

How Do I Support My Students' Learning in Family Science? Teaching Philosophy and Practice as a Family Science Teacher

Soyoung Lee, Ph.D., CFLE
Montclair State University

ABSTRACT. This article reflects on my journey as a junior faculty member and certified family life educator who teaches in the field of family science. Effective and constructive teaching is more than just delivering information to students. It is a dynamic and complex process of stimulating students' desire to learn, facilitating their intellectual and emotional growth, and preparing them to become competent professionals. My main goal in teaching is to prepare my students to become (a) able to apply appropriate theories to research and practice in the area of family science; (b) sensitive to cultural diversity as it relates to their work; and (c) able to collaborate effectively with community members, their families, and other family professionals. In order to support each of my students' active learning and to approach teaching in an integrative fashion, I utilize a service-learning option in teaching a course that develops skills to work with diverse families and children. More specifically, I discuss the course requirements, learning outcomes, and challenges it presents. Through a continuous journey of practicing effective and constructive teaching, I devote myself to supporting my students' active learning and becoming a more effective teacher in family science.

During the first five years of my faculty career, I have taught courses related to the impact of dynamic interactions between the community and its members on individual, family, and community well-being; cultural diversity with global perspectives; and family life education program development and evaluation. How did it all begin? My interest in teaching these courses is strongly linked to my education and careers at Seoul National University, Virginia Tech, the University of New Mexico, and Montclair State University, which were focused on the primary areas specified in the Certified Family Life Education (CFLE) standards by the National Council on Family Relations (NCFR) (2011). My teaching goals and strategies are also strongly tied to my own multicultural research experiences regarding the issues of community and families. More specifically, my main research interest is family diversity within a larger community context and building communities to support families and their member's well-being. I have paid particular attention to how individual community members and their families identify their needs within a community, develop problem-solving strategies, and implement actions as a group in order to deal with these issues grounded in community capacity theory (Bowen, Martin, Mancini, & Nelson, 2000; Mancini, Bowen, & Martin, 2005; Mancini, Martin, Bowen, 2003). This is a theoretical framework that promotes community well-being by utilizing community members' competences in, and responsibility for, collective efforts in order to confront challenges.

Direct correspondence to Dr. Soyoung Lee at leeso@mail.montclair.edu.

Another research interest I have is improving the understanding of adult learning and decision making. I am interested in understanding how individual adults and their families make important life decisions, and how relationships with significant others influence their decisions throughout decision making processes. I am also interested in gaining insight on how family professionals can support individuals and families within diverse community settings to make decisions that advance the quality of their lives (Creamer, Lee, & Laughlin, 2006; Meszaros, Creamer, & Lee, 2009). All these research and teaching experiences have led me to focus my teaching on supporting my students' learning in the context of family life education by incorporating active learning in diverse community settings. In the following section, I describe my teaching philosophy based on my teaching experiences and personal reflections.

Teaching Philosophy

My main goal in teaching is to prepare my students to become competent professionals in the field of family science. They must be (a) able to apply appropriate theories to research and practice in the area of family science; (b) sensitive to cultural diversity as it relates to their work; and, (c) able to collaborate effectively with community members, their families, and other family professionals.

Transformation of Knowledge into Practice

Effective and constructive teaching goes beyond instructing students. It is a dynamic and complex process of transforming knowledge that students acquire into beneficial applications in the real world (Bain, 2004). Students actively work with material and absorb it in different ways depending on their individual information processing and learning strategies (Powell & Cassidy, 2007). However, they must all be able to translate the conceptual information into practical actions in their professional and everyday lives. As a teacher, I believe in providing a safe environment in which to practice the integration and application of all the knowledge and skills that my students have gained.

Appreciation of Diversity

As someone who has lived in several countries, including the United States, Korea, Saudi Arabia, and Australia, I have gained an appreciation for being sensitive to diversity with a global perspective. As future professionals in the field of family science, students must be open to the many similarities and differences among various people, families, and communities while working with them. They must be comfortable with differences and be able to make culturally sensitive decisions during their practice. To do so, first, students must understand their own biases, values, and attitudes toward diversity. Then, they must understand how their own value systems will impact their professional judgments. Finally, they must gain insight into how complex professional judgments must be in order to support families and their members when working within different cultural contexts (Hollinger, 2007). I believe that providing different types of learning opportunities that encourage students to actually interact with people who have different backgrounds helps students to develop their sensitivities to diverse families and to become more respectful of diverse views and experiences in various families and cultures. They also gain insight on how influential their value systems are when they

make professional judgments to support families and their members in practice.

Collaboration

In order to best produce individual, family, and community well-being, effective collaboration is needed among the many professionals working with diverse families and children (Doherty, 2003). Students in the field of family science must learn to utilize their knowledge and skills in a collaborative way with colleagues, other professionals, organizations, and those who seek their expertise. I believe it is very important for teachers to encourage and provide opportunities for students to practice collaborative working relationships with others through diverse group projects both inside and outside of the classroom. Through these experiences, I believe that my students learn effective and professional communication and problem solving skills and gain a better understanding of the dynamics of working relationships. In addition, I emphasize building a learning partnership with students rather than just imparting information to them. Understanding students and learning about them through discourse is a primary way to build strong learning partnerships. Constructive learning partnerships between students and the teacher results in reflecting students' individual and group experiences and their concerns regarding course materials (Bain, 2004). I believe that this learning partnership process is one of the most effective ways of stimulating and sustaining intellectual growth among students. Overall, I believe collaborative experiences in class lay the foundation of students' future careers and lead them to carry out their work more effectively.

Teaching Practice

I exercise my teaching philosophy through various exercises, such as in-class, hands-on activities, writing assignments, discussions, small group projects, and individual and group presentations. What makes my practice unique is that in one senior level course that I teach, students actually develop family life education programs based on the needs of the community and offer a workshop to the public. More specifically, based on my training with one of my teaching mentors at Virginia Tech and teaching experiences at a previous institution, I currently offer a course that teaches different strategies for working with diverse families and children, which specifically focuses on developing skills to organize and implement family conferences in human service, community, and educational settings (Montclair State University, n.d.). My goal as the teacher in this specific course, *FCST 418 Working with Diverse Families*, is to develop a course that enhances practical learning environments to prepare students to become competent family professionals in diverse career settings.

To achieve this goal, I have been utilizing a service-learning option, as well as traditional lecture and discussion- and reflection-based teaching.

Course Requirements

The benefits of service-learning have been widely recognized by many teachers (Berke, Boyd-Soisson, Voorhees, & Reininga, 2010; Jacobson, Oravec, Falk, & Osteen, 2011; Toews & Cerny, 2005). The service-learning component is especially important in my teaching. While developing and evaluating family life education programs, service-learning experiences are extremely helpful for students to identify the actual felt needs of

the community and the target audience. They also help students to better understand the connection between these felt needs and the ascribed and future needs that they have learned during more than two years of their education in the field of family science. For more details on the three types of needs, see Powell and Cassidy (2007). Service-learning also provides safe learning opportunities for students to face real life challenges and work with a wide range of professionals, families, and children in order to deal with these issues.

With a combination of service-learning activities, in FCST 418 students working in small groups practice the entire process of developing, implementing, and evaluating family life education programs step-by-step. At the outset of the semester, the groups of four to six members (a) identify the target audience and the community where their target audience lives, (b) determine appropriate program topics, (c) conduct research on the identified topic, target audience, and community, (d) set their program goal and learning objectives, (e) develop program activities and teaching strategies to achieve their goal and objectives, (f) present some of the activities that they develop to the actual target audience, and, (g) conduct formal and informal program evaluations on their presentations based on the feedback from the audience and their own self-reflection. The overall outline of these steps models the suggestions by Powell and Cassidy (2007) and Duncan and Goddard (2010).

Learning Outcomes

To enhance students' understanding of the purpose of my course, I incorporate a group evaluation session at the end of each semester. In the session, students and I explicitly discuss and reflect on what we accomplished during the semester, and match the accomplishments with the course objectives stated in the syllabus. Through this activity, students are able to see more clearly the linkage between course objectives and course work. They also report that they feel more proud of themselves learning that they actually accomplish a lot during the semester.

In many cases, through the process of program development and service-learning, the students report that they gain insight into how to support families in building healthy family relationships and positive parenting practices by enhancing family members' knowledge and skills. While doing so, they are able to reflect on their own personal and professional experiences and integrate these real life experiences with their formal academic instruction in the field of family science. When first discussing the assignment, some students are not enthusiastic about spending extra time on service-learning or are frightened about working in a new community that they have never been to on the first day of class. However, as soon as they start working at a service-learning site, most students quickly realize how much they enjoy the service-learning experiences. At the end of each semester, they report that the service-learning component is very helpful and they would like to spend more time at the site where they have been working. After the workshops are completed and students receive positive feedback from the program participants, they often feel excited and confident. These experiences help students have a better understanding of what diversity within a community actually entails. They often report that they become more open-minded toward diverse individuals, families, and cultures, and they feel they will be more culturally competent as future professionals.

During personal conversations with my students throughout the semester, they

frequently express a positive group work experiences. However, sometime students relate difficulty communicating with other group members and negotiating their work responsibilities. In these cases, I work with them to resolve their issues effectively. All group members and myself listen to each member's comments about an issue, and, if necessary, I become a mediator to find a middle ground so they are able to continue working on their group projects. As a result, students demonstrate better professional communication and problem solving skills, which are necessary to collaborate with their colleagues and complete their professional responsibilities successfully. I also find that this is a very positive and effective way to form a strong learning partnership with my students. Several students have shared with me that they have continued working with their group members in different courses after this course.

After completion of the course, students have indicated they are less frightened of public speaking, are more confident about their abilities to work with diverse families, and have a better understanding of who they are. Overall, students think this course is very challenging, but rewarding, and they learn more than they would have learned through a traditional lecture-based course.

In sum, I believe that these activities develop the competency of students as future professionals in the field of family science by providing opportunities for practicing the application of knowledge to practice. I also believe that students become more sensitive in dealing with diversity by being exposed to dynamic professional and personal issues within diverse contexts while supporting families and children. Finally, the whole process of program development and evaluation provides a rare moment to practice the catalytic community partnership (Doherty, 2003).

Challenges in Teaching

The successful teaching experience and learning outcomes that I described are not easily achieved. Since service-learning heavily depends on collaboration with non-profit community organizations, policy changes in funding for non-profit organizations and frequent turnovers among staff members both at non-profit organizations and the university impact my teaching significantly. For example, after the first trial of the service-learning option for this course, I decided to keep it as one of my main course requirements for the following semester. With the help of the university service-learning coordinators, I enthusiastically prepared for the course during the summer by meeting with the site coordinators in person, determining student responsibilities, and arranging for the end of the semester parent workshop that my students would conduct. It appeared as if everything was ready for the beginning of the semester. However, due to the budget cuts in New Jersey, the site coordinators who were working with me and the service-learning coordinators were not able to implement their programs during the semester. This unexpected change impacted my teaching plans.

As an instructor, given these unforeseen circumstances, I had to keep modifying my teaching plan throughout the semester keeping in mind my students' best interests and maintaining collaborative working relationships with the community members. For the students, without having the "hands-on" activities provided by service-learning, it was difficult for them to envision and develop effective parenting programs. This whole experience taught me several valuable lessons. After this experience, I became more proactive about making sure that all the programs at the community site that I would be

working with were confirmed in advance so that there were no opportunities for confusion and changes in regard to service-learning during the semester. All my students have been able to participate in service-learning as planned since this first unfortunate episode and there have been no unexpected changes in course requirements.

Another challenge that I continue to face while teaching this course is that it takes significant time and effort in preparation and operation. Planning the workshop, recruiting the participants, and seeking appropriate resources for students, in addition to the usual teaching requirements, can be quite overwhelming for a junior faculty member. In particular, I have found the reports of others' difficulty in reaching out to parents to offer parenting education workshops to be true (Duncan & Goddard, 2010; Powell & Cassidy, 2007). A small number of parent attendees at the workshops often disappoints students regardless of how much I prepare students for this possibility. However, I use this disappointing experience as an important teaching moment by discussing how hard it is to recruit participants for outreach family life education programs in real life (Duncan & Goddard, 2010). Furthermore, positive feedback from students and community members reassures me that it is very important for me to remain an "advocate" for my students. Providing opportunities for them to experience real-life settings as future professionals in human services is well worth the effort.

Continuous Journey as a Family Science Teacher

I have had an interesting journey as a junior faculty member. The longer I teach in the field of family science, the clearer it is that it is important to kindle the desire for active learning in each of my students and approach teaching in an integrative fashion. Effective and constructive teaching is more than just delivering information to students. It is a dynamic and complex process of stimulating students' desire to learn, facilitating their intellectual and emotional growth, and preparing them to become competent professionals. To further my goal of being a competent and culturally sensitive teacher, I actively seek out diverse professional development activities. The completion of this training has helped me to enhance my ability to design teaching strategies to accommodate diverse learners and to provide a safe learning environment so that my students have better learning experiences in my classes. By practicing my philosophy of effective and constructive teaching, I hope to continue to support my students' active learning by being an effective teacher in family science.

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Soyoung Lee Bio

Dr. Soyoung Lee is an assistant professor in the Family and Child Studies Department at Montclair State University (MSU). She received her Ph.D. in Human Development in 2006 from Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (Virginia Tech). After graduation, she worked as a post-doctoral research associate at Virginia Tech and then an assistant professor in the Department of Individual, Family, and Community Education at the University of New Mexico prior to joining the faculty at MSU. Her research interests include immigrant families, family diversity, family life education, community impacts on families, and young adult development. She has been a Certified Family Life Educator since 2005 and served as the 2008-2010 Student/New Professional Board Representative to the National Council on Family Relations. She was also recently selected as a service-

learning fellow and a 2011-2012 engaged teaching fellow at the Research Academy for University Learning at MSU.