

Use of Self as An Anti-Oppressive Tool for Pedagogy

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Introduction

The Zeitgeist of our time calls on social workers and the social work profession to reconsider the ways in which we practice, teach, and learn. The COVID 19 pandemic and the 2021 reawakening of the racial and social justice movements profoundly influence how social workers approach the directive from our accrediting body (CSWE) calling on us to intentionally integrate an anti-racist framework in our implicit and explicit curriculum. Ubiquitously, social justice pedagogy demands the kind of learning that privileges relationality over discourse. Skills and capacities like relationship building, critical reflection and empathy, for example, have been determined to contribute to practitioners' capacities to teach and practice social justice (Furman, 2012). We view these directives as a clarion call for social worker leaders, scholars, academics and practitioners to authentically re-engage with our mission. This paper re-introduces 'use of self' as an anti-oppressive pedagogical tool that can build and hold brave spaces of transformation. Orienting ourselves to a use of self as a kind of pedagogy is one way to re-engage with our social justice mission. Although we believe that pedagogy and practice are intricately connected, for the purposes of this paper, we focus on pedagogy.

Situate ourselves for the reader

There can be no thoughts without a thinker and no thinker without a body. Our selves and bodies are inseparable from this pedagogical frame. The undertaking of this paper rests in the roots of autoethnography and phenomenology. We use lived experience and reflection to center

our purpose and message. We invite the reader to join us in this space of vulnerability, nuance, complexity, and non-binaries as we reveal aspects of ourselves and our thinking to the reader so that any assumptions might be met with some facts and context. We model use of self for you the reader by first locating ourselves.

The first author identifies as a cis-gender woman of color, specifically, a Black, Latina and Jewish woman, with no diagnosed disability. The first author is also a mother of two girls, an associate professor of social work at a private university and a trauma-informed diversity, equity and inclusion consultant.

The second author identifies as a white-identified, Italian, Jewish, 50+, mother, cis-gender female (she/her/hers) with no diagnosed disability and who is currently solidly middle class. The second author is also a licensed creative arts therapist and clinical social worker who adjuncts at a private university, offers supervision, training, and team building through the arts, and has a small, private practice.

While we shared some of our self identifiers, we also realize that there are parts of us that we are not naming in this paper. Our other positionalities emerge through stories we tell in our teaching and learning. This unsettles traditional constructs of learning as we risk our comfort for the sake of sharing power and centering our students' freedom (Boler, 1999).

Use of Self

The profession's historical roots and legacy are seeped in Western-focused, Eurocentric ideology and theory. These orientations have profoundly influenced approaches to teaching, supervision, and curriculum as they tended toward the goal of separation between the personal

and professional. Instead, we invite the reader to consider the use of self as a tool to open up spaces of dialogue between instructor and student. We define use of self as the intentional way social workers use our identities and our stories as a tool for anti-oppressive pedagogy, without centering the self. Defined, use of self is a relational, embodied way of teaching that involves multuality. The Licensed Independent Clinical Social Workers (LICSW) define use of self as, “...sharing myself with my clients through skillful self disclosure and empathy and authentically bringing all I’m made of into the therapeutic relationship for use as a therapeutic tool.” (Daley, 2013, p.3). Use of self as a *pedagogical* tool offers ways to relate to and make meaning of expressions of identities, care, structure, imagination, and non-binary sensibilities.

We believe that relationships are a cornerstone of change; centering relationships requires self knowledge in order to engage from a place of sincerity and curiosity. The kinds of learning required in an anti-oppressive, social work-focused learning environment demand that we engage in self-examination (Spencer, 2008) and then use the learnings from that self-examination in our pedagogy. There is a critical component to our self-awareness that acknowledges a status quo that perpetuates the above-referenced, Eurocentric, Western, deficit-based paradigms. The Western-Euocentric paradigm includes binaries like good/bad, us/them, and guilty/innocent. Our purpose within the use-of-self construct is to model, build, and nurture liberatory relationships within the classroom. We do this so that students can experience, and experiment with, engaging in critical conversations to build relationships. Inquiry and sense-making co-exist within the person in the environment social work framework.

Use of self in practice and spaces of learning, align with our accrediting body’s call for the integration of an anti-racist framework in our pedagogical choices. We invoke the existence and use of power as ubiquitous in any interaction where learning happens. Awareness of, feeling

about, and using the nuances of power distribution are central to our discussion of pedagogical use of self within the social justice frame. Positionalities made explicit (as above) is one practical aspect of including opportunities to name power dynamics in our approach to teaching and learning in social work. Enactments of anti-oppressive pedagogies allow the often harmful impact of explicit curriculum and subsequent standards to emerge. As stated above, and by design, any curriculum initiates a direction for content and cannot include everything about a topic; furthermore, curriculum is inherently biased. Curricula do not show us how or provide a way to teach. If we are meant to center relationships in an anti-racist, social work practice, the practice of teaching and learning can involve our felt and historicized experiences of being in relationship. We try to make those moments visible and explicit in our teaching.

The process of learning social work practice is necessarily endless. We are exposed to theory, narratives, our colleagues, research, our settings, and we are asked to critically reflect on our lived experiences as they influence how we inhabit our professional selves. The ways that we model handling struggles and discomfort, even the seeking out of those moments, will have a lot to do with our lived experiences in spaces of learning and within the biome of the socio-political landscape in the US i.e., white supremacy, patriarchy, and capitalism.

University Social Work Classroom

The struggle involved with moving to a place of liberation feels necessary at this moment. An aspect of co-creating liberatory spaces means that we examine, interrogate our language to positively disrupt (Quiros, 2020) traditional and mainstream classroom spaces. This happens by way of curriculum and pedagogy.

Our words, language, and positions in the classroom communicate a lot about us. Sometimes, we, as instructors, like to use the prompt: ‘How do you show up?’ It would be difficult to show up in any space without taking myself with me. When, How, and Why I might use certain aspects of myself and experience are intentionally explored in this paper so that use of self can be made more explicit, and transferrable. Embodiments of a use of self in these ways demonstrate to others in the classroom space, in real time and in multisensory ways, that there are many ways to make, feel, and sometimes feel a need to avoid contact. The authors of this paper believe that the process, the experience, of learning in social work necessarily relies quite heavily on many interrelated dynamics. Critical self awareness and sustained efforts to use this awareness and experience as we show up are fundamental to building liberatory relationships within the classroom community. Dismantling and denaturalizing capitalism, white supremacy, and patriarchy are not only words, their meanings and affects live inside of us, fester, are often invisible, and work to maintain the status quo. Boler (1999) posits:

“...we need more nuanced ways to speak about justice and injustice... ideologies reflect emotional investments that by and large remain unexamined during our lifetimes, because they have been insidiously woven into the everyday fabric of common sense” (p 181).

Deepening an understanding of a living practice of social justice requires an examination of the words we use and their manifestations in the classroom and in practice. Words and bodies can create possibilities for bearing witness to the experiences of each student, each human being, within a classroom. Relationships of learning require commitments to sincerity and authenticity in order to build community and disrupt the status quo. Thoughtful examination of words and actions, which should be a living practice, is a process full of nuance, complexities, and potential

discomfort. It is exactly this living practice that might offer insight as to when social justice, for example, does and can happen.

Social work educators are charged with sharing our commitment to the co-creation of spaces for embodied learning. Classroom spaces that involve embodiments of anti-oppressive practices must include discussions of power, identity, ideology, beliefs, and experience. Our vision is a social work classroom that is unsettling enough that it brings change. Most learning in the ‘use of self’ register requires some tension. Classroom spaces can make parallel practice transparent with the intention to build capacity for collective, critical reflection and ultimately action.

This pedagogical vision includes the view that the social work classroom can be a space of liberation from oppression. Thoughtful and creative centering of relationships, while building a classroom community, is a positive disruption of white supremacy. This requires a commitment to knowing the (my)self. Coming into contact with aspects of how we think and what we think about will enter all classrooms. The extent to which we are able to know what we are feeling and thinking in each moment can guide our process of deciding what to say or not say, the questions to ask, and the extent to which we can be transparent about why we made those choices. Meaning and sense-making can happen all the time. Bringing consciousness to these processes, and sensing our bodies throughout the process, is something that can be modeled. There can be no action without an enactment of position. Inaction is also action. In the next section of this paper we model use of self for you the reader.

First Author:

As an associate professor of social work I think intentionally about what stories I bring into the classroom. My intention is to share parts of myself that will open up the space for students to do the same. I desire for the students to see me as not only their instructor, but also a human who is fallible and complex and sometimes messy. In June 2021 I lost my mother to cancer. At the time I was teaching a trauma course for social work master students called Trauma, Stress and Coping. I shared with the class that my mom had passed and that grief as an adult, was new to me. It felt uncomfortable, I choked on my words, I shed tears during the telling and then, I shared with the class the eulogy I read at my mom's memorial service. I did all of this with intention and spoke about the complexity of grief, the newness of it, how it felt in my body and how it comes and goes in unpredictable waves. That experience opened up the space for other students to discuss loss and trauma they had experienced before and mostly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Students dialogued about ways they coped, what worked and what fell short. We spoke about the awkward interactions they had when others would try to offer support. Phrases like "stay strong," "this will pass," "this must be so hard for you," all ways others tried to project their own fears and reactions onto the recipient of the loss. They integrated readings into their personal experiences with grief, bonded with one another, and we all shared in ways that built and held a brave classroom space of transformation.

Second Author:

I was in my 50's (after three degrees in higher education and during my doctoral work) when I was told by a mentor that *all knowledge is partial*. It blew my mind. I also believed her. Her words mattered and they continue to inspire me to reflect on the many moments in which I am poised to perpetuate oppressive power dynamics in my life and work. These are choices we make. Use of that construct that all knowledge is partial now moves me to be curious and

intentional about giving up on myself as a kind of expert. That construct awakened a humility in me that shows up in the rubrics I use for grading (all assignments are given equal point values and each student will self-assess their classroom participation alongside mine, the average of which is used for the class participation grade). My current, intersectional identities mixed with part of my characterological disposition have been a kind of perfect storm for showing up in most spaces and believing that what I had to offer was inherently important. While that might be true in some situations, that (trauma-coping mechanism-turned-defense) way of ‘showing up’ has centered me, not the relationship. Recognition of this has emerged while in relationship with others and feeling the ways that white supremacy (for example, believing that *one* way is the necessary and correct way) became an internalized construct. The moments are experienced like tugs in the threads of my internal landscape. I remind myself with my students that we sign up for this kind of self-examination-in-relationship as social workers ... It’s essential to do (manifest/create) this kind of work separately, and together (Miehls, 2001; Spencer, 2008).

Embodiment

The use of self requires embodiment. Rosaldo’s (1984) definition of an embodiment had a powerful effect on us and our mother-identities. It incorporates the endlessly related processes of perception, feeling, identity, and expression:

Emotions are thoughts somehow ‘felt’ in flushes, pulses, ‘movements’ of our livers, minds, hearts, stomachs, skin. They are *embodied* (italics in original) thoughts seeped with ... ‘I am involved’ ... the difference between the hearing of a child’s cry and a hearing *felt* [italics in original]. (Rosaldo, 1984, p. 143)

A reflection for our pedagogy: There are numerous reasons why a child might cry. In the discourse of social justice practice, and for this paper, we apply the above phrase ‘...a hearing *felt*’ and join it with a social worker’s capacity and willingness to feel *about*. Use of self as a pedagogical tool here can include the doing/action components that accompany feeling about.

The above-named directives, concepts, and historical events will require integrating the role of the body, the human body, as a practice and pedagogical tool. Put pragmatically, *any* action requires the body. Intentional inclusion of what bodies can do in spaces of learning is aligned with social justice (Boler, 1999; Bonilla-Silva, 2018). This position echoes hooks’ (1994) description of classrooms and the bodies in them:

The erasure of the body encourages us to think that we are listening to neutral, objective facts, facts that are not particular to who is sharing the information. We are invited to teach information as though it does not emerge from bodies... we must return ourselves to a state of embodiment in order to deconstruct the way power has been traditionally orchestrated in the classroom... take seriously, respectfully, the student body, we are compelled to acknowledge that we are addressing folks who are a part of history. (p. 139)

Concepts, words, histories, culture, and identities live in our bodies; all of them attach to emotion and action. The process is dynamic, inevitable, interruptible, and worthy of collective, thoughtful consideration for the ethical practice of social work. For this paper, the body is implicated as a practice and a pedagogical tool (hooks, 1994; Kannen, 2012).

To assist with this re-examination is the innate reflective nature of the social work profession that affords us the opportunity to spend time in quiet, individual and collective,

moments of reflection and accountability to ensure that we remain grounded in the professions' mission. Being grounded in our mission, to enhance human health and well-being locally and globally, is critical because social workers are in the 'business' of relationship building; *relationships are the cornerstone of change* (Dewane, 2006).

Despite this, the authors of this paper argue that somewhere along the way, we, as a profession, lost our central focus on the value and craft of sincere relationship building in the classroom. To reinstate, this paper re-introduces the practice of 'use of self' as an anti-oppressive pedagogical and practice tool used for building and holding brave spaces of transformation. Becoming conscious of the status quo is necessary in order to create brave spaces of learning. We adopt the definition of 'mainstream' social work used by Donna Baines (2017):

“approaches that may, to some extent, ease people’s suffering or difficulties, that depoliticize social problems and fail to see the larger dynamics shaping social work practice or to imagine alternative solutions that can be undertaken with and for clients,” (p. 20).

In this next section, we introduce you, the reader, to some ways to reflect on your own pedagogy and intentionally engage with and incorporate use of self. We begin with the use of language.

Practical Implications

Language

The use of self as a pedagogical tool requires educators to understand that words, language, and positions of being in the classroom communicate a lot about us. As previously mentioned, power operates through the use of language. Language matters. The words we use to

narrate our practice and the lives of our students and clients, tells a lot about our worldviews and impacts our behavior. Dr. Maya Angelou (2019) contemplates the power of words in this way:

... Words are things. I'm convinced you must be careful about the words you use, or the words you allow to be used in your house... Someday, we will be able to measure the power of words...they get on the walls, they get in your wallpaper and in your rugs. They get into your upholstery, into your clothes, and, finally, into you. (0:09)

Words getting into us, as Dr. Angelou speculates, is significant in this exploration because we feel about the words we hear and choose to use. Words and their social-political-historical-affective meanings can manifest in how we show up in spaces and move around in them. Stories, their tellers, and the experience of both are central to the co-creation of spaces of teaching and learning. In this paper we have begun to introduce the reader to use of self as a pedagogical tool for practice, in and outside of the classroom.

Critical Inquiry

A second tool is critical inquiry. We believe that a discerned, anti-oppressive use of self requires critical inquiry. Perhaps one manifestation of pedagogical use of self is inquiry in service of understanding, transparency, and a kind of relational-affectively aware-intimacy. We have each absorbed some of the sharp fragments cast about by several generations of institutionalized, school culture. Indoctrination at the school-institutional levels look and feel like listening to lectures about the ecological model and foundations of practice. Without being invited, in a classroom collective, to notice what it feels like to recognize our own pain, joy, fear, curiosity, how might we navigate our way through sitting with another's? This idea of 'showing

up' takes multiple forms and can change across the many seasons of a life. In pedagogical motion, our work can be to acknowledge our humanity, through all of our senses, in: The ways we introduce, use ritual, readings, hold space-yes, that's a thing-, create assignments, how we handle conflict, consent to learn, sit with silence, stories, endings, losses, identity, and share power. Critical inquiry also provides us with the opportunity to ask questions in order to first understand and then create shared meaning in the classroom. We must teach students how to ask questions, what we may call honoring curiosity (Quiros, 2021), rather than live in spaces of assumptions and debate. Aagin, moving away from binary thinking and developing what our second author explained in her vignette as the understanding that "all knowledge is partial."

Positive Disruption of Mainstream Practice

A willingness to reflect and perspective-take is an aspiration and a compass. One of the premises we take here is that some tension is required in order to learn and unlearn ways of being. The use of self as a tool for positive disruption can cause discomfort. Sitting with and working through discomfort requires an understanding of and use of "affect." To affectively engage self and others about beliefs, identities, and ways of being often incites psychological and physical tensions. When we say affectively engage we mean to engage with all our senses. Drs. Sarah Ahmed (2005) and Megan Boler (1999) guide us toward the concept of affect that introduces a language for the ways that our bodies can encounter, witness, reconcile, recover, and become through differences.

It is important to make the distinction between feeling uncomfortable and feeling unsafe. As we share our humanity as instructors, we lean into this tension as a shared experience to use and work through, together. We have observed in our classrooms and in our consulting practices,

that white identified students have named spaces as unsafe when in fact, it was discomfort that was being experienced and felt.

In one example, use of self as a pedagogical tool invites us to unpack the name and practice of the word disclosure in order to offer a more inclusive practice that lends itself to sitting in spaces of discomfort in the classroom. Traditional social work practice uses the word disclosure to describe the act of sharing personal information with the client, group or community. Students are taught in mainstream social work education not to “disclose.” Yet, this mandate of neutrality and distance leads to disconnection and disembodiment. Instead, we teach intentional and purposely sharing, all in the service of the client. We tell our students to ask themselves, “what is the purpose of my sharing?” This question is an example of self injury and evokes both intentionality and awareness.

In this last section we would like to invite you, the reader, to reflect and try on what it might feel like to use yourself intentionally as a pedagogical tool that positively disrupts the status quo:

Questions for you, our reader:

And how about you? What is your process for sensing your affective awareness? What do you do when you are struggling? When you notice someone else might be? Are we recycling oppression through the ways that we teach? If we notice those moments, what do we do about them? What are our perceptions of the role of a university teacher? Of a university? What is our purpose? How do we know that we are manifesting that purpose in our pedagogies, and with our students? How do we approach our grading, receiving/asking for/offering feedback, spontaneous discussions that might veer ‘off topic’ student questioning? What is explicitly named about

struggle and its role in learning about social work practice? Learning about ourselves? Others? In interracial classes, as a white-identified teacher, when, why, and how do I name my racial identity (with humility)? What is the role of transference in discernments of self-disclosure? How do I know?

Conclusion

In this paper we invite you to consider the pedagogical practice of use of self. We offer rationale for why we believe this practice is grounded in an anti-oppressive pedagogy and therefore, supports the social work ethical mandate of an anti-racist implicit and explicit curriculum.

There is abundant scholarship about teaching and learning in social work that does not explicitly name that white supremacy, patriarchy, and capitalism's influences each of us. Our investments in these systems lurk in the hallways of our institutions, between these words and outside the frame of these pages. We have described here that there is tension and discomfort involved in becoming conscious and aware of these investments. Our investments also limit manifestations of anti-oppressive practices and have necessarily limited us in our conceptualizations here. Alongside these tensions and challenges, we want to support and encourage you to try this on and see how it feels in your body and in your classroom.

As explored above, an anti-oppressive pedagogical use of self requires sustained inward-outward acknowledgments of positionality, identity, emotions, and power. Emotions and what they *do* are often what make teaching and learning practices dynamic and unrepeatable. Our multisensory experiences, ways of learning and teaching, and the impacts of trauma are also foundational in how they intersect with what we ask of ourselves and others. While not described

in-depth here, interpersonal, relational, historical, intergenerational trauma responses can (understandably) cause us to reflexively self-protect. These acts of self-protection can close us off to what/who we might experience as potentially dangerous and therefore destabilizing. We recognize and even embrace, the potential challenges in using this type of pedagogy. We, separately and together, must explore and commit to using the expanse of our imagination as we envision liberatory spaces of learning.

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