

TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

Teaching is exciting. It is more than disseminating information, it is igniting passion in students that feeds a longing for knowledge. To me, an effective teacher creates an intentional environment to critically analyze historical and contemporary issues and encourages diverse forms of knowledge acquisition that expands empathetic awareness so that students challenge the way they view the world around them. I have taught in a variety of academic and professional settings, in places where many of my students were privileged and in locations with over 50 percent first generation scholars and a significant number of students facing socioeconomic challenges. To reach each of these learners, I develop a purposeful learning community where students, regardless of background, can be successful. To do this, I present content in ways that reach different learning styles and create assignments that rely on diverse skills. Further, because students are more likely to succeed when they are engaged by the material, I also push students to connect theory to lived experience and to develop sociological empathy.

Sociological Empathy and Theoretical Application

As a social scientist, I want my students to use a sociological imagination to critically assess how individual problems reflect social phenomena. I want them to understand how history informs contemporary discussions and be able to clearly articulate connections between history, theory and contemporary life. One way to do this is through the development of sociological empathy. Although sympathetic understanding is important, empathic learning involves getting students to assess how an individual or community might feel or engage in a particular situation, it simply does something that sympathetic learning cannot achieve. Although we can never fully understand the world through someone else's eyes, we can begin to develop sociological empathy by applying the sociological imagination. To do this, I have students look at scenarios and map individual decision-making processes in relation to social conditions. For instance, in one scenario sequence we look at various environmentally contaminated areas (such as Erie, CO) and assess what drives individuals to remain in these locations. Instantly, when presented with the facts of environmental contamination in the area, students insist that people should move. I let them have this initial reaction. Next, I present community data (income, cost of living, etc.) and we begin to discuss why individuals stay in communities that are making them sick. We discuss this from multiple angles, exploring things like lack of resources (financial and otherwise) and community cohesion. Slowly, students begin to understand that moving out of the community is not just a personal decision but is influenced by a variety of social factors.

Intentional Classroom

Intentional classrooms that value diverse identities and perspectives allow students to feel a greater sense of belonging, making them more willing to listen to and learn from each other, challenge their beliefs, overcome biases, and ultimately engage in the critical thinking that is a hallmark of a college education. To create an intentional classroom, I start by stating my intention in the syllabus and then hold a discussion on the first day (and periodically throughout the semester) about inclusivity and respect for diverse identities and perspectives-the pinnacle of cultural competency. I extend this commitment to my selection of readings, assignments and examples, drawing on works that highlight the contributions of women, people of color, LGBTQIA+ folks, those who are disabled, etc. In addition, I make course materials accessible to students from varying socioeconomic backgrounds. Although my courses tend to be reading-

intensive, I frequently forgo traditional books and instead use journal articles, pop culture texts, visual imagery, art, current events, and civic engagement exercises to present course material. When I do assign a book, I ensure students can access it in multiple ways, for example in the bookstore, in the library, as a rental, and in course reserves. Making materials accessible helps bridge often invisible socioeconomic divides among students. Finally, I engage students in their own learning experience, beginning each course with a survey to gauge interests, existing knowledge, personal learning goals, and course expectations. I also challenge students to think about how the course will contribute to their academic or career ambitions. I use this material to make connections with students and modify course content to include contemporary examples that speak to specific students' interests. This allows me to personalize the course with statements like, "James you are interested in pursuing nursing, right? Well, this study might really interest you, as it suggests that medical professionals should pay more attention to the physical environment an individual lives in when making medical diagnoses."

Teaching Content and Teaching Skills

Successful instruction hinges on a balance between teaching content and teaching skill enhancement. While content is essential, it cannot be properly engaged without giving students the tools to recognize, apply, analyze, and evaluate information in and outside of the classroom. I want my courses to be more than memorization. In creating a new course, I begin with a backward design approach, starting with the content and skills I want students to acquire and working backwards to scaffold assignments that help students reach these objectives. Although the content of each course changes, I promote five skills shown to be essential to post-college careers in all courses: critical thinking, verbal and written communication, numerical literacy, teamwork and time management. Recognizing that there are different types of learners, I include a variety of assignments: student generated videos, photography, art, surveys, blogs, tests, quizzes, video scripts, research papers, and community engagement activities.

To enhance these skills, I often assign a research project that assists students in identifying a question, completing research, and assessing statistics. All assignments are structured to build on the successful completion of the research project. I begin this process with a discussion about writing as an iterative exercise and show students one of my draft articles, demonstrating the activity from conception to publication. I provide students with detailed instructions and connect them to the university's writing resources. Through this project, we collectively explore what it means to know something and what good research looks like. I model this project from start to finish with a sample topic.

Professional Practices and Assessment

I strive to be an archetype for time management, something that many students struggle with. My classes begin on time, I am punctual about returning assignments, and I maintain strict course expectations. I discuss my promptness as a professional demonstration of respect, one that I expect students to reciprocate. Finally, I am committed to research in and outside of the classroom. This means that I take student and instructor assessment very seriously. All assignments are graded using rubrics included in the syllabus. I use pre and post course surveys to assess expectations, track progress and make course adjustments and improvements. I survey students about course elements and ask them to evaluate my performance. In addition, I often use reflective learning tools like concept mapping to help students visualize their development throughout the course.