teaching and learning. We co-create community agreements and I invite students to "check in" at the beginning of each class. Through intention, "check in" allows time for us to pause, breathe, and connect. It is a purposeful action that goes against the pervasiveness of urgency and productivity that we experience due to capitalism and hustle culture. When we center relationships, compassion, and empathy, community and mutual support emerge naturally [1].

Students are often depleted and exhausted trying to balance the demands of school, work, practicum and personal responsibilities. They are emotionally taxed as interns working with and on behalf of folks who have been marginalized and are struggling to survive in underserved and under-resourced communities. Many students live in the same communities and are impacted by the same conditions. In the practicum seminar, students discuss systemic oppression, structural barriers, personal challenges and lessons learned from "doing the work." Students offer each other validation, mutual aid, emotional support and engage as thought partners in problem solving and navigating complex intersections. A student commented in the Spring term course evaluation that seminar "Created a supportive

space that allowed for community reflection." Weekly, I hold office hours before and after seminar and am available to meet with students virtually. Students view me as someone who genuinely cares about their education and sees them as whole people managing multiple stressors and responsibilities. I firmly believe a relational approach to teaching requires accessibility and a willingness to be available to students. I also center my joy and self-care which is critical for my sustainability as a Black, female faculty in a predominantly white institution and city [2].

In the practicum seminar, students thrive as part of a learning community where they can explore, process, and make meaning of their experiences in their practicum. It is a co-created space where students can see themselves in the constellation of their diversity and their communities within social work practice. I often hear students in the practicum seminar say "I'm finding my voice as a social worker" - a reflection that deeply resonates with my own experience. Building community and having a relational approach to teaching feels authentic and allows me to bring my values and culture into the classroom.

Conflict of interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References

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