Blackboard

Digital Teaching Symposium 2026



Creating Learning Friction

Using Blackboard Ultra AI Conversation Tools to Promote Reflection and Skill Development

Heath Hightower, PhD, LICSW

Assistant Professor, Department of Social Work and Equitable Community Practice

University of Saint Joseph · Connecticut, United States

Where I teach

UNIVERSITY OF SAINT JOSEPH (USJ)

- Private Catholic university in West Hartford, Connecticut, in the northeastern United States

MY PROGRAM

- Master of Social Work (MSW): the professional degree for social work practice in the United States
- Students learn in class and in supervised internships in hospitals, schools, and agencies

TERMS IN THIS TALK

Role play
Students practice a conversation with an AI client

Persona
The character the AI plays, with hidden instructions

Friction
Challenge built into a task on purpose, to support learning

Start with a different design question

THE USUAL QUESTION

How convincingly can generative AI simulate a client?



THE DESIGN QUESTION

What must the simulation require students to decide and do to demonstrate learning?

When a simulated client readily reveals important information, or makes the right response obvious, students have fewer decisions to make.

A smooth conversation that "seems real" does not necessarily require students to demonstrate their learning.

01 · THE DESIGN PRINCIPLE

Deliberate friction

What should educators preserve as AI structures and guides a simulated interaction?

What *deliberate friction* means

DEFINITION

The intentional preservation of **uncertainty, complexity, and relational contingency** so that learners must exercise critical decision-making as an AI encounter unfolds and then examine their decisions afterward.

It is not

- ✕ **Difficulty for its own sake**
  The goal is not to make learning harder.
- ✕ **A client built to resist**
  Not a persona that reflexively frustrates or overwhelms students.

Five mechanisms of *deliberate friction*

01



Informational asymmetry

The client holds information the learner must discover through engagement.

02



Situational complexity

Several concerns are present, with no signal about which to prioritize.

03



Relational contingency

The client's responses depend partly on how the learner engages.

04



Procedural ambiguity

A practice goal, but no prescribed questions, sequence, or intervention.

05



Reflective accountability

Afterward, learners examine their decisions using evidence from the encounter.

The test: a guarded client creates friction only when it requires students to notice, interpret, decide, and reconsider.

02 · INSIDE MY COURSE

The Christopher simulation

Part talk, part live walkthrough of the role play I built in Blackboard Ultra

A narrow goal, on purpose



COURSE

First-year Master of Social Work (MSW) practice course, taken with a supervised internship



MODULE

Engagement skills, framed in part through attachment theory



SCENARIO

First meeting with a 17-year-old patient on a hospital cancer (oncology) unit

The work was relational: establish a relationship, decide what warranted exploration, and adjust as Christopher responded.

STUDENTS WERE ASKED TO

Engage Christopher and determine what types of support he might need.

NOT ASKED TO

- ✕ Diagnose
- ✕ Complete a full assessment of his situation
- ✕ Recommend treatment
- ✕ Follow a prescribed interview protocol

What students knew vs. what the AI knew



STUDENT-FACING SCENARIO

"The scenario occurs on an inpatient oncology unit at Children's Hospital. The student is playing the role of a medical social work student intern. The AI client is playing the role of a 17-year-old cisgender male referred to the social work unit by the patient's medical team. To start the role play, introduce yourself, your role, and why you are meeting with the patient. The goal of the scenario is to successfully engage the patient and determine the types of support he might need at this time."



HIDDEN PERSONA INSTRUCTIONS

"A seventeen-year-old cisgender male who just learned that his Hodgkin's Lymphoma has recurred. He is confused, sad, and angry. He's afraid that he might die. He's struggling with what his recurrence means for him and his family. Christopher is questioning his faith. He will only share information if the social worker explains their role. He is only open to support if the social worker introduces themselves and doesn't rush him to talk about his feelings. If these two things don't happen, Christopher will withdraw from the conversation. None of this information should be shared with the social work intern."

Creates

Procedural ambiguity

Informational asymmetry

Situational complexity

Relational contingency

Two openings, one client

LIVE: PREVIEW CHAT

OPENING A · REASSURE FIRST

“Hi Christopher, I’m the social work intern. I know this must be really scary, but it’s normal to feel afraid.”

The most common student opening: reassurance first, with no introduction of role or purpose

OPENING B · ROLE, PURPOSE, PERMISSION

“Hi Christopher, my name is Heath, and I’m the social work intern on this unit. I meet with everyone here to offer support, help coordinate resources, and help patients and families make decisions about their care. Would it be okay if we talked for a few minutes about how things are going?”

What the scenario asked students to do first

Watch for

- **What he discloses, and how fast**
- **Whether he echoes my words**
- **Whether his openness changes**

In the chat: which opening would your students write first? · Typed live; AI responses vary from run to run.

Debrief: where was the friction?



Relational contingency

Did Christopher's openness depend on how I opened?

If not, the client responds productively no matter what the student does.



Informational asymmetry

Did he hold anything back for me to discover?

If not, the student received key information without having to discover it.



Situational complexity

Did I have to choose which concern to follow?

If so, prioritizing is now the student's decision.

Either result teaches something. If Christopher answers both openings the same way, that shows exactly what the hidden instructions still need to state clearly.

Reflection makes practice reasoning visible

ACT

The role play is half the assignment.

Completing a conversation isn't evidence of learning. The graded reflection asks students to use Christopher's responses as evidence about their own practice.

Observe	What engagement skills did you use? Be specific.
Evaluate	What skills seemed to work best? What evidence supports your assessment?
Evaluate	What skills worked least well? What evidence supports your perspective?
Conceptualize	Review your interaction with Christopher. Using an attachment theory perspective, how do you understand his concerns?
Plan	Thinking ahead to your next encounter with Christopher, what issues, topics, or concerns might you circle back to and/or explore?

Reflection Question | Engagement Skills, as assigned in Blackboard · Bogo et al., 2011; Egonsdotter & Israelsson, 2024

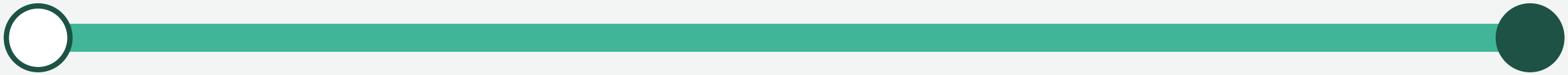
03 · LESSONS FROM IMPLEMENTATION

What I noticed

Informal instructor observations from routine course delivery, not systematically collected research data

Complexity changes the kind of friction

Complexity of responses



LOW · Shorter responses

Students must elicit information

HIGH · Longer, more detailed responses

Students must interpret and prioritize competing cues

Two mechanisms partially collapsed at High

Informational asymmetry

When Christopher disclosed several concerns up front, students received rather than discovered what mattered.

Relational contingency

Repeating the student's words makes the client agreeable no matter what the student does. AI models tend to agree with users, a pattern called sycophancy (Sharma et al., 2024).

Write the friction into the persona

ORIGINAL

Social intern must introduce themselves and not rush Christopher to engage him.

The condition is only implied, so the AI's default habit of agreeing fills the gap.

POSSIBLE ADDITIONS TO THE HIDDEN INSTRUCTIONS

- **Share one concern at a time.**
  Restores informational asymmetry
- **Disclose the fear of dying only after the student has explored current feelings without rushing to reassure.**
  Makes disclosure contingent on skill
- **Give brief, guarded responses when the student changes topics quickly.**
  Makes pacing consequential

Limits and equity considerations



Not a real encounter

Generative AI cannot reproduce the full relational, embodied, cultural, and contextual complexity of meeting a real person (Kourgiantakis et al., 2020).



Leaving identity out is not neutral

Christopher's age and gender identity were specified; race, ethnicity, socioeconomic context, and faith tradition weren't. Models may fill such gaps with dominant-group defaults.



Bias, privacy, security, equity

Concerns associated with generative AI in social work education (Báez et al., 2025). Use within institutional privacy and technology policies.

Which identities to specify, and which to leave open, is itself an instructional design choice. Educators stay responsible for testing interactions and monitoring how the AI represents clients.

Design questions for your own course

01 **What judgment should students exercise in this encounter?**

02 What do students know going in, and what must they discover?

03 What does the AI client know that students don’t?

04 What conditions shape the client’s openness, and are they written explicitly?

05 How will students examine their reasoning afterward?

BEFORE RELEASE

Preview chat as a student, several times.

Try rushing, reassuring, and changing topics. Check whether the client still responds productively no matter what you do.

Final thoughts

Friction is a design choice, not a setting.

Responsiveness alone doesn't make a simulation educational. What we preserve in service of a learning objective does.

Questions?

Heath Hightower, PhD, LICSW
University of Saint Joseph · Connecticut, United States
hhightower@usj.edu

Blackboard Digital Teaching Symposium 2026

References

Báez, J. C., et al. (2025). Social work educators innovating with generative AI: An exploratory study. Journal of Social Work Education, 61(1), 14–29.

Bogo, M., et al. (2011). Adapting objective structured clinical examinations to assess social work students' performance and reflections. Journal of Social Work Education, 47(1), 5–18.

Cordes, C. C., et al. (2026). Teaching motivational interviewing with an AI-powered virtual patient simulation: A teaching note. Studies in Clinical Social Work. Advance online.

Council on Social Work Education. (2022). 2022 educational policy and accreditation standards.

Cox, A. L., et al. (2016). Design frictions for mindful interactions: The case for microboundaries. CHI EA '16, 1389–1397.

Egonsdotter, G., & Israelsson, M. (2024). Computer-based simulations in social work education: A scoping review. Research on Social Work Practice, 34(1), 41–53.

Kapur, M. (2008). Productive failure. Cognition and Instruction, 26(3), 379–424.

Kapur, M. (2016). Examining productive failure, productive success, unproductive failure, and unproductive success in learning. Educational Psychologist, 51(2), 289–299.

Kourgiantakis, T., et al. (2020). Simulation in social work education: A scoping review. Research on Social Work Practice, 30(4), 433–450.

Lwin, K., & Brady, E. (2026). Reimagining the pedagogy of professional judgment and decision making in social work. Social Work Education, 45(1), 82–98.

McDonald, C., Davis, M., & Benson, C. (2021). Using evidence-based learning theories to guide the development of virtual simulations. Clinical Social Work Journal, 49(2), 197–206.

National Association of Social Workers. (2021). Code of ethics of the National Association of Social Workers.

Nelson, A., & Eliasz, K. L. (2023). Desirable difficulty: Theory and application of intentionally challenging learning. Medical Education, 57(2), 123–130.

Rawles, J. (2016). Developing social work professional judgment skills. Journal of Teaching in Social Work, 36(1), 102–122.

Rawles, J. (2021). How social work students develop the skill of professional judgement. Journal of Practice Teaching and Learning, 17(3), 10–30.

Sharma, M., et al. (2024). Towards understanding sycophancy in language models. ICLR 2024.

Witter, S. J. (2025). Fostering professional judgement and decision making in social work education. Social Work Education, 44(4), 995–1012.