# Teaching Philosophy

Days before the first day of class, I am filled with a mix of excitement, anxiety, and nervousness. The excitement comes from the idea of starting anew: a clean slate and the opportunity to enhance my students' learning experiences, as well as the promise of interesting and interested students. The nervousness and anxiety are attributed to meeting and addressing a group of strangers. Every *first day* is similar for me. Every *first day*, I aim to become a better educator than the semester before. What makes an effective educator? My teaching objectives are:

- Understand the student/teacher assumptions and navigating through cultural difference
- Use Technology and other alternative tools of pedagogy to supplement lecture format
- Engage the students in action learning/research projects

**Assumptions & Navigating Through Difference**

Everyone who enters the classroom, including myself, carries invisible baggage that reflects the views and opinions of those within our social location. This baggage usually manifests itself in the assumptions that are made in the classroom. For me, I have assumptions about my students' socioeconomic backgrounds. Commitment to this teaching objective gives me the sensitivity that I need to be able to adjust my curriculum, and to adjust quite rapidly, when my assumptions are challenged.

As a woman of color, I am also aware that there are assumptions that my students may have of me. We lived in a racialized and gendered society. My presence as an authority figure, along with my social location as a minority and as a female may be the first and most difficult element to navigate in the classroom. Perhaps this may be part of my *first* day anxiety: wondering will I be respected as much as my white male counterparts. If not, how can I work towards countering those negative assumptions based upon my race and gender? For this, I have no concrete answers, only a pocketful of prescribed strategies developed in consult with other female professors and faculty of color.

## Using Technology and Other Tools

I use a multitude of alternative tools to teach in class: films, the Internet, discussion groups, theater. I have found that films are an invaluable source for applying abstract concepts to everyday life. The field of environmental justice is a fairly new academic discipline and mainstream sociological texts have been slow to highlight environmental inequalities as another manifestation of social stratification. Therefore, I have had to be proactive in selecting films to supplement existing material. The good news is that the activist community and independent media outlets have produced a number of quality films including *Green* which chronicles the environmental justice movement in Louisiana and *Delta Force* which highlights Shell Oil abuses in Ogoniland of Nigeria. There are also award-winning POV series specials like *Fenceline: A Company Town Divided* featuring an in-depth look at Norco at community that borders a Shell Oil refinery in Louisiana. These films offer a unique glimpse into the lives of individuals faced with unimagined chemical threats. It would be difficult to imagine a lecture that would vividly illustrate as well as these documentaries.

In addition, I have become more familiar with electronic tools for classroom use such as the University of Michigan's web based course platform called *Coursetools* as well as *Blackboard*. These are also effective ways to communicate with students and I plan to integrate them more fully into lesson plans in the future. I already present my lectures in the form of a PowerPoint presentation that can be uploaded onto a public file for students to review for exams. I have participated in training to enable web-based assignments and discussions for my courses.

I have also been fascinated by the use of theater as a pedagogical tool. I have been working with the Theater Program, sponsored by the Center for Teaching and Learning which has been one of the most positive and enlightening experiences during my tenure at the University of Michigan. The theater project uses sketches as teaching aids for faculty and graduate student instructors to improve teaching methods in the classroom. I also used theater in this fall's environmental justice course.

## Action Learning/Action Research

My enthusiasm for sociological inquiry is very evident. I majored in the discipline in both undergraduate and graduate school. How do I translate this enthusiasm into the classroom? I engage my students in what I refer to as action learning, allowing them to translate their newly acquired skills

into small group projects. For example, when research methods are discussed, students are expected to select a method and an implement it. In the environmental justice course, students will find their hometown on the Environmental Protection Agency Environmental Justice Tool, called *enviromapper* and find out if there are any hazards in their area. I have found that when I was a student, I was most engaged in activities to which I had partial ownership. In the same vein, I include action-learning exercises in my curriculum that allow students to put their newfound knowledge to work.

With the start of every new semester I begin to prepare for that *first day*. Again, my hope is that I can effectively transfer knowledge through the use of these teaching objectives. And each semester, I get a little better.