

Teaching Statement

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My approach to teaching has been shaped by my experiences as a student, teaching assistant, instructor, and mentor of B.A. students. It prioritizes three principal learning goals. First, I want students to learn how to think sociologically. This means learning to critically evaluate evidence and to apply sociological concepts, methods, and ways of seeing the world. It also means developing a sensibility for how one's own perceptions and experiences are shaped by one's social position in the world. Second, learning means doing. Students acquire new skills and habits of thought by actively applying analytical tools to issues they are invested in. This practical component of my teaching also gives them a sense of what it is like to be an active member of a social science community. Third, I seek to create a welcoming intellectual community and turn the classroom into a space for personal development, where students can experience the joy that can come from adopting unfamiliar perspectives and from thinking through complex and challenging issues collectively.

Feeling heard, respected, and welcome is necessary to be a bold thinker. Thus, making the classroom a welcoming and inclusive community that is attuned to the different backgrounds of students is an underlying priority of my teaching. The first day of class plays an important role here. I use this class to communicate expectations, establish ground rules for class discussions, and communicate that I understand teaching as a collaborative project in which the students and I think together. Usually, I will have sent out an online survey that asks about students' prior knowledge and their goals for the course beforehand and we will spend time talking about their answers. In addition, combining a wide range of pedagogical activities and assessments, from discussions to homework assignments to response memos and final papers, accommodates different forms of learning. Required office hours allow me to check in with students and provide an opportunity for them to raise concerns about my teaching. I also elicit anonymous feedback after the first three weeks of each course that I teach to encourage students to shape the class according to their own ideals.

In-class discussions based on weekly readings are a central part of my pedagogy. Guided by the instructor, students learn to reconstruct the author's argument, to argue with the text and with their peers, and to develop their own position. This process encourages autonomy but also teaches that science is a collaborative project that requires a willingness to engage with positions other than one's own. I have found that asking students to write brief response memos to each week's readings is a good way to prepare them for these discussions and to attenuate some of the imbalances that come from the fact that students enter the classroom with different prior knowledge and are not all equally comfortable talking in front of others. I will often use short lectures to provide background on the readings and draw connections between them. I find that classroom discussions are most successful when students can rely on their ability to think rather than their prior knowledge, which is why I like to teach by confronting students with small solvable problems. For example, in a class on network analysis I show students a graph of the communication network among members of a criminal organization and ask them which of the members they would target if they wanted to disrupt the internal communication of the organization. In small groups, students then develop the idea of the broker (and other important structural positions) on their own. Solving problems and reaching conclusions on their own helps students internalize new ideas and feel joy doing it.

My teaching has a strong practical component. I want students to learn how to take the concepts and methods introduced in class and apply them to new contexts. A few semesters ago I taught a class on political sociology. The class happened to take place during a time of widespread social unrest all around the world. After we had discussed several readings on the state, state repression, and social movements, we divided the students into groups and assigned them to different cases (protests in France, Chile, Bolivia, Iraq, Catalonia, Hong Kong). An entire class was then dedicated to “expert panels” in which the groups informed the rest of the class about their case using the conceptual tools that we had previously developed (similar to jigsaw discussions). Student feedback showed that they appreciated the transformation from someone who didn’t know much about, say, the yellow vests in France to an “expert” and that they felt taken seriously. Group projects like this also serve the purpose of fostering a collaborative rather than competitive class environment. At the same time, this exercise highlighted the importance of being attuned to the different backgrounds students bring into the classroom. For some of the international students in our course, especially those from countries with authoritarian regimes, discussing social uprisings and state repression was a challenge, and we had to seriously debate if we could ask them to participate in this project.

Another component of encouraging autonomy and curiosity is mentorship. A grant from our college, which I applied for together with my advisor, allowed me to hire an exceptional undergraduate research assistant to help with my dissertation project. This turned into an exciting collaboration between me, my advisor, and the undergraduate. We added weekly meetings involving theoretical and case-specific readings and discussion of her independent work to the originally planned research, which included a trip to the New York State Archives in Albany to gather data and meet with local historians. The undergraduate and I presented this work at the 2019 meeting of the Social Science History Association, and we are currently working on an article together. This collaboration was so successful that it drew other undergraduates into the project, which I was able to hire thanks to an NSF dissertation improvement grant. Working with research assistants has taught me that many students enjoy being part of and contributing to a larger research project instead of producing writing for themselves and the drawers of faculty. Because of that I decided to design and teach a practicum class in Historical Sociology that was organized around my dissertation research. Students contributed to the larger data collection effort, but were also able to make use of the data I had collected.

To ensure that students feel invested in the class material, I often ask them to design and carry out their own research projects on a topic of their choosing. As a mentor of B.A. students, I taught a class that was designed to help them write their final theses. I designed a series of smaller assignments (developing a research question, writing a literature review, matching data to the research question, etc.) that were ultimately combined into the final paper. Breaking the daunting process of writing a B.A. thesis down into smaller parts and establishing an iterative process in which I gave written feedback on first drafts, which were then revised and ultimately combined into a paper, was particularly helpful to students for whom this was the first time they had to write a larger research paper. By building assignments toward a final paper, students were also graded based on their own improvement rather than relative to others in the class. This reduced antagonism and strengthened the collaborative spirit of the class.