

Statement of Teaching Philosophy & Pedagogy for Undergraduate, Graduate and Online Classes

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Teaching Philosophy

The opportunity to teach is the most important reason for why I chose to pursue a career as a professor of sociology. When I was a student I found that learning about social issues helped me to better understand not only the social world I lived in, but also the roles I wished to perform in it. These events were instrumental to my personal and intellectual growth. Through teaching, I seek to bring to my students similar experiences of enlightenment.

In my mind, the best route toward realizing this goal is to encourage students to pursue understandings of society that are based on research, theory, and critical thinking, as opposed to politics, philosophy, or

ideology. Being critical means not only encouraging students to question what they read or learn in class, but also their own beliefs and prejudices. By urging students to consider social knowledge and their own viewpoints in a critical light, they are better able to gain insights into their beliefs, and why others might think differently. Critical thinking also helps students to understand, evaluate, and apply social research. Acquiring and enhancing these skills not only provides for a deeper comprehension of the issues dealt with in class, but also gives students a framework from which to understand new information and other social issues they will encounter in their lives. In my opinion, these skills and experiences can make a difference in students' lives by fostering emotional maturity and intellectual growth that, in turn, improves their life chances in today's rapidly changing economy and culture.

But education is a two-way street. Professors and students must be prepared and must interact for education to fulfill its promise. If professors are uninterested, disorganized and unprepared, this will discourage and alienate students. Likewise, if students will not acquire the readings and

complete assignments, education is reduced to a one-way street with students passively accepting whatever the professor says or writes on the board. Yet when both parties, professor and students, are ready, willing and able to interact and discuss the material, then education can be a mutually fulfilling and enjoyable experience where professors not only assess and enhance students' knowledge and understanding, but professors can also be enlightened by students who may ask unexpected questions, provide novel understandings, or connect their individual experiences and personal knowledge to issues. I work diligently and unceasingly toward these latter, more ideal, classroom experiences.

Below I outline, occasionally with some depth, the specific pedagogies I employ in three teaching venues: undergraduate classes taught in classrooms, graduate seminars, and online classes. I believe that it is essential that professors develop (and continually refine) pedagogies that help them achieve their philosophical goals in the activity of teaching, as well as their personalities. After all, teaching is (and must be) an enjoyable and fulfilling experience for the professor, as well as for students. In a

successful class, professor and students will look forward to being together in class and work together to make these experiences meaningful, memorable, and positive.

Undergraduate Classroom Pedagogy

One of the greatest challenges I face in the classroom is getting students to consistently complete the assigned readings so that an informed, two-way, give-and-take dialogue about the issues can ensue between the students and I. Beginning with the first class I taught as a graduate teaching assistant at the University of Oklahoma in 1994 to the present, I am continually surprised at the paltry and meager number of students who will come to class prepared on any given day. Some students will not even buy the books! Over the years I have tried many techniques including moral suasion, calling on students randomly by name for a grade, group work, and I've even tried begging and pleading. Students assured me they cared about their education and their grades, but I wondered how this could be true if so many seemed so passive and

uninterested. And it seemed that many of my colleagues experienced the same problem.

Recently, however, a new pedagogical approach I started using is turning the tide and getting students to complete the readings, come to class, and engage in meaningful, informed discussion. Based on a modification of Michaelsen et al.'s (2002) "team-based learning" I developed, this approach is based on two principles: (1) daily assessments of students and (2) enhancing students' ownership over their grade and the class as a whole.

The gist of this approach is that each day begins with a short, four-question, multiple choice, closed-book quiz taken individually by each student and which address basic comprehension issues from the assigned readings. The intention is that, if students have completed the readings, they will get an A on this quiz. After five minutes, I collect the quizzes and then put the questions from the quiz on the projector screen and go over each question, identifying the correct answer and why the other options are incorrect. I encourage the students to question me about the correct

answers and the questions themselves and to debate with me about what might be correct or “fair.” If they can present a good case on the spot as to why a given answer should be considered correct, then I will give all the students credit for that answer. Once we have gone over the individual quiz, I put the students into their assigned teams and give them a very difficult, open-book quiz to complete as a team. The questions here are typically multiple choice and short essay. They have 20 minutes to complete the quiz, all team members present receive the same score, and students must have their assigned readings with them to participate and receive credit. While they are working, I circulate among the teams to see how they are doing, answering their questions, giving them encouragement, helping with strategy and, occasionally, giving hints. After 20 minutes, I collect the quizzes and, much like before, put the questions on the projector screen and go over them one by one, identifying correct and incorrect answers and encouraging debate. On both the individual and team quizzes, I deliberately introduce ambiguity into some questions as a way to stimulate such debate, which I then “let” them win.

This strategy of daily assessments does a number of things that encourage students to do the readings and, as a result (and perhaps without their explicit awareness), participate in meaningful discussions about the material. The key is that students receive immediate feedback on the correct answers and their grades on the daily assessments and they quickly realize they cannot succeed if they do not show up prepared each day. Students thus possess an immediate sense of ownership over their performance, which, again, is evaluated twice each class period. The debates and discussions that take place in class often result in my willingness to accept additional responses as correct, which encourages and rewards these interactions by improving their scores, as well as by gaining approval from their peers who also benefit. Being smart isn't showing off in my class, it's providing immediate benefits to self.

I also include tactics that give students ownership over the class as a whole. Most importantly, four times each semester I devote a class period to student reflection and assessment of the class. This is done individually by each student, and again in their teams. In both formats, I ask for

feedback on strengths and weaknesses, likes and dislikes, avenues for improvement, and suggestions for the future regarding me, their professor, the class format and reading assignments, and their respective teams. After collecting their responses, we then discuss their main concerns and questions together in class. I demonstrate concern and flexibility during this discussion, and find some routes by which to incorporate, wherever possible, their ideas. I also enhance class ownership by asking students to email me songs and video clips that pertain to our class material and I then start each class with one of these songs or clips, as well as any discussion that might be generated. This latter technique may seem frivolous, but students are often pleased to have a piece of music they suggested played for the whole class.

In my experience, this pedagogy results in classes that are lively and spontaneous, with *lots of interaction* between me and the students as well as among themselves. Importantly, these interactions provide ample opportunity for me to “teach” my now-informed students about the topics in the readings—making connections among ideas, comparing and

contrasting concepts and findings, and referencing a host of issues that might be relevant including theory, research methods, ethics, social inequality, social structure, and culture, as well as current events. I place a strong emphasis on gender, race/ethnicity and social class to develop recurring themes that provide structure for the entire course and to give students a much needed basis from which to gain deep insights into society.

I firmly believe that the best classroom experiences involve face-to-face interaction with students that actively engages them in a lively, spontaneous discussion of key concepts, findings, and debates. And the pedagogy I employ promotes these interactions. While this approach may not appeal to all professors, it suits my goals and personality better than any other. And I believe that to be as successful as possible, a professor must find a pedagogy that leads them to *enjoy* teaching and *want* to be in the classroom.

Graduate Seminar Pedagogy

More than any other teaching venues, graduate seminars can come closest to education being a two-way street, with students making observations and offering insights that enhance the professor's knowledge, as well as vice-versa. One of the most important tasks for professors in graduate seminars is identifying readings that will inform as well as inspire students. No longer dwelling in the realm of encyclopedic textbooks, professors here are now free to (but also burdened with) choose from among the literature of articles and books that are classic and recent, qualitative and quantitative, theoretical and applied, seminal and cutting edge. Finding an effective mix of readings that exposes students to the best of a literature is where a professor's expertise and experience will most pay off for students for, with such a collection of readings, graduate students should be excited, inquisitive and inspired. Professors should seek to structure and guide discussions and more carefully limit their participation.

Online Class Pedagogy

New challenges emerge in a venue where students work in relative isolation from professors and from each other. Communication, often limited to emails and bulletin postings, becomes less frequent and more prone to misunderstanding. Clear, unambiguous written communication in the form of the syllabus and assignments becomes the key to successful online classes. But how to stimulate thought and interaction? One way is through writing assignments that are not “Easter egg hunts” where students hunt down specific ideas, facts, or passages and then spew them back, but rather assignments that require broad and deep understandings of the reading to identify and apply requisite information.

Reference

Michaelsen, Larry K., Arletta Bauman Knight, and L. Dee Fink (eds). 2002. Team-Based Learning: A Transformative Use of Small Groups. Westport, Conn.: Praeger.