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Teaching Note—Teaching Trumpism

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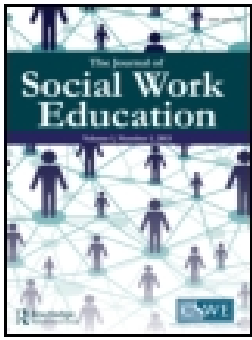


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ABSTRACT

The election of Donald Trump was an astounding moment in the history of the United States. As academics across disciplines and social work as a profession struggled to understand the election and its effects, several syllabi were crowd sourced to explain the phenomenon known as Trumpism. This article describes a social work social policy course derived from these syllabi, as well as the pedagogical choices and consequences of teaching this course at the graduate level.

ARTICLE HISTORY

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In May 2016, it became clear Donald Trump would be the Republican nominee for president of the United States. His nomination, and the social, political, and economic rhetoric surrounding the potential of his presidency, is often referred to as “Trumpism,” defined as a combination of celebrity, populism, nativism, and the use of the trope of “outsider” (Tabachnick, 2016). As the country grappled with “Trumpism,” academics began to discuss how to communicate with their students about this phenomenon.

In June 2016, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* published a crowd sourced syllabus called “Trump 101” that purported to use an interdisciplinary lens to teach both the historical and contemporary context of Trumpism. Almost immediately, backlash emerged in the comment section of the web version of the syllabus. The commentary from scholars of color highlighted the lack of attention both to issues of race and racism in the syllabus and the lack of contribution of scholars of color to the content. As N.D.B. Connolly wrote, “respectfully, this syllabus offers a disgraceful example of white methodological myopia” (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2016). In the wake of these searing critiques, additional “Trump” syllabi emerged. The most prominent of these was published on Public Books (2020) and developed by two historians of color, N.B.D. Connolly and Keisha Blain. Their course “explores Donald Trump’s rise as a product of the American lineage of racism, sexism, nativism, and imperialism” while centering the work of scholars of color.).

On Tuesday, November 8, 2016, Donald Trump won the office of president of the United States. Almost immediately following the election, the country and the social work profession began to grapple with the potential and real effect of his election. We found ourselves, as social work practitioners and scholars, discussing and debating how we arrived at this sociopolitical moment and what should be required of us as individuals and of our profession. As we began to formalize our discussions with each other and engage in reading, we encountered the Connolly and Blain syllabus and felt compelled to repurpose it for a social work education. This article discusses both the theoretical and pedagogical foundations of the course we created, entitled Trumpism: How Did We Get Here and Where Are We Going, and the challenges and rewards of delivering the curriculum. It concludes by making recommendations for others wishing to incorporate this curriculum into their work.

Table 1. Pedagogical goals of the curriculum.

Pedagogical Goals	Details
Provide students with opportunities to integrate social and political theories and data to inform policy analysis.	Key concepts include: Nativism, White nationalism and national security, neoliberalism in its entwinement with neoconservatism; racialized populism.
Focus attention on the complex linkages between social and economic policies, service delivery and access, clinical social work practice, and individual client distress.	Anticipate and dissect policy initiatives forwarded in the first 6 months of office, with a focus on: immigration, carceral politics, taxation cuts; voter registration and electoral politics; and healthcare. Assess how the Trump administration's proposed and impending social welfare and economic policies are affecting the delivery of and access to social services Examine the potential effects on clinical social work.
Analyze how systemic forms of racism and other systemic forces, such as classism, sexism, cissexism and ableism, intersect and inform the policy-making process and effect inequities, discrimination, and the erosion of civic and economic rights.	
Examine ideological imperatives and investments that shape social and economic policy formation.	Assess the political, social, and economic antecedents of Trump's election.
Strive to achieve racial equity, inclusion, and justice through both prevention and proactive measures and modes of intervention.	Examine current social work, progressive think tanks, and nongovernmental organization initiatives mobilizing to confront proposed policy changes and support communities most deleteriously affected by these policies. Learn different strategies (including use social media) for intervening in contemporary political fields of power.
Address the analysis of social policy and engagement with policy work through an intersectional racial justice lens. Attention is paid to how systemic and interpersonal/ intrapsychical experiences of race, racism, and racial equity are enlivened in their intersections with relations of gender, sexuality, class, citizenship status, health, religion, and ability.	

Underlying values

Along with other social work educators (Reisch & Jani, 2012; Reisch & Staller, 2011; Weinberg, 2010; Weiss et al., 2006) we argue that learning how to engage political systems is an essential component of social work's professional training. This approach is congruent with the Council on Social Work Education's (2020) Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards. We assert that social work education is an engaged, reflexive political praxis. To develop the course, we drew on an intersectional, racial justice framework (Collins & Bilge, 2016) to inform both our content and pedagogical goals. Table 1 reflects our goals.

Course content and structure

We broke the course content into four major sections. The first section asked students to think of "Trumpism" as a complex, social-historical phenomena. We used readings about Trumpism and the election to help situate this discussion. The second section presented students with theories that explain the political and economic antecedents that contributed to the phenomenon, and allowed students to identify the ways in which circulating political ideologies—the entwinement of neoliberalism and neoconservatism (Brown, 2006), racialized populism and nativism (Kazin, 2016)—were being drawn on by the Trump administration to inform policy and consolidate a political base.

In the third section, we presented dominant narratives about the election, and then asked students to use voter data to interrogate those narratives. In the fourth section, we asked students to apply the theories we explored, and their understanding of the electorate as analytical tools to dissect Trump's

Table 2. Course structure and content.

Session	Pedagogical Intention	Description
Section One 1 session	Defining Trumpism	Exploring definitions, introducing pedagogical goals, and emphasis on social media as tools for intervention and mobilization.
Section Two 2 sessions	Analytical Frameworks	Concepts explored included: neoliberalism and neoconservatism (and the effects of their entanglement); nativism and racialized populism; and White nationalist coloniality.
Section Three 4 sessions	Application of Frameworks to Social Policy	Exploration of different policies consolidating during the first 100 days of power of the Trump presidency. Five policy areas included proposed changes to taxation; immigration laws and border politics; law, order, and racialized carceral politics; reproductive health and the policing of sexuality and gender; Medicaid and the Affordable Care Act.
Section Four 2 sessions	Social Work and Cross-Sectoral Strategies for Intervening in the Policy-Making Process	Honing different intervention skills; critically linking policy analysis with specific strategies designed to reach targeted audiences potentially affected by policy changes. Brainstorm strategies and forming strategic alliances. Presentation of final assignment—challenged students to demonstrate their capacity to intervene effectively in policy arenas.

policy initiatives. For the final, we turned our attention to the various strategies and modes of intervention being deployed by a range of policy actors at the time of the course's offering. [Table 2](#) outlines course structure and general content.

Conceptual resources

The conceptual resources offered in the second section were foundational to class learning. We offer brief definitions of a select group of key concepts in [Table 3](#) but also invite readers to read source material so as to discover the nuance of definitions.

These conceptual resources served several pedagogical functions. First, they provided students with a set of lenses through which to critically examine policy formation under a Trump White House, and to grapple with Trumpism as a historically embedded phenomena and emergent political force. Students were expected to draw from these theoretical tools in both in-class and take-home assignments. Second, we invited students to explore whether the conceptual lenses contained the analytical capacity to adequately explain empirical findings (e.g., of voting patterns). In doing so, students were given an opportunity to understand the importance of holding theoretical tools and empirical findings in tension with one another to do effective policy work and analysis.

Evaluative tools

In addition to required readings and active participation in in-class exercises and discussion, students were evaluated on two assignments: The Speech and Media Analysis assignment (individually based) engaged the student in a critical analysis of one of President Trump's speeches, and the varying ways the speech traveled across different news media sources. We use the term "critical" in its Foucauldian sense (Wandel, 2001) to mean the purposeful act of investigating and highlighting relations of power and normative discourses undergirding social practices. Critical analysis further attends to how discourses framing textual evidence are informing of what can be known, or not, about certain social issues and subjects (e.g., refugee claimants) and the specificities of how to intervene. There were two parts to the assignment: Part one asked students to critically apply a theoretical concept introduced in class (such as racialized nativism) to analyze one of President Trump's speeches. The second part

Table 3. Principle conceptual resources.

Concept	Principle Author	Brief Definition and Defining Features
Neoliberalism	Brown (2006)	A political ideology and new form of capitalism emerging in the 1960s. Market logics come to dominate all aspects of intimate/social, political, and economic life. Features include: using market logics to determine the worth of individuals based on productivity; dismantling of the welfare state; and unencumbered economic markets favoring profit generation and economic well-being over other understandings of health and the good life.
Neoconservatism	Brown (2006)	Individualism and personal responsibility is favored over the collective good. A political ideology positioning the state as a moral compass and protector of citizenry and the nation-state. Features include: truth is morally/religiously driven and does not require empirical grounding; intolerance of mass culture and intellectualism; strong defender of heteronormative, nuclear family values; fierce patriotism; and belief in punitive carceral politics, strict regulation of the urban poor, and border security.
Neoliberalism + neoconservatism	Brown (2006)	Effects when the two unite: Civil liberties, free elections, rule of law have become desacralized; devaluation of political autonomy; transformation of political problems into individual problems (as consumers) solvable with market solutions; and certain forms of state power are legitimated (because it is good for the economy): sets aside legality, accountability, and truthfulness in favor of expedient responses and norms good management.
Racialized populism	Kazin (2016)	An emotionally charged political mobilization by mostly White (although Latinx voters were part of this groundswell) economically disenfranchised, working poor and threatened middle-class people (“the common man”). The folk understand themselves as part of a patriotic majority whose economic interests and political liberties are under siege. Threats come in many forms: multiculturalism as a threat to the sanctity of Anglo-Celtic/Northern European heritage; a tone-deaf political elite; and foreign forces’ (including immigrants) disregard for the superiority of American values and liberties.
Nativism	Kazin (2016)	A political ideology held by native-born inhabitants (mostly Anglo-Celtic and Northern European). Nativists believe they alone are entitled to stake claims of entitlement on the resources of a nation-state.

asked students to examine two different media sources’ coverage of the speech. The assignment honed students’ analytical skills and ability to identify the role of values, affect, ideologies, and rhetoric in shaping the policy process (Weiss et al., 2006).

The next assignment challenged students to stage a critical response to the administration’s 2018 proposal to undermine the Affordable Care Act’s Medicaid expansion. There were three components to the small group–based assignment. The first was a policy brief about expansion and the proposed changes drawing from the theoretical lenses presented in class as tools for analysis. The second component asked students to rebrand Medicaid expansion using the political ideologies discussed in class to target voters who did indeed vote for Trump in the election. This rebranding was presented as a 2-minute audio-visual advertisement in support of Medicaid Expansion that could be uploaded to social media. The advertisement’s format was left up to the creative imaginations of the student teams. In a final task, students created a single tweet synthesizing key messaging from the advertisement. The advertisements were then screened in class, with discussion following.

Pedagogy

Setting

It is important to note that the setting in which we taught this course is unique to social work education. Our Master of Social Work program operates on a modified block plan, and students take all of their coursework in an intensive 10-week format. Students' placements are national, so students in our course had practiced in a wide variety of geographic locations, including cities like Los Angeles that were particularly affected by policies related to border policing. This course was offered as a 5-week elective that met twice a week during the summers of 2017 and 2018. Our School for Social Work has an explicit commitment to antiracism that is reflected in a variety of ways throughout the institution. That the institution was supportive to this course offering may be understood in this context.

Pedagogical approach

We believe that an intersectional, racial justice approach to social policy pedagogy demands less didactic, and more experiential and problem-based, approaches to student learning (Collins & Bilge, 2016; Weiss et al., 2006; Zubrzycki & McArthur, 2004). This belief was reflected in the classroom and the ways in which we engaged students. We were attentive to who spoke and the ways in which students with intersecting marginal identities and perspectives experienced, and had a voice in, the classroom (Collins & Bilge, 2016). We closely monitored discussions for racialized, classed, and regional (particularly rural) microaggressions and made an effort to identify and name those when they occurred, as well as the power dynamics that informed them (Kang & O'Neill, 2018). We understood the classroom as a location for collaborative knowledge generation rather than for the delivery of knowledge. In Table 4, we offer examples of in-class exercises illustrative of our pedagogical approach.

Challenges

The biggest challenge we faced as instructors came in the second year of course instruction. There were two factors we believe influenced these difficulties. The first was that we were further away from the election and the policies had been felt by our students and the clients with whom they worked. The second was that groups of students had distinctive and conflicting learning goals for the course, which came into conflict with each other as the term progressed. Because online enrollment for electives is on a first come, first serves basis, the course filled to capacity within 2 minutes of its opening. Of the 22 students enrolled, 14 students identified as White, 8 as people of color, 10 students identified as queer, and 2 were trans identifying. In contrast to the first year the course was offered, there was a split in students' reasons for taking the course: half of the students identified personally with communities who had been most affected by President Trump's social, economic, and immigration policies. These students wanted both a conceptual language to comprehend shifts that they were personally and professionally experiencing and tools to be able to challenge existing policies and resist future changes. The other half of the class had close familial ties to areas that were strong Trump supporters. These students were sympathetic to the experiences of people "back home" whose experiences of economic and social disenfranchisement had led them to grasp on to the populist promises of Trumpism. They desired a language and conceptual tools to be able to bridge what they perceived to be gaps between their own professional ethics and the complex political sentiments of their loved ones. This contrast in motivations was stark and led to numerous points of conflict and friction.

During the summer in which our course was taught, two major themes dominated public discourse. The first was the realities of the White nationalism policies of the Trump administration (e.g., the containment of woman and children seeking asylum at the border, Immigration and Customs Enforcement raids on urban communities of color, denial of Indigenous sovereignty claims to land and resource use). The second was a series of violent events targeting those with racialized marginalized identities. In some cases, these events constituted state violence (for instance, police shootings of

unarmed Black men). All of the topics of the course touched on these events, and became points of trigger for students' deeply felt emotional responses. Power differentials between students and instructors manifested in tension and conflict, and often the students targeted real or assumed tension between the two faculty members, associated with their perceived differences in social identities and experiences. For White students, the affects of Whiteness were palpable (di Angelo, 2011; Hooks, 1997). For students of color there was fatigue, fear, and frustration with yet another violent chapter in the racialized history of the United States. As instructors, we were challenged to give voice to these emotional responses as valuable resources for mobilization and knowledge about how policies resonate in social fields of power. Yet we also wanted to challenge our students to understand that there was a professional–ethical imperative at stake in just remaining in an emotional register. This meant encouraging them to turn to the critical conceptual tools offered in the course and to help them unpack the complexities of policy formations and their effects, and to devise strategic ways of intervening. Yet this was a challenge. We found the classroom often stuck in discussions of personal and collective trauma and felt very real resistance to engaging with the course material we presented through a more analytical and thus cognitive/analytical lens.

Table 4. Selected in-class exercises.

In-Class Exercises	Pedagogical Goals	Explanation
Tweeting key learnings and insights	<p>It honed student's use of social media technology as a contemporary policy tool.</p> <p>It cultivated their ability to grasp the intricacies of the rhetorical forums in which they are engaging.</p> <p>It invited students to be critically reflective of the power of political rhetoric to affect policy formation.</p>	<p>Honed in on Twitter, President Trump's favorite medium to announce policy and rejuvenate his patriotic public.</p> <p>Experiential learning of the conventions and grammar (references) of Twitter.</p> <p>In each class, students were broken into small groups.</p> <p>Each group distilled key learnings for that session into a few key tweetable components. Working within the conventions of Tweeter, students created a Twitter message that was read aloud to the other class participants. Twitter feeds were analyzed by class participants for their effectiveness in producing punctuated forms of knowledge.</p> <p>Twitter messages were then processed through the online application Word Cloud—a novel means of visually representing text data, and specifically the resonance of key words or phrases.</p> <p>Discussion followed.</p>
Assessment of 2018 proposed tax plan	<p>Analyzing the political and historical antecedents that shape contemporary forms of political exclusion and disenfranchisement.</p> <p>Critically assessing the limits and benefits of drawing on empirically grounded data in relation to more conceptually driven frameworks to explain political phenomena.</p>	<p>Course participants broken into small groups.</p> <p>Each group considers the explanatory power of various concepts introduced in the section to account for 2016 election results.</p> <p>These conceptual frames were then assessed in relation to the potential explanatory power of two pieces of empirical evidence: empirical research documenting the racialized and class histories and politics of voter identification laws and gerrymandering of electoral district boundaries, and data detailing the demographic features of voting preferences and the spatial–political geography of voting patterns during the 2016 election.</p> <p>Students present their analysis to class participants. Discussion.</p>
Assessment of 2018 proposed tax plan	<p>Identify the different political rationalities or logics undergirding the proposed budget.</p> <p>Through an intersectional, racial justice frame, assess the possible social and economic consequences.</p> <p>Explore critical uses of social media to intervene in the policy-making process.</p>	<p>Break students into small groups. Each group is given the proposed tax plan and the following questions to help guide their analysis: What values, logics, and discourses are at work in shaping the proposed budget? Who will benefit from the proposed policies and in what ways? What will the possible effects of the policies be on economically and socially marginalized communities?</p> <p>Working groups then use the tools of social media to create a critically informed response to the proposed tax policy. Groups are asked to create a 2-minute broadcast to be posted on either YouTube or Facebook with accompanying tweet on why the Trump administration's proposed 2018 tax plan was problematic for lower income earners.</p> <p>The broadcast was to be directed at White-identifying, lower- to middle-class, suburban income earners (\$100,000 household income or below)—an essential part of President Trump's voter base in the 2016 election.</p>

A second challenge was that students were desirous of a quick and concrete fix to what they viewed as an anomaly in the U.S. political system. As one student remarked in class, “I keep waiting for the slides with stars and rainbows that tells us it will be ok.” As that slide never arrived, the frustration and fear grew in the students, which then, in turn, were projected onto us and each other. What was exposed in stark relief were the active workings of structural power, and its resonances within the double bind that plagues the profession of social work; that its investments in social justice values and imperative to champion the rights of socially and economically marginalized communities, and commitments to an ethics of care exist in an impossible tension with its historically sedimented positioning as a regulatory mechanism of the state that is always at risk of reproducing relations of power (Park & Kemp, 2006). What was exposed in this highly charged environment, in other words, were the felt impossibilities of the ties that bound our own respective, subjective identities and experiences to our professional identities—as social work educators and as interning clinical social workers—entangled as they are in the conflictual investments of social work.

Implications

While we tried to be both descriptive and directive about the course in the first session, we believe we could have better set expectations for class engagement and discussion. One of our colleagues, who teaches a similar course in that it attends to contemporary racialized violence through a historical and theoretical lens, makes a clear declaration in the first class meeting that the course is meant to be analytical (albeit, while also recognizing the validity of more emotionally based knowledges) and that affective processing will not be a part of the classroom dynamic. We could have also validated the difficulty of the content at the beginning of the course and acknowledge that emotions would be stirred and encourage students to identify and create spaces outside of the classroom to help process each other’s affective states. While we often discussed (between us as instructors) the need to limit processing in the classroom, doing so in real time was much more difficult, especially without a designated space for that to occur. Policy content, which has often been thought of as the less emotionally triggering part of a social work curriculum, is and will continue to be highly charged in this sociopolitical moment where racialized and gendered aggression are exhibited freely by our leadership.

Perhaps an even more effective strategy would have been to amplify the number of in-class exercises that gave permission for students to be reflective of the ways in which Trumpism relied on a range of affective states to drive contemporary policy formation, and to consider how their own felt states of rage, disappointment, and so on could be redirected in the service of political intervention. To an extent, the final Medicaid social media assignment provided precisely this type of opportunity, in which students were invited to critically engage analytical, affective, and creative registers. The result was beautifully crafted and poignant audiovisual messaging evidencing students’ capacity to integrate course learnings with their embodied subjective experiences to effect nuanced and complex social policy assessment and intervention.

Postpresidency relevance

As the course attempted to argue, Trumpism is not about a person, but about a consolidation of ideologies into a single new ideology, one that is not dependent on Trump himself to continue but certainly is amplified by the presence of a charismatic leader. While Trump himself has exited the presidency (but not U.S. politics), the forces of neoliberalism, populism, and racialized nationalism that have been long-standing themes in U.S. politics continue to be present in current discourse. Hence, the material in this course is timeless, and could either be used, as we did, in a stand alone course, or integrated into core policy and social environment courses.

As we watched the election unfold this fall, we were struck with the ways this course helped students anticipate and understand the election process. Our discussions in class proved to be quite predictive of the Grand Old Party’s attempts to restrict voting rights. The advertisements our students created

were strikingly similar to the ones we all witnessed on television, which harnessed populist discourse to make arguments for social programs like Medicaid. The Capitol riot would have fit right into this syllabus, marking a moment of White supremacy and government complicity.

It is important to note, as well, that increasing calls for racial justice, and a reckoning with systemic racism continue to feed Trumpism, backlash from White communities searches for a place to land. Perhaps, in some ways, this course is best thought of as a prevention course, helping students to identify and intervene in a time White defensiveness in the form of Trumpism continues to gain momentum against calls for a critical reckoning with our country's racism.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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