

Teaching Statement

Sociology opened up new worlds to me. The mundane world revealed its rich and layered structures demystifying its workings. I could uncover previously hidden social categories, discrimination, and bias.

My goals for all teaching - whether it be a hundred-person Sociology 101 course or an advanced theory course with only two students - is to instill in students this “sociological imagination.”

I believe that learning occurs best by doing. So, as a teacher, I cultivate such thought by enabling practical and active learning. In the following paragraphs I will illustrate how I use a combination of active learning, copious feedback, and robust community support to deliver the best results for my students.

Active Learning

I view sociology not merely as an academic practice. I see it as a subject that has a deep impact on the lives of my students and those around them. To enable my students’ practical learning, I follow two steps.

First, I provide my students with detailed PowerPoint slide decks and Zoom videos introducing them to concepts and examples of their application. Next, I encourage students to take sociological principles that I have taught from the slides and textbooks and to place them directly in their own lived experience. I do this by designing activities that prod students to examine their own surroundings. For instance, to illustrate ideas of deviance and its sociological repercussions, I assign them activities such as “Take a photograph of something deviant around you” or “Do something deviant. Report on the reactions your action received.”

Students voluntarily invest time and effort in these assignments, compounding their learning greatly. In fact, the most consistent feedback I have received from my students is that they both enjoy the assignments I give them very much and learn greatly from them.

Community

The learning journey of a student is greatly aided when done with a group of peers. A community provides support and accountability during a learning journey that will invariably have its highs and lows.

With online learning, I am acutely aware that learners face a lack of community and miss the resulting support and accountability. I have adapted my teaching to facilitate online communities. For every course I teach, I run a discussion board. I thoughtfully design and post thought provoking questions which encourage discussion. An average class of 60 students posts about 280-300 times per week on the discussion board.

The power of the asynchronous discussion board lies in the fact that it is always available to students. They do not have to wait to be in a live class session to share their ideas, obtain community feedback and continue their learning journeys.

Assessment

Assessment is crucial for both a teacher and their students to have a shared understanding of whether progress is being made towards achieving learning goals.

I administer tests. I find that tests are a good way to check if base level learning objectives of remembering and understanding have been achieved. Tests indicate whether a student has been viewing the material prescribed for the course and listening to my lectures.

For higher level learning objectives such as applying what they have learnt, evaluating their social surroundings and creating new works, I find assignments to be the better tools. For example, I recently assigned my class the following work: "Interview someone in your immediate circle - such as a friend, family member or an acquaintance. Draft their sociological biography." This allowed me to assess not only whether my students understood basic sociological definitions. I was also able to probe whether they could contextualize the knowledge they were gaining, and in turn, whether it was improving their understanding of their own world.

Feedback

Feedback is the engine that keeps learning going. Without feedback learning would simply stop. I employ several methods of giving feedback.

In in-person classes, I often employ group discussions for students to debate and explicate points. I then give immediate feedback. I also give feedback on tests and assignments.

I believe that learning is lifelong. Learning may start in class, but it grows and blooms outside. And students are most challenged when they wrestle with ideas outside the confines of a classroom. To ensure students are not obstructed by their challenges, I make myself extensively available to them via email and phone contact. On average I respond to 15-20 emails every day. With my graduate students, I have one-on-one meetings at least once a week. For my undergraduate class of 60 students, I am available for one-on-one meetings upon request. On average at least 40 take up this offer.

Teaching is a two-way process of communication. Just as I am very serious about giving feedback to my students, I am equally serious about collecting feedback from my students. I proactively invite feedback from them to improve my teaching efficacy.

I try to build many touchpoints in my courses for feedback. First, I make it very clear that I am available to my students via email, phone, and one-on-one meetings. Next, I actively monitor and respond in the discussion boards. Third, I actively seek student feedback on course content and assignments. In my tests I include challenge questions - if a student believes that two

options on a question are correct - and, furthermore, are able to provide a convincing argument for an extra option, I give them credit.

Recently, I obtained feedback that I had not included sufficient transgender and non-binary material in my course. Although I had included a short module in the course already, I worked on including several new reference materials. I also created fresh optional modules for extra credit. But I did not want to stop with this as I recognize that inclusivity is paramount to creating a safe space for learning. I reached out to the university's queer resource center which provided my students as access to a specialized panel of queer students. My students sent their questions about transgender and intersex issues to this panel and got video responses. In response to students, I have also removed assigned textbooks that were not being read.

Mentoring

I am a passionate researcher and problem solver. Studying and trying to solve sociological problems has deeply enriched my life. One of my goals as a teacher is to share this passion with my students so that they may benefit from new and eye-opening perspectives.

I actively mentor my graduate students and engage them in real empirical research. Students often write their first major research paper with me. I show them the ropes of writing a paper. I train them to conduct literature reviews. I then train them to write various sections of the paper including introduction, methods, and results sections. Thus, students learn both to conduct research and to communicate their results effectively.

From my first teaching experience at Rutgers—Sociology 101 over the summer—to my current position at Portland State University teaching Gender & Mental Health and the Sociology of Disability, I have always been inspired by my students. Students and their “a-ha!” moments are what get me out of bed in the morning. If given the opportunity, I would love to bring my experience and passion to the service of your department and students.

Additional paragraph for community college applications:

As a student at a community college myself, I appreciate the unique advantages of the community college experience. A smaller class size and more flexible workload are both perfectly suited to both my teaching style. It allows for building strong student teacher relationships and a deep exploration of the subject led by student interest. Additionally, I am demonstrating my commitment to community college by participating in a state-wide Open Access Sociology textbook development project that will largely benefit community college students across the state.