

## Philosophy of Teaching and Learning

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When students leave my class at the end of a semester, I want them to feel both enlightened and burdened by the development of their own sociological imaginations. By this, I mean they will develop the ability to think critically about the social system of which they are a part, and they will use this knowledge to assess their own role with skepticism and compassion. Aware that they are in society and that society is in them, students will be able to identify systems of social control, better understand their own socialization and identity, and explore the world with the multiple lenses of sociology, ideally with an interest in improving the lives of others through social justice work.

Students who exit my class should be able to *reflect thoughtfully* on society, to *present clearly* on sociological insights, to *engage meaningfully* with their communities, and to *write persuasively* utilizing research and theory. To develop these skills, I teach in ways that allow for direct interaction and application through public sociology.

One of the best ways to develop contemplation and communication skills in my students is through group discussion. I encourage students to apply sociological concepts to their own experiences, their own interests, and their own lives. For example, on the very first day of my *Deviance & Social Control* course, students discuss how their own behaviors might be considered deviant to others and why. This exercise helps them to understand the social construction of deviance that we develop the rest of the semester. By recognizing their own unique knowledge and experience, students understand the relevance of sociology and are motivated to pursue sociological investigations of the world around them. Properly facilitated and guided group discussion also helps students learn to respect the views of others. I ensure productive and empathetic discussions by stressing that students always use suitable evidence and logic to support their arguments in class, which is particularly important when I teach my courses on *Race/Ethnicity* and *Race, Class, and Gender*. I also regularly bring issues of ethnically and culturally diverse groups into all of my courses in order to help students practice more civil and respectful conversations.

Writing persuasively comes with practice. As such, I assign numerous smaller writing assignments in order to provide many opportunities for feedback before asking students to write longer, more sustained narratives. For example, in my *Social Research Methods* course, students work on 7 different assignments before completing their final research proposal, receiving feedback from me as well as their peers as the semester progresses. For the *Sociology Senior Seminar Capstone*, students have 9 component drafts that they then develop into their final research project, an applied critical exploration of their chosen future career fields. I also underscore the importance of research in the classroom by encouraging students to include new materials in their own writing (that is, sociologically relevant material beyond what is assigned on the syllabus) so they become actively engaged in scholarly pursuits. I espouse the philosophy that improving students' ability to consume knowledge leads to better research production. Thus, teaching enriches research and vice versa.

I also emphasize experiential connections to the community, such as service-learning opportunities and hands-on, applied learning. In my *Sociology of Popular Culture* course, for instance, I require students to write reflections on experiences of both high culture and popular culture events that expand their involvement in community cultural activities. In my *Pursuit of Happiness* course, students are required to volunteer for at least two hours and relate their work to the social nature of emotions. Additionally, in *Social Research Methods*, we analyze data from different community partners, utilizing real-world data sets to learn basic statistical techniques. At Stockton University, I also developed a course where students worked one-on-one with community members who were

moving from permanent residency to citizenship. As an extension of the community naturalization classes I taught in Atlantic City, students spent one class day a week working with community members directly and one class day challenging and critiquing the naturalization process in the U.S. This provided students with both personal connections and global perspectives on migration. In this vein, I believe theory alone cannot sustain a learning experience, but that practice and application must be utilized to help students construct their own understandings and to create connections with existing knowledge and the community around them—a key tenant of public sociology.

I also share my own research to expose students to the depth of sociological inquiry, while also using their beginners' eyes to gain a breadth of perspective on my work. For example, in my graduate seminar *Sociology of Immigration* as well as in my *Deviance & Social Control* course, I use my dissertation research on criminal immigration proceedings to show how certain acts (i.e. crossing a border) have developed deviant social meanings over time. We explore the history of border-crossing and demonstrate how historical, cultural, political, and economic circumstances have made a once-simple and common behavior into a criminal offense. I also use my own work as examples in my undergraduate *Social Research Methods* course as well as my graduate-level course on *Qualitative Methods and Analysis* to demonstrate that research is a process and students may only rarely see the “early, confusing” phases that they might struggle with during these courses.

Each semester is a new beginning for both students and professors to journey through previously unexplored intellectual terrain. Learning includes interpersonal growth and an extension of comfort zones for all classroom participants, myself included. I strive for innovation in teaching diagnostics and assessments to monitor my own effectiveness in teaching as well as to monitor my students' retention and growth. For example, I develop exams based on student-submitted questions. This learner-centered technique gives students both a sense of autonomy and responsibility for their own work while it illustrates for me what students are understanding and what they are missing *prior* to the formal exam. I also have expanded my pedagogical repertoire by teaching not only in-person, but also in fully online and hybrid formats, including the technique of hyflex (hybrid-flexible) teaching that matches the goals of NAUFlex through options of both virtual and in-person learning.

All students enter the educational system at their own skill levels and with their own background knowledge and I regularly draw on this diversity in my classroom. I employ a variety of teaching styles that cater to multiple intelligences. Students are given choices on how they can best engage with the material while I work to serve as guide, facilitator, and mentor. I support active educational engagement through collaborative learning techniques and problem-based strategies.

Finally, I believe teaching does not end at the close of class. I have facilitated student internships at a diverse range of locations—from congressional offices to community immigration legal clinics to the Philadelphia Zoo. I also have had several students work on independent research projects or as research assistants on my own work. One-on-one interaction and the mentoring of students is a skill I have honed and treasured. I also am active with graduate student mentorship and advising, having served as an MA Thesis or Internship Chair for 6 students and serving as a committee member for 6 students. I also have had two graduate students who I worked with go on to PhD Programs in Sociology, with the potential of 2 more this coming academic year.

I also engage in service work that emphasizes life-long learning, such as teaching community-based naturalization classes in Atlantic City and having worked as a Safe Zone Facilitator for school groups and community members at the University of Arizona. Through a community-based conception of service, integration of my own research in the classroom, and a true passion for teaching, my ultimate goal is to ensure student success through critical thinking and global awareness.