Teaching Philosophy and Values

“Schools should be the most joyful places in the world because, you know, learning is the greatest joy. To learn something is fantastic because every time you learn something you become something new.” ~Leo F. Buscaglia

The word “educator” comes from the Latin “educare,” meaning to lead, to guide. To have the opportunity to be an educator—a guide to students in a process of becoming—is a privilege I try to never take for granted. I recognize how fortunate I am to be a teacher, and I love what I do for a living. As a professor at Colorado State University, I am able to share a discipline I am passionate about and work for an institution of higher education that promotes values I am deeply committed to—civic responsibility; freedom of expression; inclusiveness and diversity; and excellence in teaching, research, and service. I regularly work with students as they learn new facts and theories and research strategies, and I also attempt to help guide them in their process of becoming fully engaged human beings in our social world.

Respect for knowledge and the learning process, respect for students, and respect for diversity inform the specific objectives that frame my teaching philosophy and values. As a professor, I strive to do the following things: (1) help students develop a sociological perspective that will enable them to better understand individual and group behavior; (2) build community and foster intellectual development among my students as I push them to think carefully and critically about historical and contemporary social issues; (3) challenge students to acquire skills that will be broadly applicable both inside and outside of academia; and (4) encourage students to understand and value diversity.

**Developing a Sociological Perspective**

“Neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding them both.”

~C. Wright Mills

I cannot imagine teaching a more interesting, or challenging, discipline than sociology. Because the subject matter is pervasive, teaching sociology is exciting, but, at the same time, difficult; students tend to think they already understand many topics because of their prior socialization and personal experiences. One of my goals as an instructor is to help students develop a broader sociological perspective as they attempt to understand local, national, and global issues. I strive to show students that sociology is not only interesting, it is also useful in our everyday lives and larger social world; it offers theories and research findings that help systematically describe and explain social interaction, inequality, discrimination, power, deviance, and much more.

For every course I teach, I create unique in-class activities, assignments, semester long projects, and lectures that are designed to help students develop their sociological imaginations. I use PowerPoint to organize my lectures and regularly incorporate photographs, music, films, and video clips to underscore important concepts and to ensure that students remain engaged. I bring in guest lecturers, and often invite former students and Colorado State University alums who are now out in the world doing great things. I provide detailed and clearly written syllabi, assignment guidelines, and exam study guides in all of my courses. For required readings, I use textbooks, edited readers, journal articles, and books, all of which offer a more in-depth look at a particular sociological issue, as well as a greater understanding of social science research methods. When applicable, I draw on examples from my own research or the research of other faculty members in our department and college to illustrate various concepts and theories. At the end of each semester I review my curriculum carefully—drawing on feedback from students and conversations with my teaching assistants—to see what needs to be changed or eliminated and what should be added or updated. I try to motivate students to want to learn about sociology through conveying my own passion for the discipline and their learning process. I arrive to class every day, on time, prepared, and excited to discuss the day’s topic. This passion and enthusiasm goes a long way in encouraging students’ commitment to developing a sociological perspective.

**Fostering Critical Thinking and Community Building**

“Responsibility to yourself means refusing to let others do your thinking, talking, and naming for you; it means learning to respect and use your own brains and instincts; hence, grappling with hard work.” ~Adrienne Rich

It is my mission as a teacher of sociology to encourage each student to think critically about social phenomena. I believe the classroom should provide students an opportunity to challenge pre-existing notions, articulate new thoughts and ideas,
and participate in intellectual discourse with their professor and peers. In order to achieve these goals, I work to make the classroom a safe space where ideas can be freely exchanged. To foster this sort of learning environment and build a strong sense of community, I learn the names of all of my students by the end of the first week of class (in my large 120 student class, it takes me about three weeks to learn all of the names, but I do still learn every students’ name). I want students to know that I care about them and am fully invested in their learning experience. I find this almost always makes the students care more about the class and the material, as well as about one another as fellow learners.

I attempt to engage every student so his or her voice is heard. I do this through questions posed during lectures, group exercises, daily writing assignments, reflection essays, and class presentations. Students actively participate in full classroom and small group discussions in my seminars as well as my large enrollment classes. I encourage students to think critically, to question the material and ideas offered in my courses, and to fully explore the topic at hand. Engaging with the material in many ways is important to me so that my students attain the knowledge and intellectual curiosity necessary for academic success, as well as those skills that promote lifelong learning and civic engagement.

**Acquiring Skills and Undertaking Challenges**

“Tell me and I forget, teach me and I may remember, involve me and I learn.” —Benjamin Franklin

Beyond fostering critical thinking, I endeavor to help my students develop other abilities needed to succeed in their academic and professional careers. Hence, I emphasize analysis and communication skills, and evaluate students to reflect this focus. For example, in addition to exams, I include numerous writing assignments in my course requirements. I attempt to help students become better writers by providing detailed comments on their papers that address grammar, style, and organization, as well as the logical and coherent presentation of ideas. I also require students to complete daily response papers in class, in which I ask them to answer a question related to the readings or lecture topic. In these informal papers, I encourage students to be creative and to think more deeply about the material. I push students to speak clearly and persuasively, whether during class discussions or as part of formal presentations, so that they learn to articulate their ideas in a manner that others can understand.

I do my best to challenge my students with comprehensive lectures, thought-provoking class discussions, multiple assignments, and creative projects. I respect my students and their potential abilities as budding scholars. Thus, I demand a lot from my students and have high expectations for their performance. Due to the challenging nature of my courses, I make a commitment to my students to help them excel. I hold office hours every week, which are always well attended (oftentimes there is a long line of students waiting outside my door!). I also communicate regularly with students via email and phone. Further, I actively seek out opportunities for my students to succeed beyond my classroom and willingly agree to support them. I have written numerous recommendation letters on behalf of students and regularly encourage them to apply for paper competitions, scholarships, fellowships, study abroad experiences, law school, medical school, and graduate school.

**Understanding Diversity and Solving Social Problems**

“In diversity there is beauty and there is strength.” —Maya Angelou

I am committed to serving a diverse student population and integrating varied perspectives into my courses. Through readings, lectures, and presentations, I encourage in-depth exploration of issues concerning racism, sexism, homophobia, religious intolerance, economic inequality, and environmental injustice. I challenge my students to think about how they as individuals and members of groups can work collectively to solve social problems. For instance, when teaching race and ethnic relations, I ask students to break into groups and come up with five things that can be done at the individual, group, and societal level to end racism. With this exercise, I try to show that although daunting, it is possible to positively influence our world at various levels, while recognizing the interconnected and complex nature of social issues.

In addition to helping students understand cultural diversity, I also challenge my students to respect diverse perspectives, people, and places. Ultimately, I believe that a more just and tolerant society must be based on a foundation of understanding. Sociology offers important theories, perspectives, and insights into why inequality persists, but it can also show how inequality can be alleviated. I do my best to create a classroom environment where students can think about these pressing issues, ask tough questions, and learn new information.