Social Work 790 - 011
Building Empathy & Communication Skills through Literature and Reflective Writing

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Credit Hours: 1

“Abrams: [Literature] expands you in every way. It illuminates what you’re doing. It shows you possibilities you haven’t thought of. It enables you to live the lives of other people than yourself. It broadens you, it makes you more human...

Greenblatt: ...For me the thrill of literature involves entering into the life worlds of others. I’m from a particular, constricted place in time, and I suddenly am part of a huge world – other times, other places, other inner lives that I otherwise would have no access to. (p. 31)”


Course Description and Content:
This course uses literature and reflective writing to help students increase self-awareness and self-reflection skills and to enhance their understanding of the complex and diverse ways in which communication occurs. The course will include readings of fiction, poetry and non-fiction pieces by authors from different cultures and ethnic backgrounds that reflect diverse approaches to communication among people. Students will discuss readings and write short reflective pieces in small groups with other students. The instructors will guide discussion of the readings and writings, helping students to learn non-judgmental ways of reacting to their own and others’ values and writing.

Course Objectives:
Upon completion of this course, students will be able to:
1. Articulate the value and importance in social work practice of practitioner self-reflection.
2. Demonstrate increased understanding of the world view of individuals from other socio-economic, racial, ethnic and sexual orientation backgrounds and be able to discuss some of the ways in which communication differs among people from different backgrounds.
3. Demonstrate empathetic listening and non-judgmental reaction and reflection.
4. Illustrate through one piece of reflective writing a discovery of a personal assumption that may impact work with clients or client groups.
5. Create an action plan for continuing reflective practice in the future.

Course Design and Format:
The class will be an intensive format over a Friday-Saturday single weekend. Attendance at the entire class is required to pass. Mini-lectures, class discussions and small group exercises will alternate throughout the weekend. Specific writing prompts will be used for short reflective writing pieces in small groups. Examples: Describe the suffering of another that moved you. Think of a difficult encounter you have had with another person in a clinical situation and write about the encounter from that person’s point of view. The approach is based on the narrative writing methods developed by faculty in Columbia University’s Narrative Medicine program.

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**Course Requirements and Grading:**
- Grading: Satisfactory or unsatisfactory.
- Assigned readings must be read in preparation for each day of class.
- Class attendance at the entire weekend is required. Class participation during discussions and writing exercises is required. Sharing writing is encouraged but not required.
- A 4-5 page paper will be due several weeks after the class. Several options will be given. Also a second draft of one short reflective writing piece from class will be required.

**Relationship to Core Competencies**
This course will expand critical thinking skills, assisting students to examine the hierarchical imbalance in clinical relationships and to better understand their own internal cultures and prejudices. Literature of other worlds and perspectives, reflected on through a social work lens, will help students broaden and illuminate their professional practices. Writing exercises requiring students to include themselves in a transformative situation will help them personalize professional engagement.

**Relationship of the course to Social Work Ethics and Values:**
Recognizing and understanding the impact of one’s own deeply embedded values is often one of the most difficult things for students. This course will help students begin to varied authors and cultures. Guided self-reflection exercises, both verbal and written, will help them to articulate some of their own assumptions and apply ethical principles to their professional practice.

**Accommodations/Special Needs:**
If you have a disability or impairment that requires accommodation, please contact one of us to discuss what modifications are necessary.

**Required Readings (available on C-Tools)**