

Teaching Philosophy

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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 diverse lives and experiences. Instead of simply reciting material during lectures, I try to fill in the blanks and illustrate 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 keeps lessons from becoming monotonous, I also break up lectures with a variety of activities 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 that they have taken, but I also build more substantial activities into my lesson plans. For instance, in *Modern Social Problems*, I developed an activity looking at recent racial profiling issues in Kalamazoo, MI involving several video clips, and a group discussion in which students create potential solutions to the issue. In *Introduction to Criminal Justice*, I have students debate issues such as the death penalty, and have them work through a recent court case in order to identify problems and issues in the criminal justice system. 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 also have experience teaching introductory level sociology courses, such as *Principles of Sociology* and *Cultural Diversity* (which places more emphasis on issues of inequality while surveying the discipline). In these general courses, I work to connect the course material to the interests of the students, who come from a wide variety of backgrounds and university programs. For instance, in my *Cultural Diversity* courses, I have students analyze their favorite film in order to draw out issues of majority group dominance in modern media. 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'm 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 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 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, Moodle, 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, and

use the *Serial* podcast to facilitate discussions related the criminal legal system in Introduction to Criminal Justice. 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, national and global, and work the latest events into my lectures as they are unfolding (such as the latest protests and riots, trends in prison overcrowding, or local environmental concerns such as 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. 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. This approach also lends itself to my desire to get students involved with research and service efforts outside of the classroom. My involvement in community projects and organizations can translate into opportunities for students to get engaged with applied research in their community. For instance, students could be involved in efforts to conduct evaluations for non-profit organizations, or help to develop projects that address social and civic needs in local government or neighborhood organizations. Such connections can also provide benefit for the university, in forging community partnerships, fostering a civic minded student body, and building on the school's public image.

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 be engaged with new materials and continue to challenge myself as a teacher. Advanced courses on statistical analysis, including more advanced courses in longitudinal modeling and path analysis, as well as those in comparative research and aspects of culture are some of the areas in which I have an interest in expanding my teaching repertoire. I would also like to develop new courses, and special topics courses (at both the graduate and undergraduate levels), in areas such as evaluation methods, technology and society, surveillance and the criminal justice system, and both qualitative and quantitative data collection and 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 and criminal justice, to social psychology, data analysis and research methods. Beyond this, I have 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 and graduate levels, 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 (such as student organizations and community service), 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.