

Teaching Philosophy

Simon J. Purdy

My teaching philosophy centers on creating an interesting and engaging learning experience in the classroom. I feel that the best way for students to retain information, as well as to develop critical thinking skills, is to present materials in a way that fosters engagement and makes abstract concepts applicable to their lives and experiences. I feel that it is a waste of both my energy, and the energy of my students, to simply read off of a slide while they take notes. Instead, I try to fill in the blanks and illustrate basic definitions and concepts with examples and deeper discussion which I encourage students to contribute to at their own pace. In order to foster these deeper discussions and understandings, I work to create an atmosphere in which students feel comfortable sharing their ideas and asking questions, even if it means interrupting the flow of lecture to revisit an issue that requires clarification.

Although using this approach itself keeps lessons from becoming monotonous, I also break up lectures with a variety of activities in order to further engage students in the learning process. Often, this involves posing questions to students, such as asking about their views on cultural norms, race or surveys which they have taken, but I also build more substantial activities into my lesson plans. For instance, in *Modern Social Problems*, I developed an activity which looks at the recent racial profiling issues in Kalamazoo, involving several video clips, and a group discussion in which students come up with potential solutions to the issue. In *Methods of Data Collection*, I place a much larger focus on class activities, because in my experience social research is something that must be learned in a hands on fashion. As a main project throughout the semester, students break up into groups and formulate a research project of their own, culminating in conducting surveys, interviewing respondents, conducting ethnographic observations and even carrying out original experimental designs on campus. I have a lot of fun planning and carrying out these classroom activities, which is an important part of my philosophy. When I have fun it shows that I am interested in what I am teaching, which I hope carries over to the students and serves to increase their interest as well. With these activities, and others such as playing music videos prior to the start of a new course topic (*Another Brick in the Wall*, from Pink Floyd's *The Wall* begins a discussion of standardization in modern education), I feel that I create memorable moments throughout the course which help inspire students to think further about the ideas presented in lectures.

Given our current historical placement, and the increasing role that technology plays in our daily lives, I feel that it is important to keep up-to-date on the technology that I utilize in the classroom. This helps not only to make the class more engaging for the students, but also challenges me to evolve in my teaching style. For example, I use online course support systems, such as Blackboard and Desire2Learn, in order to keep up to date class schedules (which can change based on student interest and engagement in topics throughout the semester) and grades so that students are not left guessing as to where they stand in the course. In my *Principles of Sociology* course, I incorporate the online documentary "The Man Behind the Mosque" as an illustration of religious stratification. I also encourage students to set the classroom technology policy at the beginning of the semester in order to determine if laptops, cellphones, etc. will be allowed during lectures. On this note, I also recognize the potential barriers that technology brings to the classroom for both students and professors. As such, I do not rely on technology as the cornerstone of my courses (save for those which are hosted online), and work instead to use it effectively as a supplemental component.

Keeping my classes interesting through engaging activities, a passion for the subject and use of technology is not the only way I strive to impart knowledge while teaching. I also work on making

my lessons applicable and up-to-date with the constantly changing social world. I keep an eye on current events, local to global, and work the latest events into my lectures as they are unfolding (such as the protests and riots in Ferguson Missouri, the latest trends in prison overcrowding, or the Kalamazoo River cleanup). Having attended an untold number of courses in my college career in which the instructors used dated examples to illustrate old concepts, I know that such a course design is bound to turn students off to the material at hand. And as a result, I think that updating the information presented to students makes it more relevant, and thus more applicable, to the world in which they live.

Along these same lines of updating the material that I deliver in class, my teaching philosophy also involves a constant improvement of the course, and my teaching style. At the end of the semester, I pay close attention to the feedback that I receive from course evaluations in order to see what worked, and what didn't, and make improvements to the course design and delivery (I am also open to suggestions and feedback throughout the semester. Ultimately, this is what my teaching philosophy is all about; designing a course, and the material presented within, so that it works for students and hopefully leaves them interested and inspired to pursue and apply what they learn to their lives outside of the classroom.

This constant improvement of my teaching style and approach to the classroom also helps to inform my goals as an educator in the years to come. Regardless of where my teaching career takes me, I desire to grow in my teaching abilities. I hope to get the chance to teach a variety of new courses, a pattern which I have followed throughout my time as an instructor, as I feel that this gives me a chance to learn more and be engaged with new materials so as to remain excited and passionate about teaching. Criminology courses, as well as those in ethnographic research and aspects of culture are those which I have an interest in expanding my teaching repertoire. I would also like to develop new courses, and special topics courses, in areas such as evaluation methods, technology and society, surveillance and the criminal justice system, and both qualitative and quantitative data analysis. My interests are wide ranging, and I hope to have the chance of developing and exploring them through teaching as they arise.

I have already had the chance to teach a variety of courses as an instructor of record, from introductory sociology to social psychology and research methods. Beyond this, I have also served as a teaching assistant and guest lecturer in courses dealing with criminology, legal processes, and even Latin American cultures. I would very much like to continue teaching these types of courses at the undergraduate level, as I feel this is the best chance to inspire an interest in the social sciences, as I was inspired in my first sociology courses. Being a mentor and advisor is another major goal for me, and working with students outside of the classroom, on research projects and other endeavors, will serve to broaden both my knowledge and that of my students. My experience with sociology, has been greatly impacted by the passion and energy of those instructors whose classes I have attended and whose offices were the arenas in which to develop new ideas. Given my teaching philosophy, which focuses on engaging students and inspiring in them a desire to learn more about the social world, it is my ultimate goal as a professor to foster similar experiences in my students.