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TEACHING STATEMENT

As a graduate student at the University of Georgia, I have successfully taught multiple sections of Sociology of Religion, Social Movements and Collective Behavior, and Introduction to Sociology, and I look forward to teaching additional classes that build upon my research agenda in the not so distant future. On the one hand, I believe my role as a teacher can benefit greatly from my role as a researcher by keeping the course material current and interesting. On the other hand, my role as a teacher helps me keep my research accessible to more general audiences.

I believe the goal of higher education is to help students think critically and creatively about the problems they encounter in everyday life. Many of the students in my upper-level classes are not sociology majors nor will they pursue careers directly related to the course material. Nevertheless, the topics we cover in all of my classes can help students better navigate the world beyond the classroom walls. In my Sociology of Religion course, for example, we read about and discuss the roles that race, gender, and social class play in the formation of beliefs and values. Since all of my students, regardless and their major or career goals, will have to work with people with divergent ideas and values, helping students recognize the source of their own beliefs and attitudes can improve the way students handle these encounters in the future.

Similarly, students will encounter academic and non-academic research in one form or another throughout their post-collegiate lives. For this reason, I believe it is important to talk about research methods in every substantive course. For all of my upper level courses I have my students read recent empirical research, and I begin every discussion of this material by asking students to identify the research question and the methodology. Even in my online Introduction to Sociology course, my students learn how to write a sound research question, develop hypotheses, and think about ways they might empirically test their hypotheses. My goal is to help students become more informed consumers of academic and non-academic research by the time they exit my classroom.

Students come to my classes with varying learning styles and vastly unequal educational backgrounds. For these reasons, it is important to use a variety of teaching styles and learning assessments. In order to get students to think critically, I put a strong emphasis on class and small-group discussions in my classroom. Small group discussions encourage higher rates of participation among students that might otherwise remain silent. I rarely spend an entire class lecturing; instead, it is most important to have students discuss the readings and think about the ways that each topic relates to material covered earlier in the semester. This is true in both my face-to-face classes and my online Introduction to Sociology course. Additionally, I employ a variety of teaching methods throughout a single class period. Short video clips can be an excellent way to spark discussion and make the material more accessible to the students. Similarly, on the rare occasions where the material necessitates more lecture, I provide my students with outlines that they can fill in as they follow along in order to keep them more engaged with the material.

Just as I make use of a variety of teaching methods, I also make use of a variety of learning assessments. In all of my courses, I use short reading quizzes in order to make sure students
come to class prepared each day. These quizzes serves as a low-stakes form of assessment and significantly improve the quality of the in-class discussions. Students in all of my courses can also expect to complete at least one term paper that asks them to synthesize different ideas from class with outside readings on a topic that interests them. In my course on social movements, for instance, students spend the semester developing a paper on a social movement of their choice; in this paper, students must provide a detailed overview of the movement’s history from a sociological perspective by engaging the dominant theories within the literature on social movements and collective behavior. The purpose of these assignments is threefold. One, the semester-long writing assignment forces students to think about how the material across different sections of the course is related. Two, my paper assignments provide students with the opportunity to explore a topic that we might only cover briefly in class. And three, the paper assignment helps students develop better writing skills. The final assessment tool in my courses is the in-class exam. I aim to create exams that test students’ ability to apply the material from class rather than their ability to simply memorize information. To this end, I use a combination of short essay and multiple choice questions in all my exams in order to more adequately test students understanding of the material on a variety of levels.

My commitment to teaching does not stop at the classroom door. I strive to be as accessible as possible to my students outside of the classroom as well. One-on-one meetings with students, for example, are an excellent place to cultivate their sociological imaginations. Additionally, as an active member of the American Sociological Association’s section on teaching and learning I have attended numerous conference presentations and tried to build networks with the teaching and learning community with the goal of improving my role in the classroom. Likewise, I am an active contributor to the scholarship on teaching and learning. A manuscript detailing an innovative strategy that I use to teach difficult material to undergraduates in my Sociology of Religion course currently has a revise and resubmit at Teaching Sociology. I created the activity described in this manuscript to improve my students’ understanding of Peter Berger’s theory of secularization. In this simulation activity, students experience the same sort of doubts that Berger predicted would result when religious pluralism threatened the sacred canopy of a religious monopoly. A pretest-posttest assessment of student learning shows that their understanding of Berger’s theory was significantly improved through their participation in this activity.

In addition to the courses I have already taught, I would also be interested in teaching courses such as Work and Family and Medical Sociology that fit well with my current research agenda. I would also be interested in teaching more general sociology courses like Research Methods (including a course on Qualitative Methods or Mixed Methods Research), Social Theory, or Social Problems. The methods I use in the classroom are easily extendable to other specialty topics courses and to the general sociology curriculum. Through these methods, every student leaves my classroom with a better understanding of their social world and the ability to utilize their sociological imaginations in order to generate solutions to larger social problems.
Evidence of Effective Teaching

Evaluation and Summary of Student Comments for:
Sociology of Religion (SOCI3030)
Social Movements and Collective Behavior (SOCI3250)
Based upon a scale of 1-5: 1 = Poor, 5 = Excellent

Note: Graph includes averages for all sections and all semesters

Evaluation Questions

1. Preparation
2. Instruction
3. Stimulation of interest
4. Breadth
5. Concern for students
6. Overall rating
7. The instructor explains this clearly
8. The instructor is helpful
9. The instructor assigns a reasonable amount of work
10. The instructor facilitates questions and discussion
11. The instructor is an excellent teacher
12. This course is well organized
13. This is a challenging course
14. Assignments and activities were useful for helping me learn
15. This is an excellent course

Selected Student Comments

General comments

- Matt’s an awesome teacher. I loved this class and would recommend it to anyone. 😊
- Overall, I really enjoyed this class. Matt is a good [instructor] and I really felt I learned a lot about the subject.
I thought this class was fantastic. I loved the subject and his teaching style.

Excellent teacher. No criticisms at all.

This course challenged my personal and academic beliefs, which was refreshing. The instructor was highly effective, and I intend on recommending him to potential students.

I found this course very interesting and the professor organized it in a clear, efficient way.

Matt is a great teacher and I learned a great deal.

Really good [instructor], explains things well and clear, open for discussion and helpful.

Mr. May is clearly interested in the topic he teaches, so it's easy to understand and enjoy. I'm not a personal fan of studying religion, but I had heard this class was worth taking, and it has been.

Teaching style

This course was very well organized and he did a great job [of] drawing the topics from the beginning and end of the semester together.

I really enjoyed this class. I feel he did really well on organizing the readings and the note-taking aspect.

[The instructor] was fair and provided a good atmosphere for interaction and learning.

He has a very mature way of teaching. I always learn a lot in his classes yet he allows the freedom for students to choose how they want to participate and learn. He is an excellent teacher!

Great teacher who really made the topic interesting.

He is very organized and prepared [with] his material.

I really like how the activities in class were so unconventional but they still assisted my understanding of the subject matter. I really enjoyed this class honestly.

Great [instructor] with more of a concern for students understanding content than retaining information solely for the purposes of a test. His activities throughout the course also made it easier to tie the material in the class to my everyday life, in the sense of the decisions I make in regards to faith and religion.

Concern for students

[Matt] was more than willing to work with students individually to make sure that they are understanding the material. He truly cares about the success of his students. This extra effort is greatly appreciated by the class. He did a great job explaining the material in a way that was interesting.

Good class. I like how you had an evaluation after the first exam and you followed through the critique[s] to improve the class.
• Overall, Mr. May was a helpful teacher who seemed to take sincere interest in going over the readings and reviewing with the class. I appreciated the responsiveness Mr. May had to mid-semester suggestions.

**Email from former student**

• Taking your sections in Social Movements and Collective Behavior (Spring 2012) and Sociology of Religion (Fall 2012) very much contributed to fostering my passion for sociology, and helped me realize that I would very much enjoy and benefit from continuing my education in Sociology.