

Teaching as Practice: A Mobile Phone Points the Way

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Abstract: This is the story of how one student's phone helped me become consciously aware of the intersection of teaching and social work practice. Aspects of this view illuminated by the story are discussed.

Keywords: Teaching as practice

It just didn't make sense. Nina (not her real name) was so bright-eyed and engaged in class. She gave excellent, well thought-out responses to the questions I posed. She was able to use relatively sophisticated reasoning to help her find her way through problems. I had been looking forward to reading her response to our first assignment, a low-stakes reflection designed to give me a good idea where students were academically and professionally. But when I downloaded the paper from our University's online learning system, it wasn't good. There were so many grammatical errors, misspellings, and formatting issues that I really had to work to decipher what she was trying to say. Not wanting to give up hope, I speculated to myself that maybe she had gotten in a time crunch, or maybe she realized how low-stakes the assignment was and just didn't put in her best effort. I diligently provided feedback. I explained, again, about APA style. I asked her to find someone to proofread her papers (including a reminder about our writing center), and included an invitation to meet with me to discuss her work. The next class, she was again bright-eyed and engaged, providing her usual insightful contributions to class. I asked her if she got my feedback, and she responded yes. I can't remember exactly what else was said, but I assumed the next paper would improve.

The next paper. I eagerly opened it up, and...no improvement. It may have been worse than the paper before. I could not believe my eyes. What in the world was going on with this student? I again diligently provided feedback, including praise for her performance in class and my dismay over her papers. This time I asked her to meet with me. The next class period, she seemed subdued.

"Have you seen my feedback on your paper?" I asked.

"Yes."

I waited for her to propose a meeting time as I had requested. She did not.

"Did you see my request for a meeting?"

She slumped her shoulders, "I work full-time days until 3 a.m. and I take care of my babies when I'm not in class and right after my last class is out I have to catch a ride with friends, and I can't make them wait."

"Wow, when do you do your homework?"

"At work during breaks and slow times."

The light bulb in my brain switched on.

I asked, "What kind of machine are you using to write your papers?"

She held up her phone.

I thought, "She writes papers on her phone. While she is at work. Because she has two small children and is a single mother and can't get child care while she does homework. She has to work full-time because she can no longer get student loans."

I am in awe of the weight that some of our students carry.

She couldn't see my feedback because the comments could only be seen in a word processing program and not on her phone. When I said "feedback," she thought "grades," which were not good. No wonder she seemed dejected. She was not seeing the praise I was doling out, the suggestions for improvement, or corrections. She was only seeing the numbers assigned.

What to do? We are social workers. We are highly trained in problem-solving. Without even thinking about it, I launched into problem-solving mode.

"Do you know about the computer labs on campus?" Nina shook her head. I explained and mentioned that she should have gotten the information during orientation. It turned out that she was unable to attend the transfer orientation that would have informed her about the labs because she had to work. She had transferred from junior college, a common transition for our department. I explained about her free access to the computer labs.

"Is there a time you could go to the computer labs and use them?" I asked.

She shook her head, shoulders still slumped, and restated her need to work and her dependence on others for transportation.

"Okay, that's before and after class, what about between classes?"

"Yes!" There was a period of about two and half hours she could use, two days a week.

"Fantastic. Why not compose your papers on your phone, email them to yourself, open them on a word processor in the lab, and edit them there?"

She sat up straight, bright-eyed once again, and said "I can do that!"

The next paper was a thing of beauty, at least in comparison to the others. Nina had such a great heart for social work and the critical thinking skills to go with it. When she had the time, she consistently turned in one of the top papers in the class. She still struggled with time management on and off throughout the semester, and pushed her absences to the limit with sick children. But she did it. I got the most moving email from her at the end of the semester (more about this below). She saw that I believed in her and that gave her the momentum to not give up. She graduated and is now using her social work degree in her professional work.

When I think about significant stories in my journey as an educator, this is one that always comes to mind, even years later. However, pinpointing just what was it about this story that so profoundly affected me took some time and effort. What did it have to teach me? As I began the process of

reflection on that question, I had several false starts. I wrote a sermon about under-prepared teaching, and promptly deleted it. I traced my own process of coming to terms with academia, and then erased that, too. Although both reflections were helpful to me in their own right, they had little to do with this story. I needed to find what it was about this particular story that was trying to get my attention. An incident that kept coming to mind was when a colleague stated, "Teaching is my practice." I intuitively resonated with the idea, but could not define it. The process of trying to understand the significance of Nina's story led me to an exploration of the idea of teaching as practice, and ultimately to an answer to my question.

I discovered that teaching as practice has a long history in social work. I found works discussing everything from how educators model social work behaviors (Barretti, 2007), to applying social work theory to the classroom (Edwards & Richards, 2002; Wang, 2012) and applying practice principles to teaching qualitative research (Ruckdeschel & Shaw, 2002). Although I had been aware of Bertha Reynolds' 1942 treatise "Learning and Teaching in Social Work," I had not really dug into it. I was delighted to find many principles of social work practice applied to social work education. For example, although the principle of "meeting our clients where they are" is fundamental to social work practice, I had not consciously and intentionally applied it to teaching. Reynolds considered the perspective to be the first principle of teaching, and even stated, "We wonder how anyone could ever have expected to do educational work without knowing those who were to be educated" (Reynolds, 1942, p. 202). One of the struggles I experience as an educator is where to draw the line at which I expect students to meet *me*.

Nina's story educated me about meeting our students where they are by teaching me to really see each student as a human being rather than drawing a line. As Reynolds states:

[W]e do not find presenting themselves for learning in social work detached intellects or even detached personalities. We find biological organisms which must survive and eat and find their mates. We find social beings who want an honorable place in society for themselves and their children. (Reynolds, 1942, p. 68).

Nina provided a critical reminder for me that she was a

human being with a full and active life outside the classroom. Prior to teaching, I had practiced social work for many years in a university counseling center, and had been well aware of the potential for tension between the student as learner and the student as human being. However, in the press of trying to ensure learning objectives and tenure-track responsibilities were met, this awareness had receded into the background. Yes, our students must come to class with the fundamental capacity to do the work, but I realized that it can look very different from one student to another.

Nina's story also drove home the idea that what we model can be even more important than what we say (see, e.g., Barretti, 2007). As Gillian Ruch, states about social work supervision, "We can only relate to and communicate with [clients] to the extent to which we are related to and communicated with" (Ruch, 2016). Nina most definitely noticed me relating to and communicating with her. This is the email she sent at the end of the semester:

I just feel the need to tell you that you have had the biggest influence on [my] career thus far....There have been many times where I wanted to throw the towel in. When I turned in that first assignment, I did not do so well. It was like you were thinking this girl can do better than this, and you helped me come up with strategies to maintain, and that meant so much to me....when someone with no ties to me steps and makes me feel worthy, it means so much to me....Thanks Dr. Fisher, you are truly a professional and are good at what you do (Personal communication, December 16, 2014).

By sharing this email, I do not wish to "toot my own horn." I share it to illustrate my awakening to just how closely students are watching me model social work. As I reflected on this email, the "light bulb" once again switched on. The student saw the strengths perspective ("you were thinking this girl can do better than this"), problem-solving ("strategies to maintain"), and recognized professional social work behavior ("you are truly a professional"). I am still often stunned by the power inherent in my role as educator.

Modeling works both ways, of course. I have received feedback on teaching evaluations that brilliantly illustrate the ways in which I do not model good social work practice behaviors. For

example, my students have told me that my responses to questions are not always helpful. I struggled with how to get better at this in the context of teaching, but framing the problem in the context of modeling social work behaviors gives me clarity and specific actions I am comfortable with and confident in successfully carrying out. I can ask questions to find out what the question really is without wrapping it in my own assumptions and expectations. I can model meeting the student asking the question where she is.

And so I arrived at the answer (at least for now) of why this interaction with Nina had so profoundly affected me. Teaching as practice has implications for me on two levels. On a personal note, I feel at home in the world of social work. I spent many years practicing social work before moving into academia. The skills and values of the profession come as naturally to me as breathing. I do not yet always feel so at home in the world of academia. I often flounder, not knowing how to move through a given situation in the classroom. I try to figure out how a "good teacher" would handle the issue. However, now I know that in moments of need, I can reach for that intersection of social work and teaching.

On a much broader level, however, I have become aware of the ways in which I model social work practice for the students in my classes. Nina stated that I had "had the biggest influence on [her] career thus far." Just as we model behaviors for our clients, we model behaviors for our students. They see us as examples of professional social workers. It is an awesome charge, and one I feel empowered to shoulder now that I see it so clearly.

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