

**Teaching Philosophy**  
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My experiences as both an instructor and teaching assistant over the past 6 years, as well as my own undergraduate and graduate training, has formed the basis of my pedagogical philosophy. In my opinion, a teacher should not only distill information but also help students learn to develop critical thinking. In particular, I try to encourage students to see the connection between their experiences and the socio-historical context around them. I also seek to highlight the dynamic interplay between individual agency and social structure and challenge students to see the role of both of these forces in their lives and in society. As a whole, I feel that it is my job to give students a tool kit they can take with them into their lives after college that enables them to better understand the world around them and challenges them to question why things are the way they are.

***“The mind is not a vessel to be filled, but a fire to be kindled” Plutarch***

Universities are charged with not only teaching students facts and figures, but also with producing analytical and critical thinkers. In my experience, critical thinking is developed through the process of working out ideas in classroom discussion. I work to create an environment that is conducive to student involvement. I find that students not only come better prepared when they are asked to participate, but an interactive classroom also fosters learning. When students are asked to engage with the material, they tend not to just memorize it but to really think about how theories or concepts apply to the world and their lives. These discussions are often remembered long after the class is over in a way that memorizing a list of terms is not.

Critical thinking is also borne out of challenging students to re-assess what they think they know about the world. Students do not come to class as blank slates and often bring with them preconceived notions about society and the different groups of people within it. In my classes, I require students to back up their claims with facts and sources. This encourages analytical thought and a more critical analysis of the society. These skills are useful for both their university careers as well as their everyday lives.

***“Neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both” C. Wright Mills***

As a teacher, I work to help my students see the importance of the socio-historical context in which they are embedded. I do this in part by bringing in current events and examples to class. I find that these examples work to illustrate concepts, which sometimes feel too abstract to students. In addition, engaging students in discussion about current issues can foster their interest in the world around them.

I also require students to complete assignments for which they must go out into the world and collect their own data. I ask them, for example, to attend social movement protests, interview activists, or survey the members of a local group. Through this process, students come to learn more about the topics covered in class and about how research is done. By complementing their first hand research with academic sources,

students produce interesting and innovative projects while also engaging with the real world and learning about the process whereby research is created.

***“[Individuals] make history, but not in circumstances of their own choosing” Karl Marx***

While I feel that individuals certainly have the ability to produce change in society, one of sociology’s important contributions is highlighting the role of social structure in shaping our lives. Most students that I have taught have been raised in a context that encourages them to see the importance of agency, feeling that people should be able to “pull themselves up by their bootstraps”. This sort of thinking can lead to uncritical analyses of issues such as poverty or race and gender inequality. Teaching about social structure illuminates its role in shaping the opportunities of different groups. This pushes students to challenge their general assumption about society and the individuals within it. The dynamic relationship between structure and agency is at the core of sociology and is emphasized in my teaching.

As most students do not go on to become professional sociologists, I feel that sociology professors should teach students to critically examine the world around them and challenge some common assumptions that they may have. I do this in a number of ways. I seek to teach students about areas of study of which they were previously unaware, critical and analytical thought, and the process of sociological research. In essence, I work to give students the tools with which they can come to better understand the society in which they live.