

Teaching Philosophy

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As an instructor of sociology, it is my goal to facilitate an active and engaging learning environment where my students can develop an understanding and application of the discipline. I want my classroom to be a space where students can be agents in the learning process. I find that by promoting agency among students in my classes, a sense of “shared responsibility” is fostered. “Shared responsibility” is a technique that views teaching and learning as a collective effort among all in a classroom, rather than solely a role for the instructor. I use four principles to guide these learning goals I have for my students. These are: concepts, critique, choice, and creativity. I employ these principles (which I refer to as the “four Cs”) to both my teaching methods and to the expectations I have of students. I structure class activities and assignments around these principles. Together, I believe that the four Cs offer a good framework in which to make learning sociology an interesting and engaging endeavor. In this essay, I will outline some of the ways I employ these principles throughout the courses I teach. My goal is to illustrate some specific ways in which I make learning sociology an active process and promote a sense of shared responsibility.

Concepts

The first principle is “concepts,” which I see as important in understanding the foundations of social thought. However, this process does not just come by me telling the students what to know. I use active class lectures and group assignments to facilitate this understanding. I build “interactive breaks” in my lectures where I pose reflective questions for my students, and use media (such as pictures and videos) to help relate the subject matter to real life circumstances. I sometimes use group assignments because I feel it is important for different voices to be heard rather than just mine. Furthermore, it gives students a chance to participate in discussion that may not be the most

willing to speak up during full-class discussions. For instance, I sometimes will have students break out into small groups and have them think of examples in their lives where they experienced something that relates back to a concept we are covering (such as gender discrimination, the double standard, or racial profiling). I find that these techniques help make abstract ideas come to life. Furthermore, I use assignments such as journal submissions (informal out-of-class writing assignments) and minute papers (shorter impromptu in-class writing assignments), where students are given the opportunity to articulate their understanding of the sociological concepts that they find the most interesting. My aim with these types of assignments is to promote my students to pursue the understanding of concepts on their own. These assignments encourage students to grapple with and develop the understanding of the complex concepts of Sociology and to give students opportunities to fortify their sociological imaginations.

Critique

The second principle that I employ in the classroom is “critique.” I want my students to be able to use their sociological imaginations to critique the concepts and ideas being presented to them throughout the course. Critical thinking is important in sociology because societies are in constant flux, and what may hold true in one situation could not hold true in another. A large part of learning sociology is noticing the abnormal in the normal. I want students to be able to critically analyze the social worlds around them and be able to notice where inequalities are imbedded within the structures of their everyday lives. It is my goal to get students to see the inequalities around them as products of larger social and cultural process, and not as a reflection of some kind of natural order.

One way I facilitate critical thinking is by embedding discussion questions throughout our classroom talks. For instance, typically towards the beginning of my introductory level courses I will ask the students: “What are the benefits of thinking through each of the main sociological

perspectives?” After the students talk through this for a while, I ask them: “What are some of the main downsides of each paradigm?” Exercises such as this provide students with an opportunity to collectively critique the concepts and ideas presented throughout the course.

Interrogation of current events is another way I foster critical thinking in the classroom. I will often times seek out and present real time examples of events where social inequalities are being brought to attention by the media. These instances offer opportunities for students to critically analyze what is happening in the world around them using the concepts and theoretical foundations that we cover in class. I find that by using the main sociological paradigms (functional, conflict, and symbolic interaction) as guides for analysis, students can critically engage current events, and see social inequalities and injustices as connected to larger social processes.

Choice

The third principle I use to guide my pedagogy is “choice.” I want my students to be able to find the “real life” applications of Sociology and to be able to apply concepts to their own lives. It does not matter if a student wants to be a doctor, biologist, educator, or a stay-at-home parent, I want them to see that Sociology can be relevant and is necessary in their career/life paths. One way I do this is by offering a “choose your own adventure” approach to writing assignments for the course. I offer up to six options for writing assignments. I have students choose the assignments that they see most fitting for their life/interests/career direction. I make rubrics available that are unique to each assignment which make my grading expectations clear to the students and add consistency across each assignment. Students may choose, for instance, a writing assignment where they explore a current event through the sociological lens, or imagine a situation that might arise in their careers and apply a sociological concept to it’s resolution. I find that students are empowered and engaged when they are given choices in how they explore the discipline of sociology. This lets

students apply sociology to their own interests, career paths, and academic focuses, which makes it more applicable to their daily lives.

Creativity

The fourth principle of the four Cs is “creativity.” After my students have chosen personally relevant paths in which to explore sociology, I urge them to be creative about their application. I want students to find their own voice while exploring the world sociologically. I often incorporate “class discussant” assignments where students are relied on to facilitate class discussions on the assigned readings to help facilitate this. During these assignments, I urge them to seek out creative and unique applications of the concepts at hand. Unique and creative examples tend to open students eyes to new avenues in which to explore the social world. For instance, during a recent class discussant assignment one of my students used YouTube videos to illustrate gender inequalities through the world of gaming (an interactive video game culture). Another example that comes to mind is during a consumer culture course a student presented on a brand of sweet potato pies called “Patty LaBelle.” She then used this brand of pies to discuss the idea of “racialization” and “racial projects” with the class. Furthermore, I create discussion board assignments for my classes where students are urged to post videos, pictures and thoughts of things they experienced or they find sociologically interesting. This allows for students to creatively explore the topics at hand, which I find gives students a unique voice. This also makes learning sociology an active process for all in and out of the classroom.

Concluding Thoughts

Overall, by incorporating many of these techniques, I intend to foster a relevant, active, and engaging learning experience for my students. I also hope that a sense of shared responsibility is felt

throughout my classes which makes the teaching and learning process a collective endeavor rather than just an individual task. After all, we all know how it feels to sit through a class, meeting, or seminar that is not engaging and is not relevant to us. It is a painful experience; one that I hope to avoid replicating for students in my classes. The examples that I provided throughout this essay are some of the specific ways that the “Four C’s” come to life throughout my pedagogy. Through my classroom principles of “concepts, critique, choice and creativity” my goal is to create an environment where teaching and learning is an active, engaging, and reciprocal process.