

Supporting Students Utilizing the Strengths Perspective: Classroom Activities & Assignments that Encourage and Empower Student Success

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“It denies that all people who face trauma and pain in their lives inevitably are wounded or incapacitated or become less than they might” is the most prominent strengths perspective definition for this chapter (Saleebey, 1996. Saleebey, 2006).” This impeccably describes how all students should be viewed and understood. As an alum of three Historically Black Colleges Universities (HBCUs), I experience a great sense of pride and reverence to teach at an HBCU. Strength in the familiarity of institutions and seeing students brings back memories of myself. On the other hand, a challenge can be transference, and countertransference, between students and myself because of such a presumed relationship, as an unconscious redirection of past feelings. This is of great significance as “we” both have made assumptions that we’ve entered this space via the same experiences or circumstances, which is often untrue and represents a false sense of commonality. Essentially both the student and I need to enter each experience open to learning, understanding our differences and acknowledging our strengths.

I challenge myself regularly to be a professional that students can model and aspire to emulate. The core objective within most, if not all, of the classes that I facilitate, is to empower students to see me as they see themselves and to understand that their opportunities are limitless. The educational philosophy of the classroom should be to transform the lives of students from diverse backgrounds, to become leaders who are politically aware and compassionate. Furthermore, it is my goal to ensure that students will engage actively as change agents capable of addressing

societal and global problems. By adding the strengths perspective to the classroom environment, the intention is to help shape and transform student experiences through supportive interactions.

“Words do have power to elevate or destroy” is essential in the classroom environment through verbal and visual expressions of “it’s a safe space” (Saleebey, 1996). The overarching aim of an encouraging and empowering classroom environment is to seek positive, strength-based statements, particularly when students need to be rerouted or steered in a different direction. This approach is equally as important as the wording itself. This chapter will illustrate how the strengths perspective, combined with the Afrocentric perspective is utilized to support students in their success. An emphasis on the importance of positive language use within the classroom will be discussed. Additionally, classroom activities and assignments will be provided, followed by implications for future practice, and a conclusion.

AFROCENTRIC PERSPECTIVE

The Afrocentric perspective (ACP) is undergirded throughout the curriculum in each of the courses in conjunction with the autonomous social work model, and humanistic values at Clark Atlanta University in the Whitney M. Young Jr. School of Social Work. Through each of the courses within the various programs, which consists of Bachelor of Social Work, BSW, Master of Social Work, MSW, and Doctor of Philosophy, Ph.D. in social work, students are introduced to the perspective and its’ themes.

ACP is defined as “...a culturally grounded social work practice-based model that affirms, codifies, and integrates common cultural experiences, values, and interpretations that cut across people of African descent. The Perspective encompasses the intersectionality of race, and other societal factors such as gender, ethnicity, social class, ability status and sexual orientation. Further, the Perspective acknowledges African cultural resiliency as a foundation to help social work practitioners solve pressing social problems that diminish human potential and preclude positive social change (CAU, 2007; Schiele, 2016; CAU, 2017; Wright, et al, 2018).”

Utilization of ACP and strength perspective together assists students with a sense of membership. Class engagement through activities and discussions, along with their identified experiences of oppression and marginalization enable students to further understand and engage with their clients. Both perspectives help students recognize their strengths and better empower them to discover their resilience from previous challenges as a place to access their strengths and build from within (CAU, 2007; Schiele, 2016; CAU, 2017; Wright, et al, 2018). ACP prepares students to, “address specific psychological, social, spiritual, and economic problems experienced by people of African descent and to address problems confronted by all people (CAU, 2007; Schiele, 2016; CAU, 2017; Wright, et al, 2018).” Within ACP, the strength perspective identifies group characteristics that can be conceived favorably and as a

source of resiliency and human advancement (CAU, 2007; Schiele, 2016; CAU, 2017; Wright, et al, 2018).

ACP combined with the strength perspective empowers as well as acknowledges oppressive circumstances that present students with holistic and empathic experiences that they can emulate when supporting their clients. Student can reference their classroom experiences and recognize how they felt empowered and supported when they were viewed from strength and not from a deficit which provides them with real-life instances. In addition to using ACP in the classroom, it is equally important to encourage students with positive language, which is explored in the next section.

IMPORTANCE OF LANGUAGE IN THE CLASSROOM

The strengths perspective identifies empowerment, membership, and resilience as concepts that illuminate the importance of positive language (Weick, et al., 1989, Weick, 1992). A portion of the role of a social work educator is to acknowledge the strength within oneself to service individuals and groups in developing their skills, obtaining membership within the social work profession, identifying resources, intervening and planning at micro, mezzo, and macro levels. Introducing students to the concept of interconnectedness, seeing all things from a place of oneness, from their personal experiences is momentous to thoughts that they can incorporate into all their coursework, in both their foundation and concentration year alongside their internship.

A predominant teaching objective is to ensure that there are influences to student development beyond the classroom. A space is created within all classes labeled “Hot Topics”, current events are incorporated with course readings and newly discovered concepts. Students are invited and encouraged to discuss topics they deem relevant. This encourages diplomacy, empowerment and freedom by providing them a platform for their voices to be heard. Listening to their concerns, they then begin to lead facilitations of selected topics, with co-facilitation from an instructor to incorporate ACP, and strengths perspective concepts. Through classroom engagement, students begin to volunteer as they appreciate having shared responsibility for integrating strength, and accountability to one another through their classroom community. This combination undergirds their understanding of other social work theories, concepts, ethics, values and social justice issues. The importance of strength-based language in the classroom, with ACP, delivers an important acknowledgment of teaching from strength rather than a deficit approach. In conjunction with the strengths perspective, this space exemplifies support and empowerment which can enhance student development.

With positive and encouraging words during classroom conversations, on-line discussion interactions, as well as oral and written feedback on assignment submissions, students can hear and identify their strengths and feel energized through

constructive feedback to become resilient (Saleebey, 1996; Saleebey, 2006; Weick et al, 1989; Weick, 1992; Staudt, 2001). Students are encouraged to make connections from their feelings to understanding and empathizing with their client population. Social work students have diverse learning styles that must be recognized in the classroom environment. Various teaching methods are applied that support student learning styles such as:

- Concrete and Active Experimental Learners: case presentations, technology, DVDs, tapes, role-playing, and have students present what they have read using PowerPoint, role plays, and graphs
- Abstract Conceptual Learners: articles, book chapters, and research focused on various theories and their usages for specific assessments and treatment interventions with clients
- Reflective Learners: technology, role plays and case presentations where students can participate and observe others in social work and client interactions.

Combining positive language during class experiences, sharing Hot Topics responsibilities, and teaching to all learners demonstrates strength-based teaching approaches that can be utilized within various phases and course types. The next section covers several classroom activities and assignments that establish a hands-on application of the strength perspective in addition to benefits for the facilitator/educator.

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES & ASSIGNMENTS

This section outlines strength-based activities and assignments that have been identified and aligned in connection to the strength perspective for integration into various social work classroom settings.

REFLECTION PAPER

“All must be seen in the light of their capacities, talents, competencies, possibilities, visions, values, and hopes, however dashed and destroyed these may have become through circumstance, oppression, and trauma (Saleebey, 1996; 2006).” A reflection paper requests students to describe an interaction between themselves and experience from their field practicum. This assignment presents an opportunity to share initial personal thoughts and feelings. Students discuss their engagement, interaction with a client, and link these experiences to course readings as well as in-class connections. The reflection paper also builds upon social work competencies that examine ethical and professional behaviors, as well as diversity.

For the facilitator: Interpreting and listening to student views as they identify feelings regarding their placements conveys opportunities for identifying transference, and countertransference. Similarly, to the classroom experience, it is important to

acknowledge assumptions and relatability to various populations. Does familiarity bring support or hindrance to the situation? This assignment also offers an opportunity to assess students' personal values, which allows the facilitator to integrate positive language around earlier traumas.

GENOGRAMS & ECOMAPS

“Too often practitioners are unprepared to hear and believe what clients tell them, what their particular stories might be, especially if they have engaged in abusive, destructive, addictive, or immoral behavior (Lee, 1994, Saleebey, 1996; 2006).” Genograms and ecomaps are activities that can further assist students in acknowledging their strengths. Genograms are visual tools that produce a family history as well as explain various family dynamics. Ecomaps are also a visual tool that incorporates the community and family relationships as well as offers a person the opportunity to see what relationships are beneficial as well as those that present challenges. By completing their own genograms and ecomaps as class activities students can identify their own resilience. This can further assist students in completing these tools with clients in addition to supporting their clients in feeling empowered. These activities both the genogram and ecomap build upon social work competencies that engage and assess individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities.

For the facilitator: Hearing students share within these activities and being rooted in the strengths perspective through emphasizing a safe space and offering students an opportunity to share out loud their experiences can create membership. This involvement presents an opportunity to see commonalities inside the class group. Both genograms and ecomaps contribute to diversity with purposeful incorporation about ACP to the discussion, can also add an awareness of oppression and marginalized groups. The opportunity to understand the impact of these feelings that may be internalized from these experiences is provided. If/when students elect to share in class, other students feel more comfortable in sharing their experiences as they identify a bond even if the bond is around a deficit; as they become entrusted by the membership group.

CULTURAL COMPETENCE INTERVIEW

“Extremely important sources of strength are cultural and personal stories, narratives, and lore. Cultural approaches to healing may provide a source for the revival and renewal of energy and possibilities. Cultural accounts of origins, development, migrations, and survival may provide inspiration and meaning. Personal and familial stories of falls from grace and redemption, failure and resurrection, and familial stories of falls from grace and redemption, failure and resurrection, and struggle, and resilience may also provide the diction.... (Saleebey, 1996; Saleebey, 2006).” A cultural competence interview assignment can further illuminate strength and diversity as well as highlight social and economic injustice. Within this assignment, students identify a person of a different race, and gender than themselves to un-

derstand intersectionality by acknowledging similarities along with differences. In addition to conducting the interview, students are to do an activity and conduct a literature review on the selected population interviewed. This assignment seeks to increase understanding of another individuals' lived experience by exploring ways of engaging by hands-on application. By moving beyond individual experience and seeing another, one can access additional empathy and move beyond theory into evidence-based practice assessing with greater understanding. This assignment also builds upon social work competencies that advance human rights, identify social and economic justice, as well as engages in practice-informed research.

For the facilitator: Instructing from the strength perspective within this assignment involves listening and understanding that students may have resistance and not see or understand another person's journey. Incorporating on-going in-class conversations that utilize positive language and incorporation of ACP presents students with a safe space that remains open for creativity and understanding that can transfer into their field practicum experiences.

COMMUNITY ACTION PLAN

"It requires composing a roster of resources existing within and around the individual, family, or community (Saleebey, 1996; Saleebey, 2006)." A community action plan activity enables the student to share a strategy for community advocacy for a specific social action. An activity that connects directly to a community can further illustrate their strength in strategizing for a community need through advocacy for a specific social action. This assignment builds upon social work competencies that engage in policy practice, and intervene with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities.

For the facilitator: This assignment presents an opportunity to consider what students value as concerns and how they see improvement and opportunities for change. This is an example of the resilience concept within the strength perspective. For example, past student submissions consisted of petitions and organized community meetings. Students conducted research and exhibited the impact of voting through demonstrations. This assignment incorporates strength perspective concepts such as membership, empowerment, in addition to resilience (Saleebey, 1996; Saleebey, 2006; Weick et al, 1989; Weick, 1992; Staudt, 2001).

Each of the assignments, including the reflection paper, cultural competence interview, community action plan, in-class activities such as genograms and ecomaps individually and collectively offer ways in which the strengths perspective is demonstrated in the application of the student as well as the facilitator. Additionally, with the incorporation of ACP, social, and economic injustices are identified as well as potential strategies to promote repair. Within social work practice classes students thrive through class engagement and hands-on application experiences that shift

beyond lectures to shared experiences within a diplomatic classroom environment that benefits both the facilitator and student.

IMPLICATIONS

“People learn from their trials and tribulations, even those they inflict on themselves (Anthony & Cohler, 1987; Wolin & Wolin, 1993).” Turning knowledge into implications for future social workers to utilize in going forward is essential. The Generalist intervention model strategy is most appropriate when incorporating the strengths perspective into classroom instruction (Coady et al, 2016). Suggestions for successful classroom engagement with strength perspective engagement for facilitators would be to:

- Hear and listen to class apprehension as well as individual student matters.
- Engage with students to understand their experiences. This builds a foundation as a place of membership; here they have an opportunity to learn what strengths they already possess.
- Make an assessment. Collective experiences in the class are a safe place that emphasizes empowerment. Students are learning through the entire process and can become stressed as well as conflicted with the development of their professional values and how they may differ from their personal. Ensure a student that this is normal and, more importantly, it is OK!
- Planning and goal setting should be shared. The initial syllabi can have room for adjustments as needed for the benefit of the entire class, which can consist of adjusting start/end times, and due date changes. Listening and applying flexibility presents an open channel for communication.
- Intervening and Evaluating are both incumbered in-class assignments and rubrics, it is important to grade honestly. Being authentic, providing constructive feedback, keeping an open-door policy as well as including a place for anonymity are all needed for a successful strength-based classroom.

The strength perspective does not solely rest in positive wording. The strength perspective recognizes the importance of resilience (Saleebey, 1996; Saleebey, 2006; Weick et al, 1989; Weick, 1992; Staudt, 2001). If a student is not performing well, inform them and subsequently offer room for improvement. Be open as an instructor to see the process and be comfortable with the outcome. Also being mindful of transference and counter-transference feelings as these concepts are taught for students to understand with clients, yet infrequently are they discussed in classroom experiences which can resonate strongly on both the instructor and student.

CONCLUSION

This paper demonstrates opportunities for enhancing courses specifically in social work with the incorporation of the strength perspective. The chapter highlights the incorporation of ACP at Clark Atlanta University, the importance of positive language use in the classroom, as well as offers classroom activities, assignments, and future practice implications for course facilitators to be successful.

Utilizing the strengths perspective within the classroom can create a sense of unity that can positively influence students' work within their practicum and their future within the profession of social work.

Ultimately, facilitators that utilize the strengths perspective within their classroom will see an enhancement in their connection with their students. Additionally, clients that interact with the students in their practicum are more likely to experience a much more well-rounded social worker.

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