

# Fostering Critical Relational Teaching in Social Work Education: Reflections on Shifting Pedagogy to Address the Current College Mental Health Crisis

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**Abstract:** *The U.S. is experiencing an unprecedented mental health crisis among college students as they return to classrooms from the COVID-19 pandemic. Social work students may be at an elevated mental health risk given their interest in the profession, often shaped by experiences of trauma and belonging to marginalized and excluded communities. This critical reflexive paper aims to draw on critical relational pedagogies, underscoring relationship-building and the co-creation of socially just spaces. We explore the fusion of relational and critical social justice approaches informed by bell hooks and Paulo Freire, examining their potential to shape social work education by centering power-sharing and love. We find utilizing a critical relational pedagogy enhanced our classroom experiences and learning, fostered stronger and more authentic relationships between students and instructors, and held space for the difficult but important generative conversations that often take place in social work classrooms. This paper includes pragmatic strategies to enhance teaching informed by this critical pedagogical framework. Adapting a critical relational pedagogy can help mitigate the negative effects of the U.S. college mental health crisis and COVID-19. Doing so may help students experience a sense of belonging in the classroom and know that their voices are valued.*

**Keywords:** *Critical relational teaching, college mental health, social justice pedagogy, social work teaching and practice*

Although May 11, 2023 marked the end of the federal COVID-19 public health emergency in the U.S., many important lessons arose from teaching in the pandemic. Crucial lessons related to teaching and learning during the pandemic can be leveraged to enhance the learning environment and support best practices moving forward in higher education. Changes in technology such as remote or blended delivery modes have been identified as effective and accessible to students (Imran et al., 2023). College students also experienced significantly more mental health concerns during COVID-19 (Son et al., 2020). Salimi et al. (2023) highlight the importance that academic support can play in addressing mental health concerns of college students. This is particularly important in social work, when classroom topics can include sensitive issues such as trauma, racism and child abuse. Thus, social work educators must stay current on best pedagogical practices to engage students across all learning modalities so no learners are left behind, regardless of delivery mode.

A critical relational pedagogy complements the current landscape, which places emphasis on relationships and the co-creation of social justice-oriented spaces. Intentionally practicing within this pedagogical framework shifts from the trending

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individualistic consumerist approach of social work education to the development of a more interpersonal and community approach that is sorely needed at this particular point in time (Morley, 2016). Uniquely building on existing relational pedagogies and highlighting them using a critical social justice lens, we aim to explore in this paper how to leverage an existing relational approach to social work education (Edwards & Richards, 2002) and apply a critical pedagogical approach that complements social work curriculum and core values (Council on Social Work Education [CSWE], 2022; National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2021). Importantly, this approach honors and prioritizes the relationship between student and instructor.

We also aim to examine how critical relational teaching can be implemented across a variety of learning modes (online, in-person, hybrid) to deepen student learning and the relationship between student and teacher, particularly beyond the pandemic. Given the ongoing challenges and uncertainty teaching instructors have encountered returning from the COVID-19 lockdown into a college mental health crisis, our hope is to encourage social work educators to critically reflect on their own teaching practices and determine how critical relational teaching can better support students, cultivate deeper learning in the classroom, enhance a sense of belongingness, engagement, empathy and empowerment. Finally, informed by our (social work doctoral student and junior faculty) teaching practice experience and feedback from MSW and BSW students, we propose practical approaches and strategies that enhance teaching and student learning in an environment that is quickly changing (McLaughlin et al., 2020).

## Background

The social work profession places relationships as a critical driver for change (Dolgoft et al., 2005). The relationship between teacher and student lies at the heart of effective teaching (Fox, 2013). Informed by relational-cultural theory (Jordan, 2017), which centers culture and identity, relational teaching in social work emphasizes the importance of interpersonal connections and seeks to challenge the individualistic ideology that dominates Western culture and education. Relational teaching aims to foster the development of self-with-others through mutual engagement, empathy and empowerment (Edwards & Richards, 2002).

Extending relational teaching, and inspired by Paulo Freire's (1994) critical pedagogy and bell hooks' (2002) concept of love, a *critical* relational teaching approach infuses and centers social justice to deepen connection within the community so that learning can authentically develop in a shared space of belongingness (Dillon & Pritchard, 2022). This at times can be a challenge to social work education (Liasidou, 2023; Sethi, 2021). Both hooks' (2002) and Freire's (1994) pedagogies integrate social justice and relational teaching together, applying a critical lens to this student-centered teaching approach, which is integral for social work practice to pursue social change as codified in the *National Association for Social Worker's Code of Ethics* (NASW, 2021).

Beginning with the onset of the pandemic, cultivating a critical relational teaching approach has been essential as social work educators have been confronted with challenges. The necessity of online synchronous and asynchronous learning without much planning

and preparation combined with the ever-changing nature of in-person learning during the pandemic has created barriers in cultivating deep and authentic relationships between students and educators and among student peers (Bennett et al., 2021). Instructors may have struggled to learn both the technical and pedagogical aspects of a new course modality in a short turnaround. These challenges have also thwarted a sense of belonging, which a critical relational approach to teaching could address (Freire, 1994).

With the advent of online social work education programs as a catalyst, the pandemic shifted the educational landscape toward remote learning. However, some social work schools were slow to embrace online learning, which may have provided additional challenges for social work educators in supporting students and navigating a new teaching modality to deliver content (Lee et al., 2019; Smoyer et al., 2020). Additionally, many social work educators and learners found it difficult to cultivate relationships and belonging within an online learning environment, adding to these challenges (Apostol et al., 2023; Bennett et al., 2021; Forgey & Ortega-Williams, 2016). As the college mental health crisis grows in light of these challenges, centering a teaching approach in social work that is relational and maintains a critical social justice-oriented approach has never been more important to address current issues in social work education.

Several studies have explored the current college student mental health crisis. Data indicate this student crisis cannot be unmarried from the COVID-19 pandemic. A systematic review of longitudinal studies examining college student mental health during COVID-19 identified that the majority of studies report worsening mental health symptoms from pre-COVID-19 levels, including anxiety, depression, mood and personality disorders, as well as increased distress and alcohol use (Buizza et al., 2022). For example, the National Healthy Minds Study examined mental health from 2013 to 2021 for over 350,000 students at 373 campuses and found nearly a 50% increase in self-reported mental health problems (Lipson et al., 2022). More than 60% of students who participated in this survey reported at least one mental health problem.

Additionally, Liu et al. (2022) outline priorities to combat the college mental health crisis. In addition to ensuring access to comprehensive mental health services, the authors suggest conducting intentional outreach for students with circumstances that may be affecting their studies such as stressors related to basic needs, caregiving, or forms of marginalization such as racism. A critical relational teaching approach is well-suited to addressing these needs.

Before delving into the specifics of a critical relational teaching approach, it is important to briefly note that critical theories inform social work education and practice. The theories include a diverse range of perspectives that scrutinize societal structures, power dynamics, and systemic inequalities to inform and guide social work education and practice (Dominelli, 2017; Fook, 2022; Garran et al., 2022). Critical theories in social work, such as feminist social work theory, critical race and queer theory, provide a foundation for critical relational teaching as they scrutinize dominant frameworks that inform social work education. While many scholars inform our practice, we recognize that three theoretical frames specifically inspire our work. Paulo Freire and bell hooks are central to this pedagogical framework because of their rejection of dominant or traditional methods of

teaching, emphasis on power-sharing and an intentional focus on love. Relational cultural theory (Edwards & Richards, 2002) is particularly appropriate for social work education given its cultural lens and emphasis on mutuality. We explore each of these pedagogical influences next.

### **Critical Relational Teaching**

Critical relational teaching places emphasis on cultivating an authentic relationship between individuals in the classroom. The goal is building and co-creating a pedagogical space using a social justice lens (e.g., attuned to power dynamics and addressing equity issues) to focus on the connection between the community. This allows learning to authentically develop in a shared space of belongingness. This approach can be applied across teaching delivery modes to prioritize the relationship between teacher and student so that learning environments may be optimized and more equitable. The following sections will briefly provide some of the theoretical underpinnings of a critical relational social work pedagogy.

#### ***Paulo Freire: Pedagogy of the Oppressed***

Freire (1994) famously challenged the “banking” model of education, seeing people as empty vessels to be filled with knowledge like a piggy bank. He argued that pedagogy should instead treat the learner as a co-creator of knowledge, which social work education espouses. He has also argued for an intentional focus on power, consciousness-raising, dialogue, and collaboration between teacher and student. This would enable people to create change in their lives, moving them towards liberation and social justice. Freire’s theory of education also incorporates “love” as a conscious act in the pursuit of social justice through dialogue in the classroom: “Dialogue cannot exist, however, in the absence of a profound love for the world and for people. Love is at the same time the foundation of dialogue and dialogue itself” (Freire, 1994, p. 89). In this way, Freire’s emphasis on love highlights and centers the student-teacher relationship, and echoes some of scholar bell hooks’ most profound insights on teaching.

#### ***bell hooks and the Concept of Love***

hooks (2002) posits that “love” is essential in teaching. Without love, she argues that there is flatness and distance between teacher and students, which does not serve students and teachers well and hinders deep learning, particularly in the humanities and social sciences. hooks uses the word *love* not merely in a personal sense but rather as a profound state of graceful being. She goes on to say that meaningful love relations can empower students and deepen engagement in the mutual practice of partnership: “Between teacher and student love makes recognition possible; it offers a place where the intersection of academic striving meets the overall striving to be psychologically whole” (hooks, 2002, p. 147). For hooks, love is a verb which facilitates social justice by fostering care, knowledge, and respect in the classroom. This means that teaching with love is profoundly political and central to a socially just approach, which is also conducive to maintaining appropriate

boundaries between student and teacher. hooks fundamentally connects deep transformative social change to love and this can be modeled in the social work classroom with students. This emphasis on love may provide our social work students with the strength to sustain their work amidst deep political challenges, polarization and turmoil.

### ***Relational Cultural Theory***

Relational cultural theory (RCT) highlights the importance of the relationship between the teacher and the student in the classroom. The central tenet of RCT, which has its foundations in clinical practice, is the idea that relationships are central to fostering healing and growth (Miller & Stiver, 1997). Edwards and Richards (2002) apply this theory to higher education and the teacher-student relationship in social work education, emphasizing the importance of mutuality across the relationship. In the classroom, the goal of fostering the relationship includes mutual engagement, mutual empathy, and mutual empowerment. Mutual engagement may include active listening from both the instructor and the learner. Mutual empathy means an engaged, empathetic relationship, which is particularly important in social work when sensitive material is discussed. Mutual empowerment can benefit both the instructor and the learner who will be empowered to learn and develop further insights regarding the course content. In this way, leading with the relationship can foster authentic learning. RCT is also an effective framework to engage social justice movements, particularly when applied to the fields of counseling and psychology (Comstock et al., 2011). Using this theoretical approach across social work curricula is ideal to recognize in both the micro and macro environments. RCT emphasizes the importance of the bond between the instructor and learner. With the development of the relationship, authentic learning and knowledge generation can follow.

We undoubtedly appreciate the challenges in applying these critical pedagogical concepts to our teaching in social work. Our current academic context and the stronghold of capitalist white supremacist structures and processes that diminish the focus on authentic relationships with students and colleagues make addressing issues of power in the classroom highly challenging. However, we contend that a critical relational teaching approach can help address these challenges. First, supporting anti-capitalist and anti-racist work in the academy can help focus on power dynamics, relationships and the interconnections between people working to collectively challenge oppressive structures in pursuit of social justice. Critical relational teaching can also bring about the cultivation of deeper learning, a sense of empathy, engagement and belongingness, and ultimately empowerment among social work students and educators. In the following case studies, we explore how critical relational teaching can support teaching and learning within commonly used modalities (i.e., hybrid, online, in-person). These case studies exemplify how critical relational teaching adheres and deeply honors relationships and the core values of our profession, particularly social justice (CSWE, 2022; NASW, 2021).

## **Critical Relational Teaching Case Studies**

### ***Joining Virtually: Hybrid Learning***

This was my, Emily's, first time teaching a hybrid course on Human Rights that met four times in person for five hours and had otherwise asynchronous modules. This was a unique structure, and after the first five-hour class, I had closely bonded with many of my 20 students. At the end of my first class, a student approached and mentioned that she had a bachelorette party scheduled for our third in-person classes and asked if she could join virtually. I was apprehensive to accommodate this because being a five-hour class I was scheduling many different classroom activities that might be difficult for a virtual learner to participate in. However, this student had already been a vibrant classroom participant and I could sense that she was committed to the material, so we discussed the potential challenges and agreed. Sometime after the third class, this student reached out to let me know her father passed away very suddenly and she was able to see him one last time because she had been home for that bachelorette party. Given this unexpected event, the student suffered many challenges that semester, including mental health barriers. While I couldn't have predicted this tragedy would happen, I am proud that I led my decision making using a critical relational pedagogy: one that prioritized the relationship between myself and the student, that highlighted the learner as a co-creator of knowledge, and that emphasized love. In that way, this student was able to prioritize her mental health while remaining dedicated to her learning environment.

### ***The Roleplay Assignment: Online Learning***

As a third-year doctoral student at my university, we are required to teach for the first time. I, Emily, taught a Macro Foundation Practice course that took place online due to COVID-19. The final assignment is a roleplay of a "Force Field Analysis" where students sign up for different prescribed roles in an organization and then have the creative opportunity to see how a meeting where major changes are going to take place would play out. The outcome of this meeting depends on the choices that the students make so they can understand power dynamics and change in a macro setting.

To allow for the most equity, I launched a Google Sheets document to all students at the same time so everyone had the same opportunity to sign up for a role. One student had not signed up and was left with the remaining role that would require significant contributions to the roleplay. This student had been shy all semester so I checked in to make sure everything was okay. At this time, she disclosed her father had been sick and she had a lot of anxiety about playing the remaining role. She requested that I swap her for a less participatory role. I wanted to embrace my critical relational teaching skills of mutuality, so while empathizing with her I explained that taking another student out of a role and placing her in a less intensive role would be unfair for that student. While respecting her feelings, I also wanted to balance the person to classroom environment. I asked if she would feel comfortable reaching out to her classmates and see if anyone else was willing to swap. This opportunity would allow her to engage further with the other students in the classroom and offer her an opportunity to build confidence in the classroom within boundaries we

agreed upon and felt safe. As bell hooks (2002) says, imposing boundaries is an act of love. Upon further discussion, the student decided to stay in the current role, but was empowered to participate more fully in the final assignment.

### ***Can't We All Just Get Along? In-Person Learning***

While teaching a required first-year Human Oppression course that explores various forms of oppression, MSW students can be particularly challenged and uncomfortable when they are tasked to deeply examine their biases, socialization and conditioning, and complicity in racism and other systems of oppression. Engaging in conversations about systemic oppression and complicity can be difficult and uncomfortable for many students, particularly students who hold significant privilege (i.e., white, middle/upper class, male, able-bodied). I, Gio, had been teaching Human Oppression in person during the later stages of the pandemic and had an older student enrolled in the course who came from a longstanding career in business and was new to the current language and discourse around social justice and social work. She would oftentimes espouse a “can’t we all just get along?” sentiment when contributing to class discussions around social injustices. While I did my best to prevent harm and address the discourses underlying this sentiment, at some point the student’s comments became disruptive to other students and tensions arose between her and her peers.

While some tension and discomfort can be fruitful in engaging in deeper and more meaningful dialogue around social justice issues, I oftentimes felt activated and triggered in our class discussions, especially given the extra stress of teaching during this particularly challenging period (i.e., the pandemic). During this time, I regularly consulted with my teaching mentors and course lead, and engaged in significant critical reflection to support this student and the students in the class more generally. Through the cultivation of both critical reflexivity and self-compassion, I developed the strength to further cultivate a critical relational stance, to critically reflect on the situation and how I was activated; ultimately, I came to realize the impact and vulnerability I experienced while teaching in the pandemic.

By engaging in a critical relational process, extending kindness to myself, and receiving support from mentors, I slowly worked through my own reactions and found the courage to respond to the student with patience and understanding. It was incredibly uncomfortable to take a step back and determine how best to support the student despite their difficulty in engaging with the course material and dialogue within the classroom, as well as balancing the needs of other students. I realized that imposing boundaries in this instance was an act of love (Freire, 1994; hooks, 2002) by respectfully moving dialogue towards a critical relational space, especially when seeing students struggle with their own critical reflexivity and boundaries. I was ultimately able to cultivate greater inclusivity and restore a sense of open and respectful collaboration and dialogue in the classroom community space, provided additional time and resources to the student to support their learning, and address power dynamics in the classroom.

## Discussion

We believe that explicitly naming and utilizing a critical relational teaching approach in social work is crucial in today's current sociopolitical climate and is an effective pedagogical approach given the mental health crisis that has erupted in the U.S. since the pandemic began (Panchal et al., 2023). We join other scholars who have argued for this more nuanced approach (Freire, 1994; hooks, 2002; Schwartz, 2019) to teaching. Often, particularly when there are mental health challenges, a classroom environment can be an impediment to learning and a sense of belonging. Prioritizing relationships through mutuality and reducing power differentials between teacher and student in the classroom can create an environment that allows for greater inclusivity, safety and the collective consciousness to thrive, which can support student mental health (Panchal et al., 2023).

Power-sharing was particularly prevalent from a doctoral student's perspective, where the line between student and instructor is blended. In some ways, mutual empathy may come more easily for a doctoral student who was recently in the role of a student. Keeping this "lifelong learner" mindset fresh by making a conscious effort to practice mutual empathy with students is one important way that all instructors can engage in a critical relational approach.

Given current neoliberal and consumerist trends in academia and social work education (Morley, 2016; Reisch, 2013), critical relational teaching is crucial and unique in that it challenges existing power structures and requires conscious and ongoing critical reflection. In the hybrid example, it would have been easy for an instructor to automatically deny the student's request because the schedule was pre-posted and allowing a student to remote into an otherwise in-person class may require accommodations on behalf of the instructor. The "my classroom, my rules" approach is cognizant of the "banking" model of education that Freire (1994) pushed back against. Taking a moment to consider the learner and their circumstances in light of the accommodation request reflects the mutual relationship between instructor and learner and is reflective of the social work person-in-environment model. Through this, trust and safety can be built to enhance student mental health and a sense of belonging.

In the in-person example, not only was there opportunity to cultivate love towards students, but also an opportunity to include oneself, the instructor, as a recipient of love. A critical relational approach can also be an act of love for the instructor. This may serve in enhancing teaching effectiveness and relating to students in an equitable manner (hooks, 2002) by addressing one's own needs as the instructor and allowing for inevitable difficult feelings to arise, and caring for them through a supportive community of educators and mentors.

Relationship building is hard work, and with students it can be particularly challenging at times, especially as they grapple with mental health stressors. Although a critical relational teaching approach prioritizes relationships, it also prioritizes boundaries. Imposing boundaries in the classroom and holding students accountable for their responsibilities is an act of love, according to hooks (2002). It is important to remember that the mutuality aspect of critical relational teaching goes back to the instructor as well.



Critical relational teaching is not a free-for-all where students completely run the classroom. Setting boundaries can be a form of mutual empowerment. For example, in the online final assignment example, the instructor set a firm boundary not to reassign roles but offered the student to engage with her peers and swap roles. This sets a boundary, offers a potential solution, and provides opportunity for growth.

The critical relational approach is also consistent with using a trauma-informed approach in the classroom (Hitchcock et al., 2021). A critical relational approach in the classroom involves instructor recognition of the pervasiveness of trauma in the classroom, and building an environment where students feel a sense of safety, support and connection. This also includes acknowledgement of difficult situations or feelings when they arise. Importantly, it is a context that provides compassion for diversity of struggle. As social work instructors, we are often in classrooms where conversations about race, diversity, and equity are discussed. Knowing how to lead these conversations in ways that are mutually empowering, supportive, and honor an individual's experience are critical given the subject matter of social work and the content that is frequently discussed. Using a critical relational approach provides a foundation for this.

### **How Critical Relational Teaching Supports Social Work Students**

COVID-19 reminded social work educators of the importance of creating a classroom that supports students and cultivates a sense of belonging. Creating a culturally safe(r) classroom environment is one of the ways to do so and may support student mental health (Bennett et al., 2021). Culturally safe means being able to be open and transparent in a way that is honest and respectful. It does not necessarily mean that the classroom will be convenient or comfortable. Fostering a sense of responsibility and commitment to student safety is pivotal during these critical classroom moments (Archer-Kuhn et al., 2020).

Although social work education has experienced challenges with incorporating a sense of belongingness into online spaces, there is area for growth (Liasidou, 2023; Richards, 2022). Since curricula are not delivered in-person, the instructor must pay careful attention to the language and framing of content in online spaces so that it is equitable, inclusive, understood, and trauma-informed. In addition, making a genuine effort to create an online learning community is critical. A photovoice study by Richards (2022) involving BSW students in a post-pandemic remote context elucidates the importance of building community at the university level. This study points to the importance of instructors being mindful of these dynamics when developing and designing remote content. Fostering a virtual community for knowledge generation, inquiry and dialogue can offer students a sense of online community in a remote setting (Liasidou, 2023). These factors can contribute to a sense of shared belongingness in online spaces, which is pivotal for a critical relational approach to social work education and may support student mental health and well-being (Apostol et al., 2023). Ultimately, social work values will guide classroom engagement, regardless of the delivery mode (NASW, 2021). Teaching in recent years has compelled instructors to be flexible. Instructors have adapted to quickly revising syllabi, learning new technology, and delivering materials via a new classroom delivery mode.

Lessons learned from these challenges remain: the value of relationships should be a driver in the classroom to support student mental health and well-being.

Critics of this theoretical approach may be concerned with power-sharing in the classroom and fear of losing a sense of control or authority to manage classroom dynamics. However, hooks (2002) rejects this idea. A classroom with power-sharing does not equate to one without boundaries. Students are still responsible for completing assignments, attending and participating, but given the collaborative nature of the classroom, they will be inclined to think critically and likely invest in their own learning. Seasoned social work educators who have been educated within a more traditional positivist context may potentially reject this approach. However, it is important to acknowledge that, like in many other aspects of society and culture, the next generation of students is changing and challenging long-held assumptions about best practices in teaching. As educators we must also be open to new ideas that will help foster student success and well-being.

Interestingly, there is a lack of publications from the United States related to the value of relationships in social work education during this time (i.e., social work student mental health crisis; COVID-19). Rather, international social work scholars have focused on the importance of relational teaching during and after the pandemic (Apostol et al., 2023; Archer-Kuhn et al., 2020; Bennett et al., 2021; Imran et al., 2023). Cultivating more spaces to dialogue about these challenges, as well as having future publications focused on the value of relationships in the classroom are crucial given the future of higher education, and social work education in particular, in the United States.

It was particularly striking for us when we presented on critical relational teaching at the 2022 CSWE Annual Program Meeting how much the presentation resonated with the audience. It was a well-attended presentation with a diverse range of educators and students in social work. Exploring cultivating a sense of love and connection with students as social work educators appeared to require great vulnerability. It also became apparent how challenging it is to hold space for these types of conversations; in our presentation, we intentionally provided time and space to open up and do this kind of critical reflection, which felt like a time of mutual engagement and support in light of the difficulties teaching at this time.

## **Implications**

Critical relational teaching can and should be implemented across learning modes. Regardless of delivery mode, the priority must be establishing and fostering a relationship with the student. Taking time to send a quick survey to gather people's names, pronouns and interests before the first class, setting up a discussion board to chat with each other in an asynchronous format, or making an effort to actively listen to your student – even if you're keeping an eye out for the guest speaker that's about to arrive – are examples of relationship building that are impactful and can set the foundation for a greater sense of belonging and an effective co-learning environment. Given the current college student mental health crisis, it is also imperative that students are connected to adequate resources and mental health supports; given the extra time and attention a critical relational teaching necessitates, centering this pedagogical approach may also help social work educators in

carefully determining student needs and referring them to adequate supports on campus and in the community.

Table 1. *Examples of Critical Relational Teaching Across Delivery Modes*

Intervention Touchpoint		Modality		
		In-Person	Hybrid	Online
In First Class	Begin class with weekly check-ins: an open space to report about internships, class, or anything!	●		
	Meet in person the first session.	●	●	
	Go over instructions for any asynchronous activities during in-person meetings.		●	
Syllabus	Plan your syllabus intentionally & ahead of time.	●	●	●
	Consider hybrid flexibility to be your friend - how can you take advantage of it?		●	
	What session topics are better online vs. in person? What would foster deeper & critical conversation?		●	
Student Mental Health	Be knowledgeable & aware of institutional & non-academic supports & ready to make referrals, if necessary	●	●	●
	Honor student requests, even if they divert from agenda.	●	●	●
	Recognize & honor the additional stressors that online learning may put on students.		●	●
Technology	Prepare your technology ahead of time.	●	●	●
	Make a Plan B (example: can you download a video in case the hyperlink is broken?).	●	●	●
	Have flexibility with camera rules.		●	●
Engagement	Work on building trust & rapport with students.	●	●	●
	Take more “classroom time” to focus on relationship building & engagement.		●	●
	Acknowledge & name awkward or stressful classroom moments.	●	●	●
	Be transparent about awkward online interactions.		●	●
Students’ Needs	Be particularly mindful of underrepresented students’ needs.	●	●	●
Instructor	Practice self-compassion.	●	●	●

Critical relational learning may look different across delivery modes depending on the context (see Table 1). For example, in a virtual classroom, offering camera flexibility may be extra meaningful to a newly nursing mother who elected to take a virtual class so she can balance motherhood with her dream of being a social worker. For a hybrid classroom, critical relational teaching may mean taking some time out of your in-person schedule to review the asynchronous activities to offer extra clarification and an opportunity for questions. An in-person example of critical relational teaching is honoring student requests to have an open dialogue on an important classroom topic, even if they divert from the instructor’s agenda. These are regular, day-to-day examples of choices that social work educators can make in the classroom, and likely already do. They may not be novel or messy case examples, but they are small and meaningful actions that build a relationship, trust and safety between the instructor and student. The difference lies in intentionally cultivating this critical relational stance in teaching, which can provide a renewed sense of focus and meaningfulness to social work educators during this time.

Additionally, being knowledgeable and aware of available institutional resources is also critical. Nonacademic supports can include available institutional and community health resources, child-care referrals, information about social services, graduation and licensure, emergency grants, and emotional and social support. Particularly as social work educators, knowing when and how to refer students when they come to you in distress can provide relief and deepen the student-teacher relationship.

Critical relational teaching should also be the focus of social work research. Understanding how students and instructors can benefit from this pedagogical approach can help strengthen the likelihood that critical relational teaching is used in social work classrooms moving forward. Social work students may also benefit from a critical relational approach to mentorship and field instruction. Approaching mentorship with this perspective can help students be at ease while also empowering them to build their skills and grow.

## Conclusion

Critical relational teaching is a pedagogical approach that can support navigating higher education given the new pedagogical landscape of social work education after the onset of the pandemic and ensuing student mental health crisis. Students of higher education, particularly social work students, may benefit from a renewed sense of focus by social work educators that prioritizes relationships and emphasizes power-sharing in the classroom, regardless of whether that classroom is a more traditional setting, online, or a blended environment. Explicitly naming and utilizing critical relational teaching can benefit social work educators and students as they navigate particularly sensitive and challenging topics in education. The practice sets the stage for collective consciousness raising, meaningful dialogue, and deeper learning to foster a sense of belonging and innovative and practical solutions to the ongoing social challenges at this time.

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