

Newell Innovative Teaching Award Application
Perspectives Shoe Project and Final Exam Activity
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Educators can teach students about diversity and empathy for individuals who have different life experiences in many ways. Carlos-Guzman (2021) defined good teaching as being more than an instructor's personal motivations and commitments, but as that which uses best practices to instruct students integrally, "stimulate complex cognitive processes (critical thinking, creativity, problem solving, etc.)," and achieve course goals (p. 4). With any higher education subject matter, instructors strive to find innovative ways for students to engage with course content in preparation for their work in society. Moreover, in Christian higher education, professors aim to help students form spiritual connections to the material, integrating faith in learning. In this proposal, I provide an example of innovative teaching that was implemented with senior social work students enrolled in SW 400, Populations at Risk. This course is designed to present students with theories and practice skills used with various vulnerable populations. The "Perspectives Shoe Project" was added to a comprehensive research assignment to enhance learning about diverse populations. Students completed their work on the assignment and project in phases over the course of the semester, which concluded with a comprehensive final exam activity and reflection.

Description of the Project

The comprehensive written and experiential assignment allows students to take a deep dive into learning about a specific population. Over the course of the semester, students researched their selected population, conducted an interview with a member of the population and a social service practitioner who works directly with the population, and formally presented information learned from research and interviews to the class. In addition, students taking this course during the fall of 2022 created a unique visual with shoes and a written case story, capturing what it is like to walk in another person's shoes.

In the initial class session, students selected their population for the comprehensive assignment and perspective shoe project. Also, students received a pair of used shoes, provided by the professor. Students could choose to use the shoes provided to them or acquire another pair of shoes with the expectation of creating a visual representation of the assigned population or social issue. Additionally,

students were asked to develop a short case story to explain the experience of a fictitious person walking in the shoes.

Later in the semester, a work session was held during a scheduled class time for students to work on their shoes and stories. Students brainstormed ideas and worked on their shoes and stories with the help of peers, the professor, and a guest local artist. The professor provided various art mediums to be used for the shoes according to the student's desired result and artistic impact. Little or much could be done to the shoes to achieve the intended outcome. Students submitted their shoes and stories prior to the final exam week.

Semester Finale

For the final exam, students participated in an independent, hands-on activity utilizing research, quotes from interviews, shoes, case stories, and other resources to conclude the semester in a comprehensive way. The professor used the submitted assignment components and created an aesthetically designed table display. The table represented the One who connects all populations, Christ our Creator. An advent wreath in the center of the table, along with scripture and social work values, artistically decorated the space. Important focuses of the advent season including hope, peace, joy, love, and the marvelous gift of Christ were integrated with the core social work values of service, integrity, dignity and worth of human beings, justice, competence, and importance of human relationships.

Every place setting at the table had shoes that represented a population at risk, along with a sign labeling the population. For example, one place setting had a pair of combat boots representing veterans. Other populations and topics that were studied included immigrants, homelessness, physical disability, intellectual disability, and addiction. In addition to the shoes, there were placemats and place cards displaying interview quotes and research statistics about the populations. A total of 19 populations were represented around the large table for 20 in the social work conference room. The extra space at the table was for the student to sit and complete a portion of their final exam. The overarching theme was not the diverse populations themselves, but God's beautifully unique creation of mankind.

Each student entered the room at their scheduled time to find instruction materials strategically placed with an introduction that read, “Welcome to the table! The connection of all populations is our Creator. Our personal worth does not come from labels placed on us, roles we assume, groups we belong to, status, or performance but from the Giver of Life who invites us to commune with him. Each one is so valuable to him.” The student proceeded to complete a matching activity using the case story cards and table setting, then checked their matches using a key. Next, the student was instructed to sit at the designated chair marked, “Your shoes” to complete a guided reflection about their personal reactions and responses to the culmination of stories, shoes, and learned information. Students submitted their personal reflection as a portion of their final exam grade. Finally, students were given the opportunity to write shared responses on large post-it notes to be viewed by their classmates.

Uniqueness of the Project

Typical ways of evaluating student learning tend to include exams and written assignments. While these methods are useful and effective, a comprehensive project and simulation activity affords students an opportunity to interact with the learned material in non-traditional ways that extend their critical thinking skills. The profession of social work is an applied science requiring cognitive, affective, and behavioral skills. Immersion in course content for deep understanding and application prepares students for their future work and empathy toward different populations of people, not simply studying them to recall facts.

Successes and Limitations of the Project

The professor used qualitative data from student reflections to examine the major themes from the final exam activity. The most common responses from students were feelings of humility, gratitude, and privilege. Thoughts expressed included, “My discomfort may be someone else’s normal” and “Don’t reduce a person to a population. It’s part of them, but not all of them.” These statements reveal students’ growing cultural competence, which Gordon et al. (2019) reported being a strong need in education due to the continued population increase and demographic change.

When asked about how the assignment transformed students' thinking, common responses noted were related to increased empathy, checking personal biases, caution for generalizations, and improved understanding of why certain populations are at risk. Students also expressed appreciation for differences and diversity. One student wrote, "Everyone is a valuable creation of God, made in His image." Another student reflected, "This simulation reminded me why I want to do social work." Overall, the project and final exam accentuated the course objectives and reinforced concepts learned throughout the students' social work education.

Despite efforts to reduce bias and the use of stereotypes, some were identified when reading the case stories and examining the shoes during the final exam activity. For example, a pair of moccasins represented the Native American population. While these were used to be easily identifiable, it is not common for this population to wear culturally traditional attire on a regular basis. More consideration should be given to the language in the case stories and visual representations of the populations. One way to do this is to gain feedback about the created items from individuals belonging to the respective populations. If presented in a public format, it would be important to give a warning that there may be unintended stereotypes or biases.

Conclusion

Combining fun, creative, and imaginative strategies with academic rigor brings joy to the learning and teaching processes. Through the implementation of this comprehensive assignment and project, students were challenged to consider the unique life experiences of certain populations from various perspectives, including Christ's point of view. Waller (2021) stated, "Jesus was more than a bit concerned with those on the margins of society—those with struggles...the people our society calls addict, poor, bigot, greedy, lazy, stupid, sinner, and selfish were Jesus' people. Consequently, as Christians, they must be our people...." (p. 119). Engaging assignments like this one tend to leave meaningful and lasting impressions on our students and influence who they become. Likewise, the students' contributions on this project left a meaningful and lasting impression on me and I am grateful.

References

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Appendix: Photo Collage

