REFLECTIVE PRACTICE IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL WORK CLASSROOMS

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Social work literature provides analysis and strategies about teaching social work practice and its interrelationship with a diverse society. In this paper, we present a framework to aid instructors’ understanding of and response to conflict in the classroom, which is unavoidable. We propose the reflective practitioner paradigm along with the contributions of mindfulness, as useful for social work instructors in examining their practice as educators. We conclude with practice principles that integrate 3 bodies of knowledge: reflective practice, mindfulness, and social work pedagogy on diversity. These principles apply to the individual educator, communication among educators, and social work departments.

SOCIAL WORK CLASSROOMS include individuals from populations across an array of cultural groups based on factors such as race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, and ability. Indeed, Plionis and Lewis (1995) observe that students not only represent a wide range of cultural groups, both dominant and oppressed, but that individual students may also identify with the dominant group in some respects and with one or more marginalized groups in others. A significant body of pedagogical literature in social work has been developed, which provides analysis and offers guidance and strategies about teaching social work practice and its interrelationship with a multicultural and diverse society (Hyde & Ruth, 2002; Miller, Hyde, & Ruth, 2004; Van Soest, Garcia, & Graff, 2001). There is increasing recognition that the very nature of diversity and oppression is likely to elicit strongly held opinions and intense emotions, which can create conflict. Many educators have observed that teaching related to this subject is, therefore, unavoidably highly charged and complex (Akamatsu, 2000; Plionis & Lewis, 1995). Predominant in the discourse in social work pedagogy is the metaphor of “safety” in the classroom (Chan & Treacy, 1996; Garcia & Van Soest, 1997; Holley & Steiner, 2005; Hyde & Ruth, 2002).
In this paper, we contend that both the term "safety" in the social work classroom and the focus on strategies to achieve safety, are limited. Rather, we propose that the main concern should be assisting the instructor to respond effectively to those interactions within the social work classroom that prove challenging so that diversity content and related emotions enhance, rather than interfere with, the learning of social work content. While a considerable body of literature on social work pedagogy and diversity exists, its emphasis is largely on strategies. We propose the "Reflective Practitioner" paradigm as a helpful approach for social work instructors to use in examining teaching in the classroom (Schon, 1983, 1987). This perspective, developed by Schon, offers an approach to practice—in this instance teaching—which encompasses both the content and processes inherent in any professional practice. Furthermore, the findings of the effectiveness of mindfulness (Kabat-Zinn, 1990) can be applied to social work education, in order to help educators focus on the interactions within the classroom and identify their own responses. Since issues related to diversity and oppression are certainly relevant to and arise in all social work courses, we suggest that the reflective practitioner paradigm is applicable to social work courses, both those that are exclusively devoted to teaching diversity and oppression, and those in which other subjects are the primary topic.

There are two main models of teaching diversity and oppression in social work. The first comprises separate courses or modules in which the focus is on diversity and oppression content, whereas the second incorporates material on diversity and oppression throughout the core curriculum. There is considerable literature on issues arising in teaching diversity and oppression in those courses in which the prime purpose is to teach this content (Chan & Treacy, 1996; Chand, Clare, & Dolton, 2002; Garcia & Van Soest, 1997; Nagda et al., 1999). In contrast, there is less literature on these issues in courses in which other subjects are the primary topic.

In both separate courses and those that incorporate material, researchers and educators concur that discussion of oppression and diversity can lead to student distress, defensiveness, shame, guilt, anger, and feelings of loss and grief (Akamatsu, 2000; Garcia & Van Soest, 1997; Sullivan & Johns, 2002; Tatum, 1992; Van Soest et al., 2001), as well as to student censorship of their views for fear of being harshly judged (Hyde & Ruth, 2002). Social work educators are faced with the challenge of teaching the specific content in their courses and managing individual reactions and interpersonal conflicts that manifest themselves in classroom dynamics that are not conducive to student learning. A number of authors contend that more attention must be paid to the legitimacy of students learning about emotions in the classroom and to the inherent dangers of teaching content that challenges fundamental beliefs students may hold about themselves and society (Chan & Treacy, 1996; Garcia & Van Soest, 2000a; Plionis & Lewis, 1995; Sullivan & Johns, 2002; Tatum, 1992). In recognition of the daunting task of effectively teaching diversity and inequity in social work education, a growing focus is towards helping instructors anticipate the inevitable tensions and conflict that can ensue, in order to address the topics and
issues in a way that promotes learning for students (Akamatsu, 2000; Plonis & Lewis, 1995; Van Soest et al., 2001). Instructors must have considerable knowledge as well as highly tuned skills, to be able to provide "a particular sort of 'both-hand' holding that relies on the ability to 'contain opposites'" (Akamatsu, 2000, p. 91).

Reflective Practice

Schon (1983, 1987) studied a range of professions and articulated a theory of reflective practice based on his critique of prevailing notions of professional practice. Traditionally, primacy is given to formal theory, which is valued and taught in academic preparation of practitioners as if these theories only need to be applied in a linear fashion to real world problems. Schon proposed that many situations encountered by professionals are complex, "messy," indeterminate, and frequently ethically challenging. He observed professionals as they worked in seemingly automatic ways with unexpected or puzzling situations that did not fit theoretical propositions or match standard procedures. He noted that professionals engage in what he termed reflection in practice—while they are actually engaged with a situation, they are creatively applying learning from both current and past experiences and attempting to figure out what might work. Professional practitioners also engage in reflection on practice—reflection after the experience to derive learning and new understanding from a situation. Through these two intertwined processes, practitioners reshape their approaches and develop "wisdom and artistry." The reflective practitioner paradigm provides an approach that can be applied to social work education, in this case classrooms that present with complex, indeterminate, and "messy" dynamics. We have observed that despite the practitioner's (or, in this instance, the social work educator's) use of strategies to address these dynamics, classroom discussion can become conflictive, with student learning compromised.

The notion of reflective practice as a way of enhancing practice through reflection has grown in usage in health, education, and social work, especially in the United Kingdom. While differences exist in definitions and approaches, contemporary writers agree on the essence of the term. Reflective practice refers to the deliberate action of reviewing one's work after the event to determine factors that affected the outcome and in this way learning from one's own practice (Bogo, 2006; Bogo & Vayda, 1998; Cross, Liles, Conduit, & Price, 2004; Hallet, 2002; Hewson, 1991). Similar to Schon's (1983) notion of reflection on practice, when instructors engage in reflection on their practice (classroom dynamics and their responses, after the fact), they likely—although perhaps not knowingly—draw on three categories of knowledge (Bogo, 2006; Bogo & Vayda, 1998; Johns, 1998; Rolfe, 2001). The first category refers to prepositional or scientific knowledge associated with the practice and empirical literature of the profession. In this case, the knowledge base involves social work education, for example, factors that promote positive learning in the social work classroom (Fassinger, 1995; Garcia & Van Soest, 1997; Juliá, 2000). The second category entails experiential knowledge gained from reflecting on one's own practice in similar teaching situations and articulating
general and specific principles. The final category of knowledge arises out of instructors’ personal knowledge or self-awareness about their specific issues and needs. Reflective thinking allows practitioners to express their own practice wisdom gleaned from their experiences and build a “local, contextual craft-knowledge” (Atkinson & Claxton, 2000, p. 3), which can support further planning and actions.

This body of literature also acknowledges actions that emanate from what has been variously termed intuition (Atkinson & Claxton, 2000), or creative and automatic behavior (Schon, 1983), and referred to as reflection in practice. As such, it recognizes that not all practice is deliberate and the result of conscious planning; it arises from highly developed tacit or implicit knowledge or wisdom to generate solutions in the moment. This type of practice wisdom often has eluded concrete definition and explication and is, therefore, difficult to study (Eraut, 2002). It may require different approaches to preparing social work academics for their roles as educators, approaches more analogous to those used in preparing social work students to develop awareness of their internal reactions to processes in an interview (Mishna & Rasmussen, 2001).

In teaching students about clinical practice, the instructor explicates the content, makes links between theory and case scenarios, and demonstrates a stance that parallels the therapeutic stance one takes with clients. This entails recognition and containment of the professional’s feelings so that the helping process remains client centered. Similarly in teaching, reflection may assist instructors to recognize and contain their feelings, which we suggest increases the likelihood that they will act in ways that foster the learning process. Students are sensitive to the power differential between themselves and the instructor. As the clinician’s use of power makes a profound difference, so does the instructor’s use of power profoundly influence the student’s learning experience. When faced with a challenge, some instructors may reiterate classroom rules in a manner some students may experience as deprecating, with little or no exploration of the process. For example, in a classroom, conflict erupted in a disruptive manner when some students used labelling and name-calling to challenge the instructor and other students. The instructor responded by reading aloud the section of the course outline on expectations regarding acceptable classroom behavior. In contrast, other instructors may consider themselves and the students to be mutual contributors to the classroom dynamics and encourage an open dialogue about the process (Mishna & Rasmussen, 2001). As in clinical practice, finding a balance between attending to both process and content requires careful judgment by the social work educator. For example, when faced with a similar challenge, another instructor stated: “We seem to be having some difficulty achieving some of the group norms we agreed were important for a productive class. I need your help. I think we need to spend some time discussing and reflecting on this.”

Mindfulness

The essence of reflection in practice entails being fully engaged and interacting in the present in a professional role, while at the
same time maintaining a level of awareness that serves to provide information to guide further actions. The contributions of mindfulness can help social work educators attain this level of awareness. Kabat-Zinn introduced mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) in behavioral medicine over 25 years ago for various populations with chronic pain and stress-related difficulties as a complement to traditional medical treatment (1990). Empirical support exists for the effectiveness of MBSR in reducing conditions such as chronic pain, anxiety, and stress, and in promoting recovery from a range of medical and surgical treatments (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). Mindfulness has been successfully incorporated in treatment models for specific mental health problems such as mindfulness-based cognitive therapy for relapse prevention in depression (Segal, Williams, & Teasdale, 2002) and dialectic behavioral therapy for individuals diagnosed with borderline personality disorder (Linehan, 1993). Programs informed by mindfulness have been developed for a wide range of settings such as schools, workplaces, and prisons (Kabat-Zinn, 2003).

We propose that mindfulness may help social work educators enhance their reflection in action and hence their educational practices. Mindfulness involves attending to the moment-to-moment flow of experience with a receptive and non-judging awareness, and entails “cultivating and refining our innate capacity for paying attention and for a deep, penetrative seeing/sensing of the interconnectedness of apparently separate aspects of experience, many of which tend to hover beneath our ordinary level of awareness regarding both inner and outer experience” (Kabat-Zinn, 1990, p. 15). It is thought that recognizing the ubiquitous and automatic nature of reactivity helps to disengage the linkages between perceptions, interpretations, and responses and then allows an individual to respond through choice rather than to respond in a habitual and “mindless” manner. Thus, mindfulness enables individuals to respond creatively and skillfully to the particular moment, situation, interaction, or relationship (Alper, 2005).

Meditation is used to develop one’s capacity to be mindful. Emanating from Eastern and Buddhist philosophy and meditative practices, MBSR interventions separate mindfulness meditation from these religious, cultural, and ideological origins. Kabat-Zinn (2003) maintains, however, that practitioners who use mindfulness must themselves have a certain level of understanding and commitment to its fundamental dimensions and to practicing meditation in their own lives. Since it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss mindfulness practice in depth, the reader is referred to the extensive work of Jon Kabat-Zinn (for example, 1990, 1994, 2003, and 2005).

Mindfulness supports reflective practice and a stance that enables educators to face rather than avoid challenges within the classroom, to acknowledge rather than suppress discomfort, and to reflect in practice rather than react in a habitual way. Vacarr (2001) presents an example of a challenging moment in a graduate psychology course, which we believe captures the type of conflict that may arise in social work classrooms in response to discussions about diversity and oppression. She describes a classroom situation in which an African-American student expresses dislike...
of the word tolerance: "When I hear you talk about tolerance, I hear you telling me that I am something to be put up with. That doesn't make me feel very good" (p. 286). The rest of the students, all of whom were White, remained silent and some rolled their eyes, clearly frustrated with this statement. In the moment, Vacarr reflected on a number of issues. She felt inept, and felt torn between allying with those students who wanted the issue passed over, and between confronting the assumptions in language that beg the question, "To whom does 'our' language belong?" (p. 287). Specifically, she contemplated the extreme different meanings the word "tolerance" can have based on one's color. Vacarr also struggled with the polarity of choices she experienced—on the one hand, abandoning the student by avoiding the confrontation and passing over the issue and, on the other hand, separating herself from the group and appearing to be the "Super Teacher" (p. 289), who "pontificated on the need for inclusive language" (p. 289). Throughout, she was aware of her desire to "know how to respond" (p. 288) in her need to feel validated. She was able to use these reflections in order to respond in the moment to the student and thus to the group: "Let me see if I understand. You want me to know that it is hurtful to you, as a person of color, to have me, a White person, be willing to 'tolerate' or 'put up' with you. And, it is even worse [for you] to be told that it is my willingness to do so that makes me a good person. I guess I don't want to feel tolerated either. It makes me feel angry and resentful, and I would have to wonder who are you to be putting up with me? How might we want to change the word tolerance? What would you want me to use in its place? Does anyone have any ideas?" (p. 292). Vacarr credits her mindfulness practice as developing her “ability to respond fully to the tension and vulnerability that often accompany moments of crises, or ‘teachable moments’” (p. 293).

**Teaching Diversity and Oppression**

Both scholars and researchers emphasize that in order to manage demanding issues and affect within the classroom, instructors must foster an environment that feels “safe,” and that enables students to examine their own values, listen to others, and both challenge others and be challenged (Chan & Treacy, 1996; Chand et al., 2002; Garcia & Van Soest, 1997; Holley & Steiner, 2005; Nagda et al., 1999). Some evidence indicates that students and instructors alike desire a classroom atmosphere that is comfortable (Chan & Treacy, 1996; Hyde & Ruth, 2002), and that students rely on instructors to create a safe environment (Hyde & Ruth, 2002). Chan and Treacy (1996) suggest that out of a desire to feel comfortable, instructors may unwittingly influence classes in a direction that results in avoidance of conflict and difficult emotions.

Alongside discussion of the need for development of a "safe" classroom is recognition that the term “safety” may indeed be misleading (Holley & Steiner, 2005) and that disjunctions are unavoidable and can distress students and instructors alike (Mishna & Rasmussen, 2001; Rasmussen & Mishna, 2003). Boostrom (1998) contends that an unintended consequence of employing the metaphor of “safety” may be the implication that participation in the classroom will not
engender discomfort and stress for students or instructors. Based on their research, Holley and Steiner (2005) conclude that since discomfort and conflict are likely to occur in the contemporary university classroom, instructors therefore cannot fully protect students from the consequences of engaging in or witnessing such conflict. Besides, as Hyde and Ruth (2002) point out, conflict can be constructive and “a sign that important learning and reflection are taking place” (p. 242). Referring to primary and secondary education, but also relevant to social work education, Boostrom posits that educators’ messages about the need “to embrace, not to avoid, ‘shocks of awareness’ and the dangers of vulnerability” might be lost or misrepresented by the term “safe space” in the classroom (1998, p. 406).

The term “safety” does not truly capture the process that occurs within a classroom and implies an “all” or “nothing” state, which does not reflect how a classroom operates; rather, there are shifting levels of comfort and challenge (Hyde & Ruth, 2002). As the topic of diversity and oppression in the social work classroom is inherently fraught with risk and is, thus, inevitably unsafe to some degree, it is not feasible in post-secondary and graduate education to aim for safety. Rather, instructors must strive to be prepared to deal with and attend to interactions and conflict in a manner that facilitates social work learning.

The competence of faculty members in teaching about diversity is considered key (Nagda et al., 1999). Some authors point out that students look to the instructor to determine whether he or she can manage the classroom, which includes the instructor showing awareness of the group dynamics such as student resistance and the precipitants and functions of the resistance, recognizing his or her own level of comfort, and endeavoring to handle the tensions and differences that emerge within the classroom (Chan & Treacy, 1996; Mishna & Rasmussen, 2001; Sullivan & Johns, 2002). While needing to manage the classroom effectively, the instructor’s primary task is to maintain the focus on the content. A further challenge for the instructor is to not only prevent escalating and unproductive discussion, but to use ensuing tension and conflict as a teaching opportunity (Mishna & Rasmussen, 2001), which “can transform strained classroom events into teachable moments that enhance both cognitive and emotional learning” (Van Soest et al., 2001, p. 40).

**Strategies**

A large number and variety of strategies have been put forth in order to deal with the tensions and emotions that may arise in the classroom. The instructor is advised to set “a tone of open inquiry on the subject of diversity from the outset” (Chan & Treacy, 1996, pp. 217–218), and to prepare students to have their use of language questioned, as language has different meanings for individuals and is continually evolving, and to prepare students to be challenged for views seen as oppressive (Chand et al., 2002). Instructors are also expected to demonstrate behaviors such as raising questions related to diversity and self-disclosing (Akamatsu, 2000; Garcia & Van Soest, 2000a). While instructors are directed to promote an atmosphere in which students feel free to speak their minds and to bring up difficult matters (Garcia & Van Soest, 2000b), they are cautioned to prevent confrontation
that can be destructive for individual students and for the learning environment (Sullivan & Johns, 2002). A number of authors recommend setting expectations about the inherent difficulties that can arise unexpectedly (Garcia & Van Soest, 2000a) and it is suggested that the instructor acknowledge to the students that even with thorough preparation and excellent course design, a class can nevertheless deteriorate in the face of intense controversy (Chan & Treacy, 1996; Garcia & Van Soest, 2002a; Mishna & Rasmussen, 2001).

A frequently mentioned strategy entails determining ground rules such as treating everyone respectfully (Chan & Treacy, 1996; Garcia & Van Soest, 1997, 2000a; Tatum, 1992). Other suggestions include conducting mini-evaluations of each class, which the instructor can review with the students (Chand et al., 2002), and working with individual students as well as with the whole class (Chan & Treacy, 1996; Mishna & Rasmussen, 2001).

One suggestion is to articulate the notion of multiple social identities, whereby individuals may be considered disadvantaged in some respects, yet considered to be in the dominant group or to be privileged in others (Akamatsu, 2000; Plionis & Lewis, 1995). Another tool involves learning theories of racial identity development for individuals identified as Caucasian (e.g., Helms, 1990) and for people of color (e.g., Tatum, 1992). Knowledge of racial identity development can help students and instructors to recognize how their own experiences are context-dependent and to anticipate unavoidable confrontations that occur due partly to students being at different points of development and thus having differing needs and interests (Akamatsu, 2000; Plionis & Lewis, 1995). In addition, particular theoretical frameworks have been advanced as providing helpful perspectives, such as concepts articulated in narrative therapy (Akamatsu, 2000). For instance, examining dominant discourses can help students appreciate that “the biases embedded within the dominant discourse are hidden by their very ordinariness and this sense of ‘normality’ functions to preclude questioning” (Akamatsu, 2000, p. 87).

Garcia and Van Soest (2000a) determined behaviors identified by instructors that contributed to positive outcomes in highly stressful classroom incidents, such as making use of tensions and differences as a “teachable moment” (p. 154). They identified such strategies as setting and following ground rules, not condemning perspectives of students, and self-disclosing. They also identified behaviors that impeded constructive working through, such as not being prepared for conflict to erupt, not intervening in a timely fashion, not developing strategies to deal with such situations, and allowing one’s own feelings to interfere. An important finding was identification of the following instructor behaviors that helped students persevere when faced with difficult issues: encouraging students to persist; helping students learn from their differences and diversity; self-disclosing while keeping the focus on the students; and conferring with colleagues. Another strategy that promotes a positive emotional atmosphere entails utilization of classroom exercises (Fassinger, 1995). A repeated recommendation is for instructors to examine and resolve their own values and conflicts (Garcia & Van Soest, 1997, 2000b), through such behaviors as con-
fiding in colleagues (Chan & Treacy, 1996; Garcia & Van Soest, 2000a; Mishna & Rasmussen, 2001).

**Practice Principles**

The literature on strategies assumes that instructors have the sustained ability to pay attention to individual students and to interactions within the classroom, and to recognize tension or emotional turmoil that could erupt into confrontation and conflict. Furthermore, it also assumes that instructors could also purposefully use relevant strategies in the moment. Instructors, however, are often not focused on the emotional status within the classroom, as attention in academic courses is typically primarily directed to content (Barr & Tagg, 1995; Boud, 1999; Light & Cox, 2001). The reflective practice paradigm proposed in this paper can assist instructors to adopt a process-oriented stance, one that is more similar to the practitioner in a social work encounter.

In the interest of advancing teaching practices for social work educators, the following principles are presented. Although presented in a linear fashion, the principles are intertwined.

1. **Reflect in and on practice.** Similar to the challenge faced by social workers in direct practice, social work educators must develop both (a) the ability to reflect on their practice after the fact and (b) the ability to reflect in their practice as they are teaching. Reflecting in practice entails paying attention to the actions and interactions within the class and, in doing so, consciously deciding not to avoid the cues and dynamics that signal tension or distress. In the interest of covering the content and out of a desire to prevent conflict and discomfort, educators can understandably and unknowingly fail to notice the processes that are occurring. The instructor’s awareness of what is going on, his or her own self-awareness, and ability to respond will contribute to the classroom process and learning outcomes.

2. **Recognize the importance of professional development as an educator.** There is recognition that teaching entails unique and specific skills. Although social work knowledge and experience includes managing strong emotions, conflict, and differences, this ability may not directly transfer from working in practice situations with individuals, families, and small groups to teaching in social work classrooms. Hence, it is incumbent on instructors and their departments to pursue and support teaching enhancement activities (see practice principle 8, “Engage in Teaching Development Activities”).

3. **Solicit feedback from students.** Practice principle 1 (“Reflect in and on Practice”) may imply that the instructor is ideally centered and aware. Although this might be the preferred stance to which we aspire, it is not reasonable to assume that instructors can consistently attain and sustain this level of awareness. Hence, instructors must be open to hearing from students as a group or individually about their experiences, concerns, and thoughts. The educator, upon hearing from students, must consider and use this information to
become more aware and reflective in practice.

4. *Anticipate emotion and conflict and expect to mishandle some incidents.* The educator must anticipate that various degrees of conflict and perhaps disruption to the learning process will inevitably occur in the classroom, and must also anticipate that, despite their best efforts and use of strategies, they will likely miss, avoid, and mishandle some situations that arise. It is imperative to recognize that conflict or issues that are not addressed can cause distress for student and instructor alike. We argue that, with such expectation, the instructor is more likely to have greater awareness of dynamics within the classroom and be more able to reflect on his or her own behaviors.

5. *Along with ground rules, prepare students for the possibility of conflict.* We strongly support the recommendation frequently made in the literature that instructors develop ground rules or group norms together with the class. Ground rules can be helpful by providing explicit expectations and, thus, a structure that may mitigate conflict. However, a danger is that having ground rules that have been determined by the group may give the illusion that the students are “safe.” As the instructor should anticipate conflict, it is important that the students also expect that conflict may arise.

6. *Engage in recovery and repair.* Expect that, despite thorough preparation, ground rules and strategies, complex, unpredictable, and “messy” processes may develop in the classroom. Ruptures and impasses inevitably occur, at times even to the point of breakdown, just as they may in social work practice (Mishna & Rasmussen, 2001). Moreover, it is our observation that students’ and instructors’ discomfort mirrors the disquiet that social workers often experience in practice with clients, groups, and in teams; as such, this discomfort represents a learning opportunity. Indeed, many researchers and educators posit that the way disquiet is handled in the classroom can influence students’ future ability to manage comparable discomfort in their practice and, as such, becomes additional content to be conveyed (Garcia & Van Soest, 2000a; Mishna & Rasmussen, 2001; Van Soest et al., 2001).

Disjunctions may create confusion and distress for all participants. The instructor is ultimately responsible for helping the class to recover from a disjunction and to repair frayed relationships and senses of self. To do so, the instructor must be aware of his or her own emotions and reactions, and must also recognize his or her contribution. At times, this may necessitate providing an apology, for instance, for failing to intervene or for making hurtful or insensitive comments. Such recognition can foster dialogue and a search for ways to proceed.

7. *Consult with colleagues.* Even the most experienced instructor can be thrown when faced with problematic classroom dynamics that he or she somehow cannot resolve (Mishna & Rasmussen, 2001). There is general agreement that examination and analysis of the situation is
enhanced when it is not only conducted as a solitary activity. Brookfield (1998) observed that individuals use their “own interpretive filters to become aware of (their) own interpretive filters” (p. 200). Consequently it is crucial to consult with colleagues who can help the instructor think beyond his or her own “interpretive filters.” To be willing to engage in such consultation, an instructor must have one or more colleagues who he or she can trust.

8. Engage in teaching development activities. A collegial atmosphere promotes support and mutual trust among colleagues, whereby instructors can turn to and count on each other for both critique and encouragement. This then allows an instructor to disclose challenges in teaching, to reveal struggles and difficulties, and to seek out and be receptive to others’ analysis and suggestions. Furthermore, the art and skill required to excel in teaching demands ongoing professional development.

Conclusion and Future Directions

Paradoxically, the rhetoric of excellence in teaching has not traditionally recognized the complexity and challenges involved in teaching in our diverse contemporary society. Individual social work educators are involved in local and national professional development, such as attending workshops and institutes, and contributing to social work education literature and research. They are likely to be motivated to continue to expand their knowledge about teaching and their repertoire of educational strategies. However, individual responsibility is insufficient. Giving high priority to teaching excellence must also be championed and recognized by the department and the university.

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