MODELING BEHAVIORS IN THE SOCIAL WORK CLASSROOM TO ENCOURAGE AN EARLY PROFESSIONAL STANCE IN STUDENTS

Greta McDonough

I came to teaching social work classes slowly and in mid-career. I had never aspired to teach, and, if I am honest, I never thought of myself as a teacher. I had worked as a college counselor and a trainer for business and industry, but not as a full-time professor. In the early days of teaching, I struggled because my orientation differed from the traditional format of college teaching. My philosophy was rooted in the concepts of andragogy, the field of adult learning, as espoused by the late Malcolm Knowles.

From the beginning I viewed myself as a partner in my student's education, a colleague, in fact. Perhaps I was a more learned colleague than they at the moment and they were very young, very inexperienced colleagues, but still, our job was to work together. I was to impart theory and knowledge and help them develop discernment and compassion for their work with clients. Their goal was to come prepared to learn, to question, to master the material in order to help their cli-ents competently and ethically. My goal was to show them how.

In essence, I saw it as my goal to create in them colleagues I would want to work with in a few years.

Because I taught lower level classes, and they were learning the foundations of helping, it seemed imperative that I begin demonstrating the professional stance of an ethical and competent social worker from the first class. I decided to put into practice in the classroom the values and ethics of our field. I felt strongly that to teach competent and ethical practice, I must personally model it – every day with every interaction with my students. In effect, I set about interacting with students in the same ways their textbooks instructed them to interact with clients.

I turned to the National Association of Social Work's Code of Ethics and the values listed there, as a place to start. One guiding principle is this: Social workers respect the inherent dignity and worth of the person. (NASW Ethical Principle Three.) So often I overheard students discussing experiences in other classes, classes where professors belittled or embarrassed them, classes where they were treated, not as equals worthy of respect, but objects for the professor's ego, anger, or frustration. Imagine this treatment in a social work classroom. Who can teach students about positive regard and the dignity of all people, while demonstrating in the treatment of the student, the exact opposite?

By viewing my students as future colleagues at the beginning of their training, the relationship developed quite naturally into one of mentor and protege, and therefore helped ease the atmos-phere in the classroom into one trust, openness, safety and mutual

positive regard.

Another value in the NASW Code of Ethics is integrity. (NASW Ethical Principle Five.) I worked to demonstrate that by always being truthful, kind, perhaps, but truthful. If they all did poorly on an exam or project, we talked about it as a group. I didn't sugar-coat the results, and I usually asked on the dread day I turned back bad papers, "What happened?" And almost always they would tell me. I would then ask, "Was there something I might have done differently to have helped improve your grade?" And they told me that, too. Students will be amazingly honest if they have no fear of reprisal or ridicule.

I honored the rules established in class. In US colleges the syllabus is the contract between the faculty member and student. I followed the calendar I presented to students, did not veer from the grading scale, did not blindside them with unexpected assignments. If changes had to be made, they were made with full awareness and accommodation of students, and well in advance of the due dates.

One of the first ethical standards in the NASW Code of Ethics is the client's right to self-determination. (NASW Code of Ethics Standard 1.02). In the classroom, this was an overarching standard of ethical practice. The student has a right to determine if, or if not, they will do the work. Of course we are available to them for additional help if they struggle with the material or concepts. But assuming we have given clear instructions and expectations, the student now has the ball and takes it from here.

I will confess to you here, before I fully embraced this concept as a working tenet of my class-room, I took it personally, at least just a little, when students did not perform well on assign-ments. But, in truth, my students are adults, even the younger ones, and they have the right to do or not do. My class may or may not be the most important concern in their life right now. I have provided what is expected of me. If a students fails to honor his or her end of the contract, the student, makes the decision. The professor is not part of the decision-making equation.

One of the most positive outcomes of adjusting my teaching philosophy to align with specific social work values is this. The classroom atmosphere seemed charged each day with collegiality between students and professor and between the students themselves. There is an engaged and supportive climate, there is a trust that allows for students to delve into upsetting and difficult material. Students begin to deepen their passion for the work, feeling as they do, however subtly, the respect and mutual support of the professor as fellow colleague.

Works Cited

National Association of Social Workers. Revised by 2017 Delegate Assembly). *NASW Code of Ethics.* https://www.socialworkers.org/About/Ethics/Code-of-Ethics

Author

Greta McDonough, MSSW, LCSW
Professor
Social Work and Human Services
2419 Saint Ann Street, 42303 KY, Owensboro, United States
gretamcdonough@gmail.com