

Recommendations for Addressing Spiritual Diversity

Throughout the Social Work Curriculum

Edward R. Canda, MA, MSW, Ph.D., Professor

University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS

Copyright 2009

These recommendations are intended for social work faculty, instructors, and professional workshop teachers. They are based on my experience of more than 23 years teaching about spiritual diversity in social work within an MSW elective on spiritual diversity in social work, HBSE courses (at BSW and MSW levels), a PhD level theory course, professional continuing education workshops, and consultations for faculty. My approach is influenced by cultural anthropology and religious studies (Canda, 1989; 2005). I strive to teach in a manner consistent with the CSWE educational standards and the NASW Code of Ethics. My faculty appointments have always been in state affiliated universities, so my teaching does not advocate for particular theological or religious claims of truth. To sum up, I seek to promote understanding, knowledge, respect, and skill for spiritually sensitive social work with clients and communities of diverse religious and nonreligious perspectives.

Since I am writing for a wide audience of educators, my recommendations

are at a general level, although they focus on the context of teaching within accredited social work education programs. Each teacher needs to tailor these recommendations for the particular context and students. For more detail, see the references and links provided. I will update these recommendations periodically.

### **1. Engage in Department/School Wide Planning.**

Since spirituality is not a universally accepted topic for social work education, faculty who wish to teach a new course (or even include content within established courses) sometimes need to provide extra justification and rationale for the topic and the approach.

- Examine the current CSWE Educational Policy statement and the NASW Code of Ethics for relevant expectations. See especially sections on nondiscrimination (based on religion, etc.), cultural competence (as religion and spirituality are everywhere features of culture), and, for the CSWE EPAS, human behavior knowledge (re spiritual development). For the CSWE EPAS, go to the online PDF version and search for key stem terms (religion, spirit, culture) for relevant passages.

*www.cswe.org/accreditation/EPAS/EPAS\_start.htm*. The Ethical Principles of the International Federation of Social Workers/International Association of Schools of Social Work also has similar provisions.

[www.ifsw.org/en/p38000324.html](http://www.ifsw.org/en/p38000324.html) <http://www.iassw-aiets.org/>.

- Examine the syllabi for social work courses at various universities, including those similar to your own in terms of state or private auspice, region of country, country, ranking, or other distinguishing features. Identify how these faculty persons were able to make a successful case for the course. For example, see my syllabus for an MSW diversity selective on Spiritual Aspects of Social Work Practice (<http://www.socwel.ku.edu/canda/>). You can find more syllabi links on this website (<http://www.socwel.ku.edu/canda/>) and on the websites of the Society for Spirituality and Social Work (<http://ssw.asu.edu/portal/research/spirituality>) and the Canadian Society for Spirituality and Social Work (<http://w3.stu.ca/stu/sites/spirituality/index.html>). If you use contents of anyone else's syllabus or website, give citations and credit.
- Make a clear case rooted in professional values for education and practice. Negotiate in a proactive but non-defensive manner. Build on student interest, practicum instructor requests, and research showing the importance of spirituality for social work and beneficial health and mental health outcomes.
- Use inclusive conceptualizations of spirituality and religion that are founded in the literature. See Canda and Furman (2010).

- Avoid idiosyncratic definitions or use of nonprofessional, religiously biased, or 'pop' discourse about spirituality.
- 2. Develop educational modules to use within existing courses or in workshops.**
- These can be small scale (e.g. one session or one portion of a session) if necessary to accommodate other content. One way is to examine issues that interface spiritual diversity and another more commonly addressed topic, such as diversity (e.g. gender, culture, disability, age, sexual orientation, etc.), human development, or mental health assessment and use of DSM. See links to educational modules (<http://www.socwel.ku.edu/candagrants/module.htm>) and numerous resources that can be used for developing modules on this website.
  - In foundation policy courses, relevant topics might include: religious influences on origin and development of social policy; faith-based services federal initiatives; current debate between different religious groups on policy issues, such as abortion or gay marriage; debate between secular and religious policy perspectives; religious roots of policy and programs in different countries : e.g. in USA, Puritanism in early American colonies, Settlement House movement, Charity Organization Societies, Jewish

communal services, religiously based persecution of Indigenous people and their religious traditions of healing; Catholicism in Latin America; Buddhism, Hinduism, and Confucianism in Asian countries; Islamic law and zakat in primarily Muslim countries; spiritual traditions among First Nations peoples concerning democracy and harmony with nature.

- In foundation HBSE courses, relevant topics might include: universal existential and spiritual aspects of human experience, such as the quest for meaning and loss of meaning during crisis; the impact of religious diversity on human behavior; alternative theoretical perspectives for understanding spirituality, such as ecofeminism, deep ecology, and transpersonal theory; potential helpful and harmful influences of religious traditions and social support systems; life cycle development including morality, faith, and spiritual transformation. In general, content on transpersonal theory needs to be addressed (e.g. Jung, Grof, Maslow, Wilber, Washburn) concerning self-actualization and self-transcendence, development through the life span, spiritual crises, altered states of consciousness, and culture and religious-specific means of distinguishing visionary experiences from psychopathology (Robbins, Chatterjee, & Canda, 2006)
- In foundation practice and practicum courses, relevant topics might include: ethical guidelines for appropriate use of religiously derived helping

techniques and support resources; clarifying interprofessional boundary issues between social workers, clergy, and other religiously based helpers; dealing with possible conflicts between personal, professional, and agency based value commitments (e.g. debate over abortion/right to choose in Catholic agencies); how practitioners can utilize meditation and ritual to enhance empathy, reduce stress, and increase life celebration for both selves and clients; how to conduct assessments of a client's spiritual perspective and its helpful or harmful consequences; how to differentially assess between psychopathology and spiritual transformation experiences; macro practice strategies that draw on nonviolent spiritual approaches (e.g. M. L. King and Gandhi) and empowerment (e.g. liberation theology).

- Regarding practicum, be sure there are field placement opportunities for students who wish to develop practice and administrative skills relevant to spirituality. For example, hospice, palliative care, hospitals with good partnerships between social work and pastoral counselors, mental health centers with spirituality related treatment programs (such as DBT, spiritually oriented cognitive behavior therapy, or consumer spiritual support groups), substance abuse treatment programs, immigrant and refugee serving agencies, and religiously sponsored agencies. Be sure that field instructors and liaisons are open to this topic and that the

agencies neither prohibit spirituality or religion nor impose discriminatory spiritual attitudes and policies or proselytization.

- In foundation research courses, relevant topics might include: issues in the study of human subjectivity and consciousness; the moral purposes and ethical dilemmas of conducting research; qualitative and ethnographic methods for studying spiritual communities; phenomenological techniques for study of consciousness and self-reflection; human subjects protection concerns in studying religious groups; problems in operationalization and measurement of concepts such as faith, religiousness, and spirituality; strengths and weaknesses of current research on spirituality related outcomes of clinical practices and religious/spiritual participation; insights from religious traditions concerning epistemology and inquiry (such as related to holistic and monistic world views).
- In diversity courses, be sure to include issues of religious and spiritual diversity as well as intersections between spiritual diversity and other forms of diversity (e.g. religious denominational positions on sexual orientation diversity, helpful or harmful ways that religious congregations address congregants with medical or mental health disabilities, or issues of discrimination and oppression toward members of spiritual groups).

- Many other courses lend themselves toward the topic of spirituality, such as those focusing on *health* (e.g. research on complementary medicine, the effects of religious participation, teamwork with chaplaincy and palliative care, and spirituality as sources of resilience); *mental health* (e.g. role of spirituality as support in recovery; consumer perspectives on spirituality; culturally competent and spiritually sensitive use of DSM); *aging* (e.g. significance of spirituality in life review and preparation for end of life, Eden Alternative and deep ecological approaches to residential settings for elders); *substance abuse treatment* (e.g. pros and cons of 12 Step programs; alternative paradigms for treatment based on feminist or Indigenous views; crises of meaning involved in development and recovery from substance abuse; understanding religiously and legally appropriate use of peyote in the Native American Church); *grief, loss, death, and dying* (e.g. stages of grief; crises as opportunities for spiritual transformation; near death experiences; various religious views on death and after-death; existential questions about suffering; spirituality as source of resilience); *youth development and child welfare* (e.g. contemporary youths' ways of understanding and engaging spirituality via affirming or questioning parental views, peer relationship, internet use; spiritual development of children and youth; religious based

adoption and foster care programs; parental or religious authorities misuse of religious teachings and power to abuse or neglect children).

### **3. Develop a specialized course dedicated to practice with spiritual diversity.**

- This is most commonly feasible at the advanced MSW level.
- The above topics can be packaged into such a course.
- The course should provide a comprehensive framework for knowledge, values, and skills for spiritually sensitive and culturally competent practice. It should not be simply a collection of unintegrated ideas and skills or the pet interests of the instructor.
- See my course syllabus for a detailed example (<http://www.socwel.ku.edu/canda/>). See other examples as indicated above. The new edition of the Canda and Furman (2010) (<http://www.oup.com/us/catalog/general/subject/SocialWork/?view=usa&ci=9780195372793>) book is designed to serve as a thorough textbook for such a course. Its extensive bibliography and Appendix C gives numerous other resources (print and online), including textbooks, that can be used to go into more detail on various types of spiritually oriented practice in a range of fields.
- Study abroad courses can be designed to give an international

comparative understanding of spiritual diversity in social work. Activities and readings should be tailored to the national context of the course. See my syllabus and flier on a course set in the Republic of Korea as an example (<http://www.socwel.ku.edu/canda/Korea/Kindex.htm>).

- See the comprehensive bibliography on spiritual diversity and social work (Canda et al. 2003) for possible textbooks and more than 700 relevant articles. The Journal of Religion and Spirituality in Social Work (<http://www.haworthpress.com/store/product.asp?sku=J377> (formerly Social Thought) is an important reference. The Spiritual Diversity and Social Work Resource Center (via [www.socwel.ku.edu/canda](http://www.socwel.ku.edu/canda)) (<http://www.socwel.ku.edu/candagrants/HFC4.htm>) connects to essays, bibliographies, a large photo gallery, and numerous websites on spirituality in social work and health.
- Use internet search engines to find photos, interviews, podcasts, and brief videos to supplement lectures.
- Use ‘google scholar (or similar search engines),’ university library electronic databases, and amazon.com or other online booksellers for literature searching.
- For textbooks, I recommend using books that give a clear social work perspective along with interdisciplinary insights. The textbook I co-

authored is designed for this purpose (Canda and Furman, 1999; second edition, 2010, with Oxford University Press is now available). All of the textbooks listed in the Canda et al. (2003) bibliography have advantages, as described there. See also the interdisciplinary bibliography on spirituality in social work and health within this website. Every textbook should be scrutinized for its consistency with professional values, state of the art theory and research, and relevance to particular course objectives.

- The Canda & Furman book is designed for both course teaching and general reading. The exercises at the end of each chapter are very helpful for students to link contents to their personal and professional growth. Note in my syllabus how I tailor the instructions for journaling about the exercises for course purposes. Also, I begin introducing practice applications alongside materials in the chapters from the first or second session, such as teaching stress management and basic meditation practices. This way, students (who are usually eager and impatient for 'how to do it' information) can weave between the cognitive and experiential learning guided by the book and practice applications. Although I go through the chapters sequentially, I bring in the application material little by little throughout the semester and then focus on that intensively in the last third of semester.

- The new edition of the book has more information on practice in various settings, updated interdisciplinary insights on theory and helping practice, and some international perspective.

#### **4. Course syllabi should be constructed carefully.**

- A standard format should be established for master course syllabi so that course syllabi/outlines for particular sections can be compared with core objectives, rationale, and other content indicators required for every section of a course.
- Identify specific content on religious or spiritual diversity within objectives, readings, and assignments, as relevant to all courses in the curriculum.
- Every course syllabus should mention policies pertaining to students' rights to accommodations based on religious diversity. For example, if exams or due dates conflict with times of special religious observance, accommodations should be made.

#### **5. Experiential exercises.**

Experiential exercises are important for students to develop awareness, values, relationship and communication styles, and particular skills and techniques for practice. These might include relaxation and meditation techniques, quiet, attentive walking, attention to breath, journaling, active

imagination, group drumming, introspective exercises, small group discussions, role plays, etc.) However, they can be challenging and provocative. So they should be well planned and facilitated. Here are some guidelines for use of experiential exercises. See also the guidelines in my syllabus.

1. Establish values for professional respectful communication and rapport.
2. Be inclusive in attitude and behavior.
3. Assess spiritual backgrounds and sensitivities of students that might determine the types of exercises that would be appropriate.
4. Obtain explicit oral consensus supporting experiential learning.
5. Allow for degrees of participation by comfort level in specific exercise by explaining each ahead of time, asking for questions, allowing for private expressions of discomfort or concern, and indicating when students have an option for simply observing versus full engagement.
6. De-link exercises from sectarian origins, if any. Do not require direct participation in any religion specific activity.
7. Observation and educational field visits of a variety religious agencies and sites can be appropriate within the context of clear course objectives. Do not limit to only one religion.
8. Help students identify specific spiritual traditions, support groups,

stress reduction and growth-promoting activities to pursue on own

### **Further Tips**

- Begin the course or first module on spirituality in a course with clear explicit connection to professional purposes, values, and ethics. Explain the meaning and significance of spirituality and spiritual diversity.
- Establish guidelines for class discussion that promote respect for diversity, openness to different points of view, willingness to agree to disagree, and to work through disagreements in a respectful way. These should be in the syllabus and presented orally.
- In lectures, build on your areas of special knowledge, expertise, enthusiasm, and familiarity.
- Bring invited presenters to address topics with which you are not thoroughly familiar and which help link class materials to regional practice issues.
- In lectures and guest presentations, introduce students to several religious and non-religious spiritual perspectives including some that are especially relevant to local populations and some that show significant contrast between perspectives.
- Do not cover so many materials that the course becomes superficial. Choose certain topics to go into significant depths and details.

- Give in-class exercises and homework assignments that help students to connect classroom learning to their practicum and professional practice.
- In lectures, supplement verbal presentation with use of stories, images, experiential exercises, small group discussions, and use of internet videos etc.
- In each class session, make sure there is a mixture of these approaches.
- In a dedicated course, choose at least two or three spiritually related practice skills that are non-religious (including assessment and helping activities) to teach students in depth and to give them an opportunity to practice in the class. Explain how these can be related to religion-specific practices when clients desire.
- Emphasize that spiritually sensitive practice is based on the quality of the helping relationship and that skills and techniques should follow from that relationship.
- Use resources on the Spiritual Diversity and Social Work Resource Center to supplement the material and the lectures.

### References

- Canda, E. R. (1989). Religious content in social work education: A comparative approach. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 25(1), 36-45.
- Canda, E. R. & Furman, L. E. (2010). *Spiritual diversity in social work practice: The heart of helping, second edition*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Canda, E. R., Nakashima, M., Burgess, V., Russel, R. & Barfield, S. T. (2003). *Spiritual diversity and social work: A comprehensive bibliography with annotations, second edition*. Alexandria, VA: Council on Social Work Education. (Also available in electronic searchable form at [www.cswe.org](http://www.cswe.org).)

Canda, E. R. (2005). Integrating religion and social work in dual degree programs. *Journal of Religion and Spirituality in Social Work: Social Thought* 24(1/2), 79-91. (Also a book chapter in *Social Work and Divinity* edited by Daniel B. Lee and .)

Robbins, S. P., Chatterjee, P., & Canda, E. R. (2006). *Contemporary human behavior theory: A critical perspective for social work, second edition*. Boston: Pearson Allyn & Bacon.

Revised August 2009