TEACHING PHILOSOPHY
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Since joining the Department of Sociology, I have prepared six different courses—SOCI 113: “Social Problems in Modern Societies,” SOCI 208: “Dating, Marriage, & Family,” SOCI 269: “The Sociology of Aging in a Global Context,” SOCI 377/477: “Population Dynamics and Changing Societies;” SOCI 407: “Research Methods: The Modes and Logic of Social Inquiry,” and SOCI 469: “The Sociology of Age, Aging, and the Life Course.” These courses cut across a number of topics and appeal to a number of different types of students. This variety of courses has afforded the opportunity to develop and refine a teaching philosophy that attends to not only the demands of sociological training, but also the larger educational and training goals of the University.

My philosophy is that effective teaching in sociology does three interrelated things: helps students identify their taken-for-granted assumptions about the social world; pushes the boundaries of students’ preconceptions about social issues; and provides students with the means to be independent and critical thinkers. While these three tenets apply to both undergraduate- and graduate levels, effective graduate-level teaching goes further and equips students with solid substantive and methodological foundations for future scholarship. A few brief illustrations of each tenet of my teaching philosophy follow:

- I challenge students to recognize the assumptions under which they are operating through the use of culturally diverse examples and readings. For example, in SOCI 113—a course which surveys major social problems through the innovative use of documentary films—I have used the film The Other Europe to examine undocumented immigration. Examining immigration in the European context forces students to confront their preconceived notions about immigration and immigrants because their usual frame of reference—the U.S./Mexico border—and the associated political context is unavailable. I use a similar method in SOCI 269, where a global approach to the study of aging reveals how aging experiences vary by cultural context.

- I employ active learning strategies to incrementally push the boundaries of students’ preconceptions about social issues, and perhaps encourage critical thinking in their other courses as well. In SOCI 208, I make use of in-class short writing assignments that ask the student to answer a question that applies the concepts covered in the day’s lesson. Across all of my courses I emphasize discussion and practice the Socratic Method, systematically asking questions of students to expose assumptions, errors in logic, and to draw connections to other concepts, in an effort to foster critical reasoning.

- I provide students with the opportunity to be self-directed learners by creating assignments that allow exploration of their interests within the context of a given course. In SOCI 269, for instance, students are required to evaluate age-related social policies, comparing and contrasting the purpose, eligibility and administration of a policy in the United States and a country of their choice, assessing the degree to which these policies are effective in meeting their stated goals. In SOCI 407, students complete several exercises where they must demonstrate their understanding of an aspect of social research design by applying it to a substantive problem of their choice.
I offer graduate students (and advanced undergraduates) in-depth examination of key areas of substantive and methodological importance, which supplies them with the knowledge base to engage in the discourses of the discipline. For example, in both SOCI 377/477 and SOCI 469 each week of the course is organized around a specific topic and students are assigned to read several scientific articles and book chapters covering various aspects of the topic, including debates in the literature. To facilitate critical evaluation and integration of these readings, students complete 3-5 page written assignments each week where they must answer 1-2 broad questions. As the semester progresses, I expect that students will begin to make connections not just among the readings assigned for a given week but across weeks. In evaluating these assignments, I provide extensive written feedback to help the student identify common themes and offer critiques of prior findings in a well-organized, logically coherent essay.

My teaching philosophy is continuously evolving based on my experiences in the classroom. At the end of each course, I identify which aspects were particularly effective (and which were not) and make note of changes to incorporate the next time I teach the course. I also revise my courses each semester in order to ensure that course content is up to date, speaking to current issues and scientific findings, in an effort to achieve the goals of my overall teaching philosophy and the specific learning objectives of each course.