

PERSONAL TEACHING STATEMENT

I believe the challenge of teaching Sociology is being able to demonstrate to students the political and social consequences of the structural and cultural choices that societies make in order to function. By extension, the study of Sociology signifies more than the accumulation of knowledge but also a consistent process of interrogation. Understanding this process requires consideration of the diversity of human experience, across cultures and over time and place. The pursuit of mastering such a process results in students who, when pushed intellectually, challenge their assumptions and become empowered with a new vision of a more just and equitable society.

In helping students to develop their “Sociological Imagination,” I view my chief pedagogical role as that of a facilitator. In that role, I often begin by presenting credible information provided by scholars in my field. However, I have come to believe that in most Sociology courses students’ understanding and awareness of the issues discussed are greatly enhanced by opportunities to apply these issues to their everyday lives. Therefore, I not only present the systematic findings of scholars but also try to provide as many opportunities for discussion of the various issues as is possible. Invariably, these Sociological discussions often involve issues that most students can relate to or they themselves or a loved-one have experienced personally. In the course of such discussions students sometimes have a tendency to “line-up” on one side of an issue or another—that is, they often find they disagree passionately with other viewpoints expressed. It is in these circumstances that my role as facilitator expands as I try to balance the goal of providing an opportunity for differing or competing opinions to be heard without making students uncomfortable or putting them on the defensive.

To this end, I have found it highly effective to alter the traditional format of college courses. For instance, while studying abroad with WKU students this past January in Chiapas, Mexico, we as a class participated in a fascinating workshop with a local NGO called *Partners in Health*; following the workshop, we as a class made a monetary donation to the organization, in part so students could later reflect, in their reaction papers, on the pros and cons of all types of gift-giving originating from individuals and organizations in more industrially developed societies to individuals and organizations in the developing world. In another instance in the beautiful yet impoverished Chota Valley of Ecuador—home to the country’s second largest Afro-Ecuadorian community—students spent the day visiting local villages and schools while subtly absorbing the legacy of plantation slavery. The pedagogical point of such excursions is not for our students to realize how “lucky” they may be compared to those in, say, Mexico or Ecuador but rather for them to grapple with the structural underpinning of inequality (whether at home or abroad) and re-evaluate their civic roles in an increasingly global society. Perhaps the remarks of one of my students on her final paper during the Winter 2008 Mexico study abroad put it best:

“Here in Mexico, entire states are riddled with terrific inequality. Having this experience I now feel that I am more aware of and informed about Mexico’s issues. Along with this awareness, I also think that I may have gained a new passion as well. I have always wanted to be able to change the world for the better,

Holli Drummond

which is part of the reason I am a journalism major. However, I also have a love of the Spanish language (and now Spanish-speaking people) which is why I am also a Spanish major. Now, since taking this class I have begun seriously assessing my educational and professional goals. Lately I have thought more and more about going to graduate school for Political Science. Although I am not yet sure whether this is even possible, I have this crazy idea that either through writing or politics (or both I suppose) I could potentially be a part of enacting change in this region of the world, and it honestly excites me” (Student Winter 2008).

In Spring 2007 and again in Spring 2008, I have taught two new, ambitious courses (Women and Crime and Gender and Crime) that have also sought to offer WKU undergraduates (“outside students”) and female and male offenders (“inside students”) at the Barren County Jail in Glasgow, KY. These courses focus on the workings of the U.S. Criminal Justice system, critically evaluating how this social institutions operates as well as calling attention to both its strengths and deficiencies. What makes this course so enriching it is structured so that each student, inside or outside, is treated equally in expectation, evaluation of contribution, and confinement (for the duration of each week’s three-hour “lock-in”). As such it provides an opportunity to look past old stereotypes and assumptions and beyond the orange jumpsuit with the jail stamps. Not unlike study abroad, these jail-based courses ultimately challenge students to think and imagine way beyond their intellectual, social, and cultural comfort-zones—one of the great pedagogical qualities of such experiential learning. As one “outside student” remarked on her final Spring 2007 paper:

“I can’t say that I’ve enjoyed the class because its created so many conflicting emotions in me. I can say this has been an excellent class. When I say that I say it because it has forced me to view things from a different perspective. If you always believe things are a certain way just because that’s what you’ve been told then you just believe it is so. But when you take your beliefs and values and put them up against the reality of the situation you have a question either your beliefs or the situation. This is beliefs or the situation. This is where I have changed. I couldn’t hold on to my beliefs because the reality is we need to be doing more for these women that are being locked up. Somewhere in the back of my mind I can still hear that voice “they are getting what they deserve,” but now the voice of reason is louder. We have to change the system in order to change the offender” (Student Spring, 2007).

Of course, my interest in experiential learning does not minimize the importance I attach to more traditional lecture-based courses. In lecture-based classes such as *Social Inequality*, *Introductory Sociology*, or *Strategies of Research Methods*, I combine both popular and academic readings, case studies, simulations videos, and special projects, in an effort to provide my students with the opportunity to personalize their learning in a way that makes the concepts discussed seem relevant to their lives. For instance, in *Social Inequality*, I use several readings from an excellent *NY Times* series called “Class Matters.” These readings help students relate to topics such as unequal access to education or health care because they provide concrete examples students can apply and elaborate upon both inside and outside of the classroom. I also incorporate selections from an outstanding PBS series called “People like us: Social Class in America.” One lesson this documentary teaches students is that sometimes the people we love cause us “status frustration” when they accuse us of *Getting above our Rasin*’. For instance, this particular segment uses Morgantown, KY to illustrate the contradiction of wanting more for your children but not wanting them to change so much that they become “above” the communities they came from. In

other instances, I have found role-playing and interactive simulations to be a particularly effective pedagogical tool. For instance in my *Social Inequality* course, I have students play “Soci-Monopoly.” Each of the five players represents 20% of American society and as such each is given the portion of socioeconomic assets corresponding to their assigned segment or “class.” Students always remark that this simulation helps them better comprehend the unequal distribution of resources that exists in our society. As a final requirement for this course, students participate in a “project” in which they engage in an exercise that puts them in contact with groups of people whom they would rarely if ever have had social interactions.¹ For example, some students choose something as innocuous as getting their hair cut by a person of a different race or ethnicity; others spend several nights without heat during a particularly cold winter period; while others apply for a factory job. In each case students evaluate their particular experience notable changes, if any, in their own assumptions and reactions. While some students find these out-of-class projects taxing, many (nonetheless) are inspired by them. The following student quotation which appeared on the popular web-site “Prof-eval.com” speaks to one student’s personal and intellectual transformation:

“I guess maybe I just feel that not too many students that are in college are doing it for themselves. Duh!! I thought the purpose of a university education was to learn something and if something is hard-won, oh how sweet the reward! I am not talking about a job I am talking about knowledge. From knowledge comes wisdom, from wisdom comes right decisions, and from right decisions comes a life worthwhile. Take her classes and then work...”

It is the accumulation and application of such a “Sociological Perspective” that I try constantly to convey to my students, sometimes more successfully than others.

¹ Information about this project is included as a supporting document.