

# Moving from Unprecedented Events to Expected Success

## SWK 300: Introduction to Cultural Competence

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### Abstract

The High Impact Online Teaching and Learning Practices (HIOTLP) course provided great resources and tools to improve my skills regarding online teaching and learning skills. It made me think more about the importance of encouraging complete student engagement and looking for ways to empower students to take ownership of the class. Even in an online environment, a course can be intentionally designed to encourage students to work together and learn from each other. Assignments and activities can be created in an online environment that will provide opportunities for students to speak up, ask questions, even make arguments – all signs of student engagement and interest – accomplishing the goals and objective of the faculty.

### Course Information: Introduction to Cultural Competence (SWK 300)

#### Narrative

In thinking about redesigning my undergraduate social work (BSW) courses for the fall semester for delivery in an online environment, I was not as nervous or under the same amount of stress that I felt the previous spring. Being forced to do something in less than two weeks is a different type of pressure than when you have a few months to prepare. What I learned from the HIOTLP course was invaluable in the success that I experienced in my courses this past fall.

The course that I focused on redesigning in the HIOTLP course was Introduction to Cultural Competence, one of our program's required introductory courses. Most of the students that take this course are social work pre-majors. This class was taught online, asynchronously in the fall semester. The first component that I thought about was how to spark interest, even though for most students this was going to be a required course.

I created a welcome page on the class portal in Canvas with a virtual classroom, an introductory statement and video about myself, and an inclusivity statement to help engage the students. This was done to start building rapport which can be challenging in an online environment. They can see me as more than just a name on a screen. I also created a survey to get an idea of the workspace our students would be using in the fall semester as the university was offering courses 100% online. The results of this survey helped me to adjust

and adapt to their needs as online learners.

When developing the course content, I worked backwards starting with the Student Learning Outcomes (SLO's), what I wanted the students to learn from this course. This was something that I learned in the HIOTLP course. When developing the assignments, the focus was on questions that were not just asking them to find information from the textbook. There were questions that were reflective, asking the students to engage with the material on a personal level. For example, in our unit about personal biases, I ask the students to think about why they believe what they believe. It gives them the opportunity to really think about the messages they were given about differences from their family during their formative years. There is also a question that challenges them to think about something they believe now about people that is contradictory to what they were taught. This gives the students an opportunity to provide narratives and authentic expressions. When these are shared in a safe classroom discussion, it can be amazing for the students.

There were questions in the assignments that required them to post a video or even make a video response. This allows them to bring their true self to their responses. I incorporated the use of social media in their answers as well, i.e., find an Instagram account of an agency or organization that supports/serves/advocates for one of the cultures we discussed in the course. Students seem to become very engaged in any assignment that includes a social media component.

As I redesigned the course, I had to figure out how I was going to establish my online teaching presence, from what I learned from HIOTLP this presence had to be established early and often. Every week in this course I posted announcements, I made weekly videos, and I participated in the weekly discussion boards with the students. The announcements would be about our weekly activities or important university information – during the height of the pandemic so much information was being shared so often, this helped the students to focus on what was important for our class. The discussion boards were great spaces to check in weekly with students, framing questions where I can see exactly how the students are doing. It also allowed me to have regular contact with students like having that weekly class contact.

Through my online teaching presence, I wanted to set clear expectations for the students and what they could expect from me. The students were provided with a detailed syllabus which contained the required course components from our accrediting body – the Council of Social Work Education (CSWE), an outline of the course competencies that would be covered, detailed assignment directions with due dates, and a weekly course calendar that contained the week's activities. I designed the syllabus so the students could see clearly that the course content was aligned with the course objectives and assessments. These were changes that I included after taking the HIOTLP course. The students had a clear understanding of what was expected of them regarding online participation in this course, how they were expected to communicate with me and with one another, and information regarding expected netiquette (I created a cute infographic about netiquette). This was outlined in a section of the syllabus called "Student Expectations". I made sure to also include university resources that provided them with technical support for their devices and for the LMS platforms being used.

During the first several weeks of the course, I wanted to orient the students to the online environment, based on the results of the survey that I distributed during the first week of class, I learned that for many this was their first experience taking an online course.

I divided the learning into smaller chunks than what I would usually do in a face-to-face course. Instead of using one week to go through one chapter, we used two weeks. I established a clear pattern of weekly class activities and due dates using the online resources that came with the required course textbook.

Throughout the course, I wanted to be sure that the students were making real-world connections between what they were learning in the course and what they could expect to experience in their future internships and as a social work professional. This was accomplished through virtual guest speakers – social work professionals sharing with the students about their professional journey. This was also accomplished through specific discussion board questions and videos. I made it a point to often show the students how they would apply what they are learning to their future professional expectations. Overall, I wanted to create an educational experience through this course that would challenge students by extending their academic abilities, and that would also enrich their experiences as students. The student evaluations at the end of the fall semester were all incredibly positive and informed me that I was on the right track in online course delivery. The students were especially glad to have prompt feedback from me from the activities and assignments that they completed throughout the course.

## Summary/Conclusion

One thing that stuck with me throughout this fall semester and moving forward was a quote from bell hooks (who is one of my most favorite authors) – “Make the classroom a place that is life-sustaining and mind-expanding, a place of liberating mutuality where teacher and student work together in partnership.” This is the framework from which I wanted to approach my online teaching this fall. An important thing that I learned from the course redesign was the importance of connecting with students online. There is a way to do this, and, in our discipline (social work), it is imperative that we make connections with our students and model for them how to connect with others.

As our world becomes more and more technologically advanced, these human connections are being made virtually. It is a skill set that we must learn. It must be intentional; it does not happen by accident. We must be able to relate to our students in order to make a connection with them. In this age of COVID, we are in desperate need of making connections with other human beings, it is good for our soul and for the soul of our students. They are going through this pandemic in many of the same ways that we are – fear, grief, loss, insecurity. By connecting with one another, it helps our souls. This is another important component that I learned in the HIOTLP course. To try to accommodate this in my class I am going to be intentional about the activities that we do on our Zoom class activities in the breakout rooms, on the discussion boards, even in the videos that we watch and discuss.

Another important thing that I learned from this course redesign is the importance of a design where my students are fully engaged not only with the course content but also their peers and myself, the instructor of the course. Students do not care how much you know; they want to know that you care. I wanted my students to know that I care, so every week I would check in with my students – giving them space to share how they were doing. I would also ask myself -

how can I best do this using online learning techniques? In social work we are probably better than most professions in inclusiveness, but there is always room for growth. I love the principles of inclusive teaching – begin with the end in mind, have a plan and a purpose, and build independence. I wanted to be fully invested in my students’ learning throughout this course.

This HIOTLP course gave me great resources and tools to improve my skills regarding online teaching and learning. More importantly though, it made me think even more about the importance of encouraging complete student engagement and looking for ways to empower students to take ownership of the class. Principles that are very much aligned with the guiding principles of the profession of social work. This course also reminded me that all the pressure does not have to be on me to “perform.” I can intentionally encourage students to work together and learn from each other. I can create assignments and activities in an online environment that will get students engaged and interested, they will provide opportunities for the students to speak up, ask questions and even make arguments – all signs of student engagement and interest. I have the confidence now, more than I did in the previous spring semester that I can do this and do it with the expectation of success for my students and for myself.



## References

hooks, b. (2003). *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*. Routledge.