

Educator | Resource
OF THE MONTH

Educator Q&A



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1. *Is there evidence to support this teaching approach?*

Yes. According to educators, social psychologists, and other experts, reading helps develop empathy and critical thinking in profound ways. However, it is not just any reading that makes a difference. Factual text that limits itself to providing analyses, explanations, or steps in a process, the type of readings commonly used in our courses, does not produce these results. For example, a study by Mar and collaborators (2005) found that “comprehending characters in a narrative fiction appears to parallel the comprehension of peers in the actual world, while the comprehension of expository non-fiction shares no such parallels.” More discussion on the value of reading full-length books for developing empathy and critical thinking is provided in “Skim reading is the new normal: The effect on society is profound” by Wolf (2018). Read these pieces and more in the [Pedagogical Resources](#) included with this course guide.

2. *Tell us about your education resource. What are your goals in sharing this piece?*

My education resource on using books for teaching social justice is based on educational theory and relevant instructional strategies.^a This body of work also guides the course assignments, including reader’s logs, book clubs, and a multiple-book book review. This approach to teaching provides one building block in the students’ larger university education involving additional ways of learning, which in social work include experiential activities, research, and opportunities for practice.

Reading provides a focal point for the course, including some reading time in class (I allot 20-30 minutes most class days). The success of the course depends on student engagement. On the first day of class, I create a beautiful and colorful “gallery” of nearly 100 book covers and descriptions in my classroom. After a quick 15-minute introduction to the course, for the rest of the class I have the students walk around and consider what books interest them personally. The point is to create excitement. But the essential element to reading is **choice**. I include a wide range of books from which to choose, books that will serve as mirrors and books that will serve as windows, and I incorporate books from different parts of the world, but all with a very specific message of social justice. What I have found in using this pedagogical approach myself is the wide range of interests of

the students. In a class of 18, each student tends to choose different books (they don't all gravitate to the same books). This suggests that when we select a class-wide book because we find it particularly enlightening, it may not, in fact, connect with the students as deeply as we would hope.

As instructors we need to be realistic and patient when using this method. Many students don't read (books) or "fake read" (get away with minimal reading and fake their way through assignments). On the first day of my class as we were walking through the gallery of book covers, no less than four out of my 18 students commented that they hated to read and had not read a book in years. They said this to me as they thoughtfully looked through the book descriptions, and later their reflections have revealed a sustained engagement.

The course guide I present here is modeled on a course I created, titled "How to Change the World," an interdisciplinary course on social justice for students across majors. At our School, we open our BSW and MSSW social justice courses to students across campus, and many of us also teach interdisciplinary courses on themes of diversity and justice outside the School of Social Work.

3. *How do you engage your students in learning about diversity and justice?*

My approach to engaging students in diversity and justice can be summed up in words inspired by the writings of French writer Antoine de Saint-Exupéry: ***"If you want to build a ship, don't drum up the men to gather wood, divide the work, and give orders. Instead, teach them to yearn for the vast and endless sea."*** My goal, then, is to spark a longing for a just society. Kindling this longing sets the stage for learning about social work practice, social action, policy reform and so on. People are not moved to do things based on facts, or because it's the logical thing to do, not even because it's a mandate. Issues of justice are issues of morality. I start to engage my students in questions of morality and values by introducing them to [Kohlberg's](#) proposition on what motivates our actions: from a primal desire to avoid punishment to selfless engagement in civil disobedience. According to Kohlberg, the stages of moral development "can be seen as representing increasingly adequate conceptions of justice and as reflecting an expanding capacity for empathy."^b Through books, they hear the voices of social activists who model the highest levels of morality as they pursue their visions for a just world.

In teaching about the richness of social diversity and our intercultural world, I similarly strive to awaken and cultivate the students' sense of wonder and awe. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) describes the ability to wonder as one of the three basic capacities of intercultural competence—the others being the ability to listen and the ability to dialogue. According to UNESCO's World Report, [Investing in Cultural Diversity and Intercultural Dialogue](#), "ongoing discovery, a perpetual wondering" is the foundation of interculturality.

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^a Much of the work on reading instruction originates in K-12 education with direct applications to university education.

^b For a discussion on teaching as a moral enterprise and how values are reflected in how we teach, see the piece by Lawrence Kohlberg and Richard H. Hersh, "Moral Development: A Review of the Theory" in *Theory Into Practice* (1977, 16:2, pp 53–59).