TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

Making Sociology Meaningful

I clearly remember my first Sociology course. It was a revelation. Suddenly the world made more sense and seemed more interesting. I do not expect my classes will have such a dramatic impact on all of my students (although I hope it will for some), but I seek to impart something valuable to everyone. In my teaching I strive to pass on both the wonder of the sociological perspective and the practical tools it provides. In short, I try to make sociology meaningful. In each course I introduce students to sociological concepts, theories, and methods in ways they will find interesting and relevant. In part, this means discovering what is important to my student and incorporating it into the classroom. By using examples students relate to, I help students understand abstract principles while pointing out the value of these principles in illuminating the their own lives and world around them. By making sociology meaningful, I also hope to show student that I care about, and am committed to, their learning.

I attempt to make sociology meaningful in numerous ways, for example, by soliciting student interests at the beginning of each class, and using them as examples to elucidate course content. I also incorporate discussions of personal and current events into every course I teach. At the beginning of some classes, I ask for volunteers to share recent experiences, observations and/or noteworthy news events. Issues we discuss include controversies on campus, current political and cultural happenings, excerpts from movies, music, art and media, and personal experiences. I ask the students what they make of the particular example or incident, how it relates to class concepts, and how the sociological perspective (or statistics or research methods) might help us better understand it. This exercise serves two purposes. It begins the class in an active way, encouraging the students to start thinking, discussing, and interacting. It also reinforces the relevance, importance, and usefulness of the course, encouraging the students to continually connect the course to their own lives and happenings of the world around them.

Promoting Active Learning

Because students learn in many different ways, I employ a variety of teaching methods, including lectures, class discussions, student presentations, and small group exercises. Students learn by reading, listening, and discussing, but I think they often learn even more – and the lessons stick with them longer – when they do, see, and experience things firsthand (Kuh 2008). Thus, I incorporate active learning exercises and assignments into the classes I teach. Examples include structured class debates, class activities, group research projects, field trips, and undergraduate research.

One of the active (or high-impact) learning practices I employ is undergraduate research. As I discuss elsewhere in this application I regularly teach research methods courses using community-based research projects. In addition to addressing public interests, the courses give students hands-on experience "doing sociology" through their involvement in all stages of a research project, including conceptualizing problems, selecting appropriate methods, collecting and analyzing data, and writing up/presenting results. Students also learn about local communities, and ways in which community and university partnerships can address various
needs. My efforts to involve students in undergraduate research also extend beyond the classroom. I regularly encourage students to present at regional and local conferences, help students find funding, and mentor students’ independent research. Engaging in research is a critical experience for the sociology major (McKinney et al. 2004). Students learn what constitutes evidence, how to develop and test arguments, and how to solve ethical dilemmas. They may also learn to solve problems independently and to communicate ideas effectively. These are practical skills that will serve students well in future endeavors.

**Imparting Skills and Tools**

A final primary teaching aim is to impart skills and tools students can use to accomplish goals throughout their lives. Thus, all of my courses serve to help students develop critical thinking skills, and learn to better express themselves orally and in writing. I believe that students should be taught how, rather than what, to think. Hence, I challenge students to be critical and creative. Regardless of the topic, I ask my students to examine the things they know and how (and from where) they know them. I also ask them to consider the views of others as well as how and why these views sometimes differ from their own. Such critical thought highlights the subtleties and intricacies of social life and helps students make informed decisions. I encourage critical and creative thought in a number of specific ways. During lectures, class exercises, and discussions I present balanced views of controversial topics such as gender and racial inequality, affirmative action, welfare, and animal rights. I often present conflicting perspectives and will provide supporting evidence for each. I then ask students (in discussions, quizzes, writing assignments, class activities) to explain and evaluate the evidence, and sometimes choose sides.

Learning to speak and write well are equally important skills. Regardless of where my students go and what they do, they will need to be able to communicate. I give students a chance to improve their oral communication skills in my classes by encouraging daily group and class discussions and by assigning in-class presentations and student-lead class discussions. In my upper level courses, I occasionally have the students teach each other concepts from the readings. And in my introductory courses, I ask students to share experiences and observations from their homework exercises (mini-experiments and interviews). To foster writing skills I incorporate writing assignments into each of my courses. During classes I often ask students to free-write in reaction to a short in-class reading, video, or song clip, to help them prepare for discussion. I regularly employ journal assignments, reading response papers, term papers, and essay exams. I believe that writing is a critical component for students in learning how to process complex ideas and express themselves clearly.