

*“Teachers who have a vision of democratic education assume that learning is never confined solely to an institutionalised classroom. Rather than embodying the conventional false assumption that the university setting is not the ‘real world’ and teaching accordingly, the democratic educator breaks through the false construction of the corporate university as set apart from real life and seeks to re-envision schooling as always a part of our real world experience, and our real life.” – bell hooks*

My teaching philosophy is reflective of my overall commitment to social justice and change through education. As a facilitator in the learning process, I pay attention to classroom dynamics and seek to create a supportive environment for students, within which they feel safe taking risks and making mistakes. Similarly, I see my own role not as infallible expert, but as someone engaged in reciprocal learning and dialogue with students. Within the classroom, I actively involve students in experiential application of sociological concepts and theories.

I attempt to utilize tangible examples to illustrate complex materials, taking under consideration the diverse backgrounds of students. For example, when teaching about micro- and macro- structural forms of inequality with regard to sexual orientation, I will arrange for speakers to come to the class to share their personal experiences and perspectives. In this context, students have the opportunity to dialogue with individuals who may have had experiences, barriers and opportunities quite distinct from their own. Of course, such experiences may also serve to validate and/or challenge students who *do* share some of the perspectives and experiences of the speakers.

When consonant with course goals, I also facilitate active learning through class projects that may take students out of their comfort zones, both in terms of geography and general familiarity, immersing them in new environments, communities, perspectives and situations. This work can be challenging and is sometimes met with resistance given the discomfort it can produce. Nonetheless, the outcomes of these projects are generally quite positive for students according to their end-of-semester evaluations. When exercises and activities seem to fail, however, it is important to discuss the intended result, the actual result and potential reasons the exercise did not meet expected outcomes. I encourage students to engage with one another, and me, in challenging, constructive, critical yet supportive ways. I also urge them to be accountable for their individual work and personal contributions to group work and processes.

When I assign group work, I incorporate a group evaluation component into this work, whereby students assess and report their own and others' contributions to the project. I also provide feedback mechanisms at the middle and end of the semester so that students can anonymously relay quantitative and qualitative evaluations of my teaching style, its effectiveness with consideration to their own learning style(s) and whether or not they are meeting their own learning objective(s). In addition, I use the feedback that I receive from students to generate class discussion, mid-semester, on what is working particularly well in the class and what needs to change. Whenever possible and relevant to furthering the course learning goals, I actively incorporate students' suggestions, often transforming classroom lessons, activities, assignments and/or evaluations to better fit the students' varied learning styles and goals.

One of the key elements of my teaching philosophy is the importance of encouraging students to engage in divergent, critical and analytical reasoning. By developing these skills, they will be better equipped to think logically and to make informed decisions in their lives. My teaching also stresses the importance of addressing, rather than effacing, difference in the classroom. Difference for the purpose of greater knowledge is exemplified through the utilization of multi- and interdisciplinary perspectives across course materials.

When analyzing various theories and models, I encourage students to consider whether or not universal application is appropriate, or if factors such as gender, class, sexual orientation, culture, etc., place limits on their applicability and relevance. I encourage students to share their unique experiences with one another when they feel comfortable doing so. I will sometimes share my own viewpoints with students or play devil's advocate to spark classroom debate. I believe that students often learn a great deal from unanticipated discussion sparked by differences in interpretation and opinion surrounding sometimes controversial course topics.

Central to my teaching philosophy is the belief that students attain mastery over subject materials when they engage with the material across different modalities and contexts. I believe that my teaching philosophy is one dedicated to student empowerment and growth. I expect students to read course materials, actively listen to comments from peers and me, participate in classroom dialogue and exercises, write reflectively about the material and assume roles as educators, themselves, when working in groups and presenting material to the class. This method of building layers of learning creates depth in students' processing and understanding of course material.

A mentor of mine often reflects that more than learning the *factual* information presented in a course, as a teacher he hopes that students will grow as human beings. This does not mean that he feels learning factual information is irrelevant or inconsequential, but that the ultimate goal should be to make the contents of the course personally relevant to students. Once the material is personally relevant, it has the potential to affect students in myriad meaningful ways—causing them to modify certain behaviors, challenge existing stereotypes and/or stand up for their own beliefs. I have seen this happen while teaching and agree that the experience is transformative not only for students, but for the teacher as well.

I attempt to convey the importance of this experiential and applied learning by not overemphasizing grades. I create “wobble room” within my grading system by offering a number of alternatives for students to earn points for participation in my courses. Offering students a variety of options to display their knowledge of the material ensures that students with differential learning styles are not penalized for their differences. Understanding student anxiety about grades, I ensure transparency in grading by distributing grading rubrics to students and promptly posting grades, grading policies and grade tabulation instructions. To me, teaching and learning is hard work—consisting of iterative and reciprocal processes that, at their best, never cease challenging and inspiring all those involved.