

PHILOSOPHY OF TEACHING STATEMENT

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I am a firm believer in active learning and teaching. By active, I mean that education should be engaging and motivating, and at the same time reflexive. By learning, I refer to the process through which information is received and applied. Finally, by teaching I submit to a pedagogy that seeks to empower. There is a necessary dynamic between course materials and approaches to teaching that is fluid, and I will outline my philosophy of teaching through the conceptualization of this dynamic: a reflexive account of learning and teaching, and concomitant empowerment for my professional growth.

Conceptualization of Learning:

Learning is more than simple or rote memorization. I see learning as a process where new or expanded information can stimulate critical thinking and application. The progression of learning is the purposeful and reflexive evaluation of course materials, how the materials can be applied, and the diverse modes through which they have utility. My favorite question from students, especially because my teaching has been in statistics and research methods, is, "When will I ever use this?" Through active engagement with the content of the course, I hope that students are empowered to see a range of answers to this question.

In addition, I understand the learning process to be performed at a pace or through a mode that differs between individuals. While students may or may not be aware of how to best utilize their strengths, as a teacher, the ability to present information in different ways opens mechanisms through which students can connect to and engage with the material.

Therefore, my philosophy of teaching acknowledges the primacy of learning through the presentation and application of course content in diverse ways. Learning is a path beginning with the introduction of material and ending at a stage of empowering its application, initiating the development of new capacities and strengths.

Conceptualization of Teaching:

Teaching, in line with learning, is also a process. It is the means through which learning is cultivated. To teach is to motivate the learner regardless of his or her level of development, and it flows from the presentation of new ideas to providing opportunities and energizing development.

Teaching is applied in various ways for specific courses, individual class sessions, or one-on-one meetings with students. Teaching is not static but incorporates different instructional methods: lecture, in-class application, homework and projects, dialog, and critique. It is a fundamental aspect of my teaching to provide for, through this dynamic, repeated opportunity to

support learning. The focus is to challenge students in different ways and open multiple modes for engagement with the course.

On this path, teaching must also be reflected upon critically. How information can be presented, and for whom, are constant points for self-deliberation. I often reflect on my teaching at the end of the day, replaying the session in my head and looking for both the positive moments and spaces for improvement. I am also constantly revising my notes and techniques to ensure my teaching remains relevant in its presentation and content.

My Approach to Teaching and Instruction:

In the classroom, my philosophy is implemented purposefully. Lecture, for example, introduces and outlines new material. Similarly, providing contextualized and applied readings beyond the textbook aim to spark interest in the new material and foster critical thinking. In-class exercises provide opportunities to practice new skills, and course papers and projects are intended to embolden students and develop competence.

My primary teaching style is rooted in an established and focused system for lecture. As the initial introduction of course material, my approach to lecturing presents the substance of the course in an engaging way. I do not simply talk at students, or read verbatim from my notes; instead, I provide the students with modified lecture materials that demand their active participation. As an example, in my undergraduate statistics course, *Methods of Data Analysis*, I offer lecture notes to students with a considerable amount of missing information where definitions, key terms, and equations are left blank. Through the lecture, students are able to complete the text and work through computations and example problems.

Within these lectures, I also build in opportunities to reflect on the information and apply new techniques. Whether it is developing a list of possible questions for a survey or interview protocol or building a sampling distribution using both M&M's and internet simulations, lectures should be anything but one-dimensional. I also make use of the students themselves during class. For example, I ask for volunteers to walk the class through the calculation of a statistic or to participate in mock survey interviews.

In addition, I build assignments, both for in-class and out of class completion, that attempt to expand the relevance of course materials, especially in a way that could simulate real world applications. It is a challenge to introduce substantive topics and themes in statistics and applied methods, but as a sociologist, I feel it is important to confront this barrier and foster a critical eye to social processes. I stress, in my teaching, how different statistical applications or research methods can elucidate or challenge our understanding of society, social problems, inequalities, and the intersection of individuals and social institutions. For example, I continually incorporate public polling and media reports into my lectures to stress how different data collection methods and analyses, even basic descriptive analyses and graphical representations, can be used to investigate timely topics.

Moreover, I also believe it is necessary to stress the importance of the inseparability of the individual and society, including someone's social class, gender, and race. To incorporate these themes into my courses, I provide students with opportunities to develop their own

sociological imagination and an investigation of the private and the public through statistics and methods. For example, my statistics students write a formal paper testing hypotheses that look at disparities in employment and gender, political involvement and race, support for gay marriage and religion, or use of electronic media and education levels. Additionally, in my data collection course, I designed a group research project that explores social capital on a college campus. Based on Putnam's *Bowling Alone* hypothesis, the students conduct participant observations and semi-structured interviews, and work in research teams to develop a collaborative survey based on the findings of their qualitative work. This project, extended over the entire semester, offers the students real, hands-on experience in designing and conducting original social research and work on a timely issue, the civic engagement of students on campus and their involvement in religious, educational, voluntary, and political activities.

Despite these activities and my approach toward teaching, the one action I take that establishes my teaching style with my students happens on the first day of class. As I discuss the syllabus and outline the course expectations, amidst the other traditional objectives and graded course requirements, I give considerable time discussing participation in the course as *engagement*. Engaging with the course, as I stress, is fundamental as students are expected, at minimum, to come to class prepared to learn. But engagement also means completing the assignments in order to practice the techniques. What is more, willingness to seek help or guidance when needed connotes engagement and motivation to learn. I am hopeful, as is the point of this discussion, that the students are not simply passive recipients of information, but engage in a reciprocal process of doing and questioning. Whether for lecture or an in-class activity, my goal for students is to contribute to their learning by being engaged.

After these initial expectations for students, I follow with a discussion of my engagement. While I do not grade on attendance or participation, by engaging the students through my teaching style, I attempt to ensure their engagement with the course. Teaching, like learning, does not begin at the start of the class session and end when students are dismissed. In essence, I make sure students know that I am with them on the path of their learning from the introduction of new concepts and ideas, their practice and application, and their engagement with the course.

Empowering Professional Growth:

I am a firm believer that, just like students, teachers need to continually develop and enhance their competence. As my teaching career has been brief, this idea may seem perfunctory, but it is one that I take seriously. My professional growth plan is simple: taking opportunities to be reflexive and foster self-empowerment for the improvement of my teaching and the enhancement of my courses.

There are two major modes through which I continually reflect on my teaching: consulting students and the discipline. First, I take the course evaluations and student feedback very seriously. When I receive evaluation results and comments, I spend time reading them and thinking how their concerns can lead to improvements for the next semester. For example, I redesigned my Methods of Data Collection course based on the considerable comments by students to have a mix of traditional exams and applied assignments. Additionally, throughout the semester I informally ask students for feedback on how things are going for them, how they

are experiencing the course, and if there are any concerns. I do this at moments where, for example, they may come to my office hours or stay after class to ask a question.

Beyond direct feedback from students, I also seek out opportunities to stimulate my teaching. For example, I consult the American Sociological Association's *Teaching Sociology* journal and other support materials offered by professional organizations. Further, at professional conferences I make it a point to attend at least one session geared toward teaching. The point is that teaching in academia is much like learning in academia – critically analyzing the course material, how the material can be presented and applied, and developing and empowering instructional competence.