

AHA Moments: Connecting Online Course Content to Field Education

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"The intent of field education is to integrate the theoretical and conceptual contribution of the classroom with the practical world of the practice setting. It is a basic precept of social work education that the two interrelated components of curriculum—classroom and field—are of equal importance within the curriculum and each contributes to the development of the requisite competencies of professional practice." (EPAS, 2015)

Human Behavior and the Social Environment (HBSE) courses focus on theories and models of human behavior. Often when we are learning theory, we find that we have an "AHA" moment where real world experience and theory come together. In this course activity, I ask students to integrate theory and their field experiences. Each student searches out at least one "AHA" moment they experience over the course of the semester where they connect a theory and a moment in their field experience coming together. This "AHA" moment is then shared with the learning community in our Adobe Connect classroom. These shared examples reinforce the importance of both classroom and field components of social work curriculum.

Teaching and Learning Goal

My goals for this assignment were to:

- Bring course content to life that students sometimes perceive as dry or flat
- Engage student's curiosity and critical thinking skills regarding course content and how this content applies to the work they are doing in their field placement and eventually as professional social workers
- Provide students with the opportunity to evaluate where and how a model or theory may connect to a client, community or organization
- Connect our signature pedagogy - field education - to classroom learning/course content
- Build community using the features Adobe Connect offers

Activity and Results

Field education is the signature pedagogy of social work education, providing students opportunities to integrate theory and classroom knowledge into the practice of social work. My goal in this activity was to raise students' curiosity and ask them to utilize their critical thinking skills by searching for examples of how a theory of human development can be seen in the work they do in their field placements.

This straightforward activity is highly impactful for students. Each semester that I've utilized it, students share how much this kept them focused on looking for live examples of something we were learning in our course. Students also share that they experience the activity as a chance to go on a "theory treasure hunt" or "play theory detective" throughout the course - even if they have already completed the requirement for this assignment. Another outcome of this activity is that it requires students to use a critical lens and explore a theory or model more deeply than they may have if they only had to define components or apply it to a case study.

Unexpected Results: While students are only required to complete one "AHA" moment each semester, most students end up completing 3-4. This delightful result was unexpected; students found themselves applying the "AHA" assignment requirements to each theory we were covering in the class. Additionally, the organic dialogue and discussions that resulted from students sharing their "AHA" moment allowed the learning community to analyze and question a model or theory utilizing the PROP (power, race, privilege, and oppression) lens presented in their Foundations of Social Work Practice classes. Finally, this activity, done at the beginning of each class, assists in

building and strengthening a sense of community, where over time, students are willing to take risks and learn from each other.

Technical Details and Steps

Step One: Introduce the Activity

First, I provided instructions for this activity in both the course syllabus and the learning management system. Here is an example of those instructions:

“AHA Moment” Field Discussion

*The content taught in this course is critical to a successful career as a social worker. Often when we are learning theory, we find that we have an “Aha” moment where real world experience and theory come together. During our course, each student will share one “Aha” moment they experienced related to the models and theories of human behavior in the social environment. These types of moments should come from the students’ field experience (or current event if you are not currently in a field placement). We will start each class with our “AHA Moments”. **There is no one due date but all students must complete this by Session 13 of our class.***

Step Two: Prepare the Learning Community

My second step was to introduce this activity to students during our first meeting as a learning community (**Images 1 & 2**).

I asked students to share or “drop” some ideas of what an “AHA” moment might look like in the chat feature. Since this is the first class meeting, asking students to use the chat feature in Adobe Connect provides students an opportunity to practice using this important feature. Chat also captures all information shared in it, so instructors can review chat after a class is over. Finally, the use of chat allowed me to affirm students understood the activity or provide clarification about the assignment that students might need.

The last step in preparing the learning community for this activity was to share that, based on class size and time, we’d allow up to 4 of their colleagues to report in each week.

Step Three: Report In: Weekly “Aha” Moments

Time Management: I allowed 15 minutes in each class session for this activity. This activity was done at the beginning of class.

Share: I shared an AHA moment slide prompt and asked students to raise their hand icon if they had an AHA moment to share (**Image 3**).

Using Visuals to Create a Community Discussion: Once students were ready to share with the learning community, I used Adobe Connect to make the discussion more intimate through changes to the layout. It is important to note here that when working with Adobe Connect, instructional teams work together to ensure the best possible experience for students. This includes not only the instructor but the Live Support Specialist. This role incorporates the “behind the scenes” technology needs for the course. In this course, the Live Support Specialist changed the layout depending upon the number of students who were participating in the activity each week. We used various layouts to ensure that the camera view of students filled the screen. Our goal for doing this was to make this activity a community discussion. I wanted students to see each other and feel a sense of connection while sharing their experiences.

Step Four: Celebrate What Is Shared

Throughout the semester, I captured what the students shared during their “AHA” moments. The purpose of capturing this content was for the final step of this activity, which was to review and “celebrate” the “AHA” moments students shared at the end of our term.

As we prepared for our last class session, we organized the “AHA” moments based on the theory or model of human behavior covered in the course that they applied to. We then shared those moments via slides in our final session to celebrate what the students learned. It also gave us the opportunity to encourage students to continue to search for “AHA” moments in the field that applied to their course content (**Images 4 & 5**).

What this looked like in Adobe Connect

Image 1: Introducing the Activity: Aha Moment PowerPoint Slide. This is an image of the slide that was used in the first class meeting to introduce the “Aha Moment” Activity.

Image 1 Alt-Text: This is an image of a PowerPoint slide introducing the activity to the learning community. At the top of the slide is the title “Connecting Theories to Practice.” The body of the slide is split in half with a left and a right side. On the left side, there are three bullet points. Bullet point one states “Let’s bring it alive!” Bullet point two states “‘AHA!’ moments connect course content and theories to an experience in your field placement.” Bullet point three states, “We will start each class with members of our learning community coming on camera and sharing their “AHA” moment.” On the right side of the slide, there is a title that says “Aha Moment” and the word “Aha!” in white text within a blue square.

Connecting Theories to Practice

- **Let’s bring it alive !**

- “AHA!” moments connect course content and theories to an experience in your field placement
- We will start each class with members of our learning community coming on camera and sharing their “AHA” moment

Aha Moment



Image 2: Introducing the Activity in Adobe Connect: The Weekly AHA Moment Activity. Note: Chelsea Walus is a member of the instructional team who helped create these images. Adobe product screenshot(s) reprinted with permission from Adobe.

Image 2 Alt-Text: This is a screengrab of an Adobe Connect classroom. At the top of the left side of the screen there is an image of the instructor on webcam. Below this, there is a narrow Attendees pod that lists the host who is the instructor and one participant who is a member of our instructional team. To the right of the Attendees pod, in the center of the screen, there is the “Connecting Theories to Practice” PowerPoint slide from Image 1. At the bottom of the

screen is a Chat pod with example dialogue happening in Chat; it says “@you - So agree! It is like I am on a treasure hunt!” “How to we know what we know? That is a tough question” “Culture? Our families?” “I was thinking the environment” “Am I off base?” “Such a great break out group we had! Thanks Chelea!”

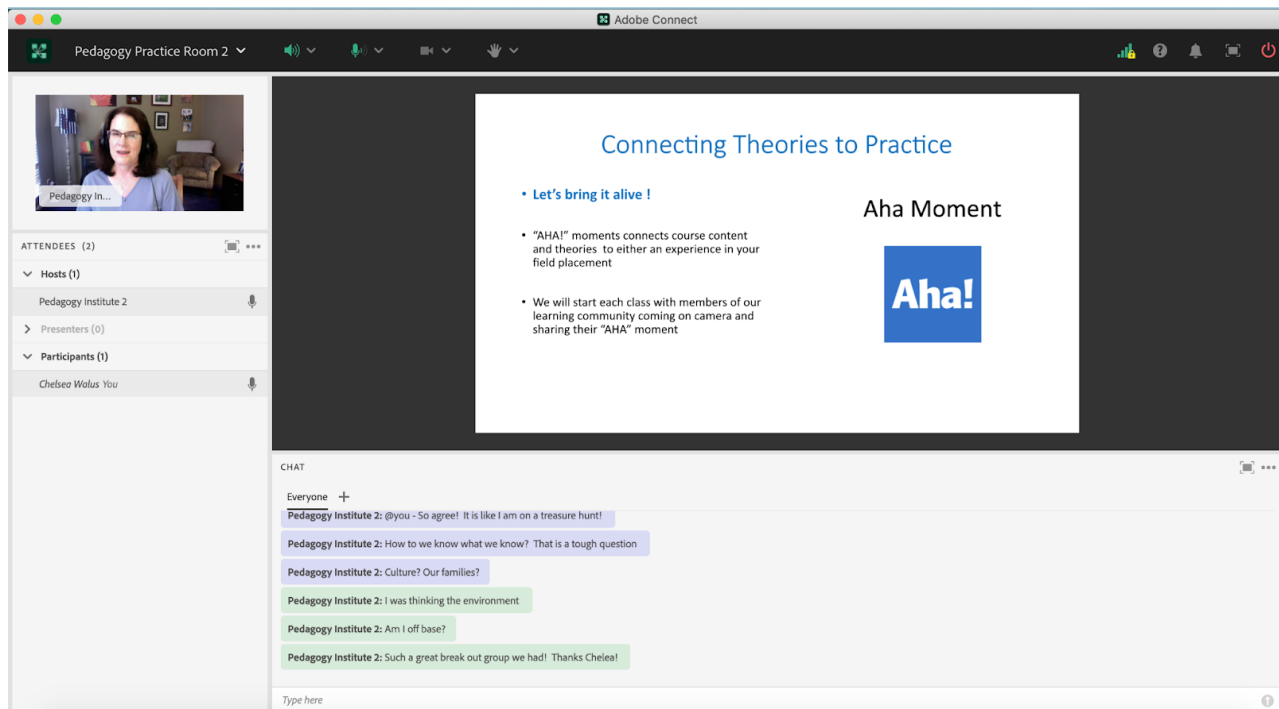


Image 3: The PowerPoint Slide: The Weekly AHA Moment Activity.

Image 3 Alt-Text: This is an image of a PowerPoint slide that opens the AHA moment activity each week. At the top of the slide is the title “Aha Moment.” On the right side is an image of the word “Aha!” in white text within a blue square.

Aha Moment



Image 4: Celebrate What Is Shared PowerPoint Slide: Our Connections: AHA Moments. This is an image of the PowerPoint slide used in the final step of this class activity, where I organized the “AHA” moments that students shared throughout the semester by theory or model. This image contains a photo of an actor and has been used with permission.

Image 4 Alt-Text: This is an image of a PowerPoint used as the final step in the AHA Moments activity. The title reads “Our Connections: AHA Moments”. Below that is an image of a PowerPoint slide with a title that reads “The Developmental Life Course “AHA” Moments”. Moving down the slide on the left is a bullet point list. The title of the list is “Cohorts and their Impact.” Below are three examples. They read “1. Social Media and Generation X. 2. World War II & The Depression. 3. Baby Boomers and Aging.” To the right is an image of an actor looking at their cell phone.

Our Connections: AHA Moments

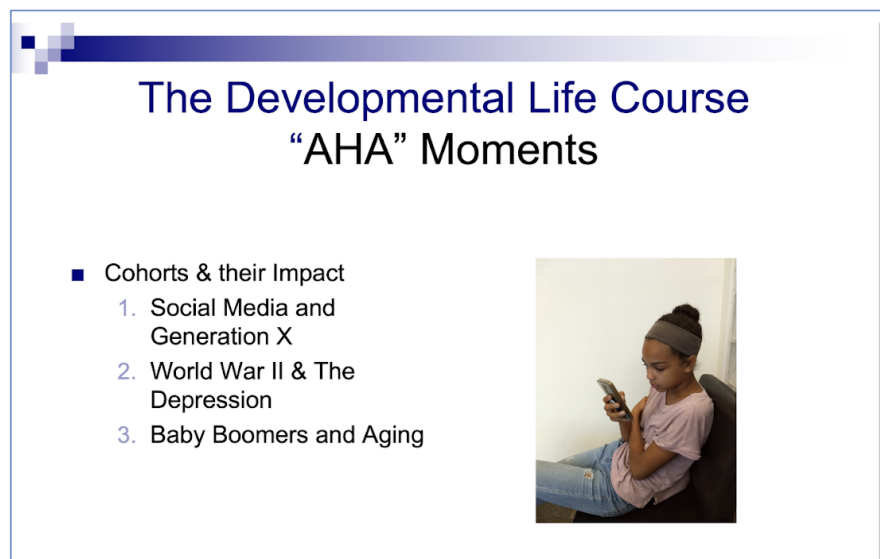


Image 5: Final Step of this Activity in Adobe Connect: Celebrate what was shared. Note: Chelsea Walus is a member of the instructional team that helped create these images. The image used on the slide is an actor and is used with permission. Adobe product screenshot(s) reprinted with permission from Adobe.

Image 5 Alt-Text: This is a screengrab of the same Adobe Connect classroom as Image 2. The difference is that the slide has been changed to the “Our Connections: AHA Moments” PowerPoint slide from Image 4.

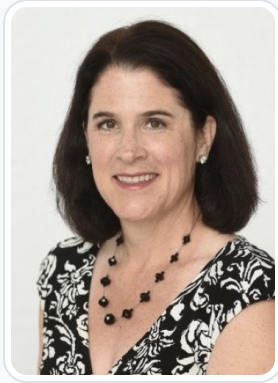
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References

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Melissa Murphy Thompson MSW, LCSW, OSW-C is an award winning online educator and professor of social work. Melissa utilizes models of accompaniment, trauma informed teaching and learning, and radical hope in her work with students, colleagues and clients. A board certified oncology social worker, she has worked in mental health, health care and community settings as a clinician and a leader. She is in private practice in the Chicagoland area. Her research, teaching and clinical practice focus on supporting those who have experienced trauma, the LGBTQI+ and non-binary communities, military veterans and families, health and health disparities and the utilization of mindfulness in various settings. Melissa was a full time faculty member at Dominican University in River Forest, Illinois where she was the Director of Online Learning and Development and the Coordinator of the Military Social Work Program. She is currently a Clinical Assistant Professor at Salisbury University in Maryland and a member of the online faculty for the Columbia School of Social Work. Besides accompanying amazingly talented and passionate students, Melissa's contributions in higher education include curriculum design for both online and face to face learning communities, training for teaching excellence, student success, and professional development for faculty and administration. She is often found researching how to make a class, a content area or a program more effective, engaging and student centered. Melissa is a sought after keynote speaker and consultant in the areas of social work, higher education, health, business leadership and employee wellness. Melissa holds a Master in Social Work degree from Aurora University and a Bachelor of Arts degree in Human and Organizational Development from DePaul University in Chicago.



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