

## **My Philosophy of Teaching**

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To teach is to actively forge an inquisitive, reflexive community of learners. I do this by employing a number of classic educational theories. First, following John Dewey, I provide opportunities for students to learn through experience. Secondly, drawing from Vygotsky's theory of a zone of proximal development, I actively work to encourage student discussion and cooperative learning. Third, I incorporate Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences, to present materials in a variety of ways, and provide students opportunities for hands-on learning. Finally, inspired by Harry Wong, I strive for a well-organized, well-structured classroom, and I try to work with my students, as much as possible, one-on-one. I will describe each of these strategies below.

The less isolated a classroom is from the phenomenon being discussed, the better. My ideal is to have every course a field studies course, where students are actively gathering data, using the classroom to share findings and receive feedback from each other. My most rewarding undergraduate experience was in an intensive ethnographic immersion course, in which I gathered data for fifteen hours per week. I was later able to assist in teaching a ten week and a thirty week version of this course, in which I found field placements for students, coached students in reading and analyzing field notes, showed them how to conduct interviews, to write memos, and finally, to produce a coherent ethnography. I also worked for one year at UCLA as a field studies coordinator, assisting students to analyze an intern experience in terms of emotion work, racism, classism, or sexism, or other dynamics of the workplace. In many of the evaluations of my work as a coordinator, students stated that it was the best learning experience of their undergraduate career.

I also encourage learning through experience in my courses which are not explicitly field based. When I teach Research Methods, students complete weekly assignments in which they practice what they're learning: writing surveys, conducting brief ethnographic observations, conducting a short interview, conducting a content analysis on sources I provide, etc., to culminate in a final research proposal, which they present to the class. In my Introduction to Sociology course, students must complete a breaching experiment for a short paper, and then draw upon the sociological imagination to analyze a personal experience of deviance, how they came to recognize their class position, racism, sexism, or a global political event. In my course, The Inner-City and the Suburb in Comparative Perspective, I guide students through the process of interviewing one person living in an inner-city and another living in a suburb who share a similar ecological niche, such as: school administrator, city council person, single mother, or police officer. In my course, Sociology of Education, students incorporate their personal experience in weekly reflections on the readings. By helping students make such connections between experience and education, the classroom becomes an active learning laboratory, in which students learn primarily from each other, and by teaching me what they have learned.

Experience must not only be incorporated from outside the classroom, but the classroom itself must be experience based. Listening and watching an instructor lecture are vital ways to gather information, but they are not the best ways to become motivated about learning, and passionate about a subject. Hence, I try to use discussions whenever possible, to facilitate students nurturing each other through the zone of proximal development. First, I write my lectures as a series of questions, and when I ask a question, I ask students to initially discuss the response with each other before I ask for responses from the group, so that everyone has an opportunity to answer. I try to limit fact-based, right/wrong answers, and instead utilize open-

ended, interpretive questions, which enable rather than inhibit students as learners. On many occasions I will arrange student desks into cooperative groups, and ask them to collaborate on an assignment. For instance, in my sociology of mental illness course, I had students in groups analyze vignettes from the life of Van Gogh, Max Weber, a church-goer speaking in tongues, a traditional shaman, and a climber experiencing “the other presence,” to see how definitions of mental illness can be understood contextually as a micro-political process.

In addition to encouraging learning through discussion and collaborative work, I also strive to invigorate my lectures by presenting material in a variety of ways. First, I try to make my lectures timely and relevant, incorporating current events and capitalizing on “learning moments.” For instance, when I speak about Weber’s emphasis on rational bookkeeping as a key to the transition from feudalism to capitalism, I discuss fraudulent accounting practices at Arthur Anderson which facilitated the Enron collapse, and subsequently damaged faith in the American economy. Secondly, I provide students PowerPoint slides prior to lecture, so that the outline of the lecture and major points are clear. I also like to use films or small excerpts from films in my teaching, to exemplify certain points, and make them real to students. For instance, when I speak of Deindustrialization as an explanation for poverty in my Introduction to Sociology course, I show a short clip from Roger ‘N Me, where news footage of GM plant closings is juxtaposed with footage of deteriorating neighborhoods. Finally, I enjoy incorporating the internet into my courses, extensively using the General Social Survey when I teach Research Methods, and pulling up EllisIsland.com when I speak of immigration, for instance. Through such techniques, I work to constantly keep students engaged with my courses.

Students are also motivated by a well-structured, well-organized classroom. I begin a course by gathering personal information about my students, and learning their names. As the

term progresses, I ask my students to provide anonymous feedback on how they think the course is progressing, and I make adjustments accordingly. For instance, recently I was teaching the Sociology of Mental Illness through Cleveland State University Extension, and these anonymous mid-term evaluations showed that students were overwhelmed by the readings, and wanted more opportunities for assessment. At that point, I began providing extensive weekly study guides, and I increased the number of tests from two to five. I grade students' papers as quickly as possible, in order to provide timely feedback on their progress. I also give my students personalized grade reports throughout the term, merging their score from an Excel spreadsheet to be printed on a small, confidential note. I always provide study guides for exams, which call for short answers and critical reflections based on readings and lectures.

Finally, I work to nurture personal relationships with my students. While at UCLA, I was a Teaching Fellow for a year-long ethnographic immersion course. This entailed, among many other duties, finding field placements for the students, and then guiding them through the rigors of taking ethnographic field notes and conducting in-depth interviews. I enhanced the computer resources for ethnographers at UCLA by adding Ethnograph 5.0 to the mainframe, and used this to train my students in coding and analytic induction. Finally, I guided my students through numerous drafts in order to arrive at a final analysis, to be submitted as undergraduate honors theses. I also personally mentored dozens of students through internships for academic credit, and I was the UCLA Sociology Department's Graduate Thesis Advisor in 1997. I try to nurture these same sorts of relationships in larger courses, always circulating among groups during small group discussions, providing my email address for any questions students may have, and being available for office hours.

All of these strategies are designed to facilitate a collaborative community in the classroom, so that individual students may personally grasp the material in an enthusiastic matter, in order to ultimately encourage motivated action. The ideas of sociology are too vital and relevant to be confined to books; they must be brought to life and embodied by instructors and students who empower each other to question social structures, towards considering how they might better facilitate a full expression of human potential.