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THE DOSSIER

Evidence Provided by the Nominee

Teaching Philosophy Statement

Developing from Naïve to Deliberate
Decades ago, as a very young, enthusiastic, and novice junior high school teacher in an inner-city, I was often asked how I was able to "survive." I would rather irreverently, but somewhat proudly, say that "I drive them crazy faster than they can drive me crazy." As I think about this now, I can easily see how flippant and insensitive this can appear, and yet I can remember the drive to be proactive and dedicated to making a difference by learning to manage the chaos, and how much I loved the students. I believed that my role in that position was to make sure that I did everything I could so that as much learning as possible could take place in the classroom and beyond. In some ways, my philosophy of teaching in higher education emanates from my earlier career days, though I am happy to say that I (and the articulation of my practice wisdom) have matured and moved from the study of children's pedagogical principles to adult learning theory and action (hooks, 1994, 2004; Knowles, Holton III, & Swanson, 1998).

Holding a Relational Stance
I begin my classes by telling students that *our* goal is for them to "get" the concepts and practices introduced in the courses and that *we* will do whatever it might take for them to understand and integrate new information as fully as possible. They quickly see and hear that I view being in the classroom together as a relational and collaborative practice with mutual and co-constructed influences. Ken Bain (2004), in a similar way, very powerfully talks about understanding what excellent teachers do to achieve success. The key, he claims, is in the teacher's *attitudes, faith, willingness, commitment* (see p. 78). Mary Rose O'Reilley (1998) talks of teachers creating space for learning to occur. I agree with both and yet need to extend their ideas to include that *both* teachers *and* students (especially in graduate school) have the responsibility to create a space of safety, freedom, and openness for attitudes, faith, willingness, and commitment to bloom. This is part of what I believe and expect adults to enact in higher education learning.

There are two major premises underlying this thinking about accountability to learning: community and process. I have changed my idea from it is *my* job (alone) to do everything possible to achieve student success to seeing this as a joint enterprise in which *we* (all participants in the classroom) must be actively involved in everyone's success, thus initiating a

shared sense of responsibility for individual and group success (i.e., it is hard to see how individuals can be fully successful if the group is not; conversely, individual successes do not necessarily feed the group's success). The second premise is that *how* we proceed will be every bit as important, and probably even moreso, than the actual content/material that forms the basis for the class. In other words, I believe that the process used in the class will have equal and at times more meaning than the content.

To ratchet this idea one notch, let me add the benefit of isomorphism, that is, having the learning occur at multiple levels simultaneously. If we want students to understand as fully as possible the key elements of a new profession, teachers need to impart the ideas by living the ideas—I need to do as I say, I need to "walk the talk," I need to live out the principles I espouse (especially when the going gets tough) so that they will be encouraged to do the same. This article speaks to my aspirations for both my teaching and therapy.

> *If we are not to be adversaries in the classroom, then what is the appropriate relationship between teachers and students? As I see it, it is that of good neighbors in a small community. The classroom works best when students and teacher perceive it as a place where there is a continuing conversation among interested people, similar to what one might have with neighbors and friends. A sense of community is not created by rules and laws but by a sense of mutual respect and tolerance. Good neighborliness cannot be legislated—it can only be learned by example and experience, and it flourishes in an atmosphere of trust and acceptance of differences.* (Singham, 2005, p. 57)

To do less is to confuse and dishonor the students. This does not demand perfection, just regular reflection and adjusting. At a conference once, I learned that successful organizations were those that built in time for employees to reflect, to question, and to comment on what was transpiring and how processes and decisions were experienced. I agree that a healthy environment is one in which participants, students, or members can comment on what they are noticing, understanding, feeling confused by, experiencing, learning, questioning. This in turn becomes a site of change.

Another major part of my philosophy is that class and class progress is *ours*—it is neither mine nor the students', but is due to our holism—in the systems vernacular the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Therefore, class is not a competitive or individual enterprise, but a highly cooperative complex of relationships. Strong and committed relationships provide both the impetus and the safety to operate at the level of the unfamiliar or in educational terms, one's frustration level or "zone of proximal development" (Chaiklin, 2003). It takes faith, but I believe that is how we get better and proficient at what we do!

The last big idea that I hold in teaching is that of the completeness in the complement of teaching and learning. My teaching only makes sense relative to student learning, growth, and development—they are coupled and tend to support each other. And my teaching is not only about imparting content, but helping students to develop in accordance with what Martha Nussbaum (1997) defines as one of the roles of the university:

> *If we cannot teach our students everything they will need to know to be good citizens, we may at least teach them what they do not know and how they may inquire. . . . Above all,*

> *we can teach them how to argue, rigorously and critically, so that they can call their minds their own.* (p. 205)

Reflecting on Complementarities, Symmetries, and Wholeness

So when I think about my part in this endeavor (and privilege), I must think of the whole and refer to our work together as teaching/learning. Teaching is dependent upon learning (though I am not so sure the reverse is true). There have been times when I thought I was brilliant in the classroom and wished that those particular moments had been videotaped for training purposes. And yet, when I have checked back to see if those moments of brilliance were central to learning (in an effort to corroborate my own conclusions), I have always been sorely disappointed—students have without fail chosen other moments, other examples, other explanations, and other stories. By way of a quick example, I once asked a former student who had been in at least three of my classes several years before, what seemed to stand out for him and his answer was, “The time I was having an extremely bad day and you nodded and smiled at me.” His response reminded me of the uniqueness of each student and how students experience school, their teachers, and the environment of learning.

A related notion that I live by is that each student will come to use and understand the material differentially, at different levels of sophistication, and at different rates. I am never disappointed by this and it becomes motivation for altering our processes. It requires the capacity to be flexible and responsive to students. Jane Tompkins (1996), through heartfelt and arduous self-reflection, tells us about her own journey of change from fear to faith:

> *faith that things will work out and that if I pay attention to the moment, without too much pressure to make it come out a certain way, I’ll be all right. Sometimes this means asking the students what they think and being willing to let go of previously made plans in favor of taking up the opportunities circumstance provides. And it means trusting my own instincts.* (p. 227)

I know that teaching is my life’s calling because no matter how tired, frustrated, or overwhelmed I am, the minute I cross the threshold into the classroom, my spirits are uplifted and I am energized. One of my favorite compliments from students is when they leave class “complaining” that their heads are spinning. Maybe this is just the graduate school version of driving students crazy. At any rate I would say students get their tuition’s worth!

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Teaching Strategies

As a family therapist practitioner, supervisor, teacher, and as a qualitative researcher, I am often asked by families, students, and researchers to teach exact strategies to achieve goals; I have come to think of strategies as conceptual ideas for practices and processes that are dynamic and can include exercises, but the strategy is not the exercise alone. Because I teach mainly experiential, and what we in Social Work call "practice," classes (students who are preparing for professional counseling practices in the field or preparing for working with clients in social service program delivery), I believe that I must concentrate on ways of interacting successfully. There is no formula for this as a practice or strategy can be most successful in one context or with one family and then dreadfully ineffective in another. My intentions are

1. To create a sense of community; members hold mutual responsibility for learning
2. To motivate and support students to learn and do exemplary work
3. To help students recognize their growing edges and potentials

My teaching strategies are a collection of interactions that I initiate. They are the following:

1. Being fully present and generous—you are the instrument.
2. Everything we do in this class is practice.
3. Practice, practice, practice.

1. Being fully present and generous. I set the stage for this in the beginning segment of our first class when I introduce the course and the expectations for all of us: to be fully present and generous and to aim to do that in every interaction in the classroom. I begin every semester with some type of introduction exercise to set the stage for sharing and accepting each person's uniqueness. I then tell some clinical stories—stories of my own, of previous supervisees, or clients to illustrate what people are hoping for, receiving, not receiving, needing. This is context for explaining my reasoning behind the rather unique and very high expectations I uphold.

> *"The class left the typical superfluous anecdotes at the door and focused on being interactive and introducing usable and applicable theory. I was riveted, as were the rest of my cohort, at this engaging instructor who initiated us into the world of family therapy and expected us to be present for the process." Paige (see letter)*

In fair course construction, I believe that evaluation should be proportional to the time spent on each activity. Consequently I often hold 50%-60% of a course grade to class contribution; this means participating fully in all experiential activities. Such expectation maps directly onto

what is required in a practice setting and can be anxiety-provoking for those are expecting a more passive student role.

I believe that students have natural abilities and many experiences; I also believe we are obligated to go beyond that and learn ways to continue conversations in the face of any kind of breakdown or conversational threat. I then explain that the grading criteria is quite subjective and wide open—I need to be able to make a comment about how they think, conceptualize, and put together ideas as an agent of change. My own behavior is to be fully present and appreciative of any worries, ideas offered, questions, and to be witness to their growth.

> *"I have always had an incredibly difficult time speaking in large groups, yet somehow I found my voice in Dr. St. George's classes. I believe this speaks to her ability to create a safe and welcoming learning environment as well as the way in which Dr. St. George challenges students to do their best." Lindsay (see letter)*

2. Practicing the Practice: Everything We Do in This Class Is Practice. This is very much related to what I have conveyed above—key to practice is being fully present and generous though multiply defined and experienced. Therefore, every minute of class is not just preparation for professional practice, it *is* professional practice. I will discuss my strategy/practice of questions as the answer or at least the path to the answer(s).

In a nutshell, I teach that part of the definition of social work practice is not rushing to offer solutions, but working hard to create solutions that are tailored to the situation and context. Therefore, the essence of good social work practice is designing and posing questions that will keep the conversations going and not accepting of the usual dead ends and getting caught in conversational stoppers (e.g., countering, defending). When a seeming impasse is reached we do not stop; instead we ask, "What other questions need to be asked or raised in order to get more information and a more complete understanding to get beyond this impasse, confusion, misunderstanding, and so on?" The follow-up is, "What/how will this question help us advance?" So, like good practice, we create the questions that will help us resolve or get past the usual places of breakdown or conversation cutoff. But we are not finished. Once we have co-created a plausible or possible solution to process, we are not done questioning. I ask once again the starter questions, "What are the implications of such action? What are the social justice issues we have attended to/neglected? What other questions shall we ask of our intended or proposed path?"

Students seem to easily catch on to the need to not rush to solutions and frequently comment on how difficult it is to "interrogate" a problem or solution, but they experience and see the depth and complexity and understand that they are not solely responsible for solutions, thus engaging in the *social* of social work.

> *"An important aspect of Dr. St. George's interactions with students is her ability to provide just the right amount of structure yet allow the students some independence to showcase their ingenuity." [A Doctoral Student]*

"Her contributions to the academic and professional development of students goes beyond traditional teaching styles as she challenges students to take pride in the social work profession and to exhibit confidence in their skills." [A Clinical Supervisee]

3. Practice, Practice, Practice. This is probably one of the most obvious, useful, and most successful (and possibly mundane) strategies/processes in teaching, yet I am compelled to include it as it is central. If you think of any endeavor it (e.g., sports, music, dancing, cooking) and those who are successful, the reason they all give is that they practice routinely and rigorously. We spend much of our class time practicing with role-plays: my goal is to give students the opportunity to practice without any form of evaluation, thus releasing them from being nervous and attempting to be perfect in something they are only beginning to learn.

"Not only does Dr. St. George encourage students to do their best, but she also communicates to us that she genuinely believes in our capabilities and potential, which is so inspiring given the pressure of a professional graduate program. Dr. St. George shows her students that she believes in them, which I believe helps us to believe in ourselves." Lindsay (see letter)

I am very possessive of my time with my students, but I also think they need variation, therefore I make it a habit of bringing in other clinicians who can demonstrate their skill in a role-play. Students are allowed to stop the interaction to ask the visitor about his/her thinking and decision-making in that very moment. This is the closest activity I can offer that is not a reflection *after*—this is a reflection-in-action—a skill I hope our students develop.

What I would like to share here is another kind of guest I invite into my classroom to offer a very different kind of experience and to teach the concepts of multiplicity and attending experientially. Toward the latter part of the semester I invite an improv artist who teaches the principles of improv and leads selected improv practice activities. I prepare students and ask them to please watch for and note any crossovers between this session and the ideas and practices we have been focusing on in our time together. They have no trouble seeing crossovers in to how to be supportive, to manage moving out of one's comfort zone of knowledge or understanding, how to collaborate, how to be appreciative of that which is different and unfamiliar, to be in the same uncertain circumstance many clients would be in, to have fun without it being at anyone's expense, how to deal with ambiguity and uncertainty, and how the silliness seemed to connect the group.

"There is something about how the material is presented, how it applies not just to family dynamics in theory but to interactions in daily life that makes it stick, for which I am deeply grateful." Paige (see letter)

A Note about the Use of Technology

I have taught online modules and courses and have found ways to make these rigorous and meaningful. But teaching clinical face-to-face skills is quite different and therefore, the technology that I use is videorecording so that students can practice and view themselves as well as receive feedback from me. Next to live observation with one-way mirrors, and

immediate feedback, videotaping in my experience has been one of the best ways to learn clinical work. They can safely "see" themselves, analyze their own behavior, and practice alternative languaging for future interactions—alone and/or with a supervisor.

I am currently proposing a set of post-master level certificates in family therapy to be delivered online. I am interested in developing online ways to enhance the development of practice skills, especially as we develop new ways to deliver clinical services and clinical supervision online.

A Note about Evaluation, Appraisal, and Assessment of Student Competence and Class Performance

I see student evaluation as a sensitive and critical part of exemplary instruction, and therefore it is a part of learning and not merely a statement that ends the conversation. That is why I include appraisal and assessment. I also believe that it is necessary to be transparent in these processes by explaining *how* I arrived at my decisions or feedback. For example, I explain my thinking and rationale for giving such a large percentage to class participation—namely, that it is what we are actually *doing* in clinical settings. Then I can provide many examples of how/where this is the case.

While I make known my criteria and expectations, there is no right or singular way to assist others with change in their lives or communities; evaluation of student performance is neither objective nor the same for each student. Students come to the program with different experiences, capacities, and degrees of sophistication. Therefore, growth and thus evaluation is captured by noticing and acknowledging their increasing skills and sophistication in the following:

1. Conducting a change conversation with coherence and flow. This is evidenced by a central theme that can be identified by observers and that is looked at from multiple standpoints with questions that at once gather information and provoke newness that leads to greater clarity, understanding, and hope. This is evidenced by the responses—the talk is not repeated, stalled, or circular, but clearly shows difference.
2. An intentional attention to the language that is used including the speaker's intention and the meanings generated.
3. The ability to reflect and explain the rationale behind one's practice decisions often evidenced in the analysis of transcripts or understanding by a practice partner.
4. An increase in persistence evidenced by staying focused, curious, and getting more accomplished in less time.
5. Utilization of feedback to modify one's work and apply new skills.
6. A self-appraisal of the quality of one's own performance.

Even though letter grades are awarded, even more important are the narrative appraisals/feedback that students obtain from each other and me. I use the word appraisal because I want them to understand that there are emerging skills that are recognizable (more often I can see this before they can) and commendable as well as growing edges and challenges that need attention. An important part of this is that the feedback is quite specific and regular. We all must identify the behaviors and words that are associated with our feedback. This part of my role is assessing student performance. I see this as tightly linked to helping my students

develop confidence in their steady growth and development as social work clinicians. This is also a gentler means to help bring along students who are more passive, reticent, or afraid.

And then there is the evaluation of the evaluation. Grades are very important to our students and I need to be ready to engage in the talks with those who are not in agreement with the way I have seen things. I see this discussion as developmental with respect to a professional exchange, requiring generous listening and understanding, and freedom to question and perhaps change or stay the same. The goal here is to remain accountable and keep the conversation going—walking the talk when passions and emotions can be high.

In a collaborative and relational environment evaluation occurs all along the way. Some may call it formative, but I prefer "feedback for going on together." At least once during a class, I will ask something akin to "how are *we* doing?" It is a check to make sure that we are accomplishing what we have set out to accomplish. I want to ask it early enough in our time together in the event that we need to make modifications. It helps me to better judge if our process is useful and it helps students learn to provide feedback in listenable ways because they realize we are all implicated in the success, growth, failure, or movement of our class.

One other means of feedback I ask for usually comes at the end of each class. I have a variety of questions that I ask to link time in class with the rest of their week, other classes, practicum experiences, and more. I can ask them to briefly share what was most provocative for them from our time together, how they might describe class to someone at home, a question they are likely to ponder over the next week, one word that describes their experience today, or what we might need to add to our agenda for the next class. Since I am asking the questions I do not usually think to answer, but students often call upon me to give my own answer to the questions I pose. That says to me we are in this together!

A Note about Teaching Beyond the Classroom
The classroom is not the only site of learning and teaching. I teach behind the mirror in clinical settings, online by mentoring authors who are working to present reports of their qualitative research in credible and rigorous ways, at workshops at home and abroad, and supervising doctoral students. I hold the same philosophical principles whether I am with 1 or 100 students. And sometimes I get to be in these other settings with those who have been in the official classroom with me!

Critical Reflection That Contributes to the Development of Scholarly Teaching Practices

As I do with my students, I also ask critical questions of myself to further my own professional development.

You know that feedback is key—what have you been advancing and developing?

An area that I feel strongly about both in my clinical work and in my teaching is feedback. In every class I ask for feedback, sometimes in the middle and sometimes at the end. I want to model mutuality and the regularity of asking for feedback on our work by eliciting comments about students' experiences, our classroom processes, ideas that will continue to live on through the week, practices that they are likely to try, or struggles they are having. This helps

me to shape and organize the next few minutes or the next class period or adjust the long-term plan.

What kind of teaching model are you?

I am lucky to have a partner who is also a teacher, and while not "official" learning we often debrief with one another to share successes and plan for modifications. I have also extended myself to junior faculty inviting them to come to talk with me about their dilemmas in grading, or with particular students. These conversations help me to reflect on my philosophical underpinnings and my sense of integrity and value in the classroom as I help them to ask and answer their questions regarding fairness, implications, and standards, and develop their positions and languaging for dealing with these classroom issues.

Where does teaching fit into your continuing career?

This question only came up of late because I was being consulted about my workload—the gist of that conversation was that my teaching load could be significantly reduced to bring my workload more into internal compliance with my academic colleagues. But I cannot have that, because it continues to be central to my continuing career. When people ask what I do for a living, I always respond that I am a teacher and take great pride in it. I aim to integrate my Research As Daily Practice (St. George, Wulff, & Tomm, 2015a, 2015b; Wulff & St. George, 2014) which is a systematic study of my own practices (for public consumption or for my own information) by looking for the patterns in feedback and students' growth and development to develop theory and more effective practices thus integrating research practice and theory of teaching and learning.

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