

Teaching Dossier

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Teaching Objectives

The main goal in my teaching is to foster a sense of curiosity in my students. My hope is that students will carry away from my class an eagerness to understand social processes at a deeper level. My secondary objective is to impart methodological and theoretical tools that students can use to satisfy their curiosities. Finally, I try to structure opportunities for gaining knowledge about substantive issues that are timely, relevant, and consequential. In substantive courses like the sociology of disaster this is fairly straightforward. It can be more challenging in a required classical theory class, which requires clear demonstrations of how and why the ideas and frameworks of 19th and early 20th century social thinkers like Karl Marx, Max Weber, or W.E.B. Du Bois remain vital to 21st century social problems. My initial step, however, is to recognize that most of us forget the specific content that we learned in our classes. What lasts is a curiosity to know, a critical sensibility toward redressing social injustice and inequity, and the critical thinking skills useful for gaining knowledge about important social problems. I feel like I have done my job when students report back that they were inspired to discover more about a topic covered in a class. My overall objective, then, is to build capacity in our students so they can constructively address the issues and dilemmas of our shared future.

Teaching Philosophy

My teaching philosophy rests on two core principles. I refer to them as *learning by mistakes* and the *pedagogy of pedagogy*. The idea of *learning by mistakes* is that to properly learn a subject area, we need to flail away at it for a while. As the economist Kenneth Boulding once said, “Nothing fails like success because we don't learn from it. We learn only from failure.” I endeavor to create a space where curiosity, speculation, and the occasional blunder are vital features of long-term learning. This requires a student-centric learning environment inclusive of individuals from diverse life circumstances. I understand the classroom as a “third space” betwixt and between work and play, where students experience a lively intellectual environment that respects their personal history and unique perspectives as well as our collective speculation, analytic risk-taking, and discussion of ethics and values. This is much easier said than done, especially when classes are made up of students from varied international, ethnic, racial, religious, class, and community backgrounds, as is so clearly the case on the UTM campus. I have found that one key tactic is for me to personally model the engagement I seek from my students. By witnessing how I engage in critical, intellectually rigorous risk-taking, students then can see the classroom not as a place where “anything goes” so much as a supportive space where risk-taking and openness are valued.

The second prong of my teaching philosophy is the *pedagogy of pedagogy*. The idea is that the best way for anyone to learn a topic is to teach it. People become educators when they evolve from recipients of information to crafters of knowledge. This empowerment is something that can be generalized to our students. My philosophy holds that students should take ownership of course material by learning how to teach that material to others, rather than just passively receive it.

The vast majority of the literature on teaching sociology suggests that learning is a social and dialectical process, rather a unidirectional flow of information from instructor to student. I therefore create opportunities for my students to become teacher-learners. To create those

opportunities, though, I find I need to disrupt the traditional power arrangements between instructor and student. I have two strategies for doing that. First, I try to learn from my students—from the ideas and viewpoints they raise in the classroom, in their writing for my courses on and offline, and in our one-one communications. Second, I try to relate to my students as smart, impactful, and resilient individuals. When I assume my students possess these qualities, they usually endeavor to demonstrate that my assumption is correct.

With this posture, I implement my philosophy of pedagogy of pedagogy by designing assignments in which students become the primary educators. In my disasters course, for example, I have developed a sequenced research project that culminates in a group-led formal teaching unit on a specific aspect of Hurricane Katrina. The teams present units on topics such as the government's use of emergency preparedness procedures during and after the hurricane, race and class disparities in the evacuation and emergency services within New Orleans, strategies of community resilience, race and class bias in the resettlement of the city, and policy debates over scientific and environmental impact measures. In short, the students teach the rest of us about a specific topical area within a shared empirical case. This fosters their curiosity, enhances their critical thinking and public speaking skills, and provides opportunities for the entire class to gain a broader perspective on the case than they would have from individualized research assignments.

Implementation of Teaching Objectives and Philosophy

To achieve these teaching objectives and implement my teaching philosophy, I need to ensure that students are indeed learning—that I am reaching them. I use an assortment of analog and virtual modalities in my classes, including lecture, discussion, activities, video content, music, games, class field trips, guest lectures from topical experts, and even art projects. In my social theory courses, I like to connect concepts to each theorist's biography and social milieu as a way to relate to them as flesh-and-blood humans who made their own mistakes while groping toward social insight. I also lean on my past experience as a boxing coach at an inner-city Chicago gym, where unexpected challenges kept pupils "on their toes." Along these lines, I use breakout groups for in-class exercises, critical discussion, or even topic-specific Jeopardy matches. My typical lecture will use PowerPoint with a fair amount of multimedia content embedded. However, sometimes I lecture without technology aides at all, relying solely on delivery and engagement. Regardless of my pedagogical tactics on a given day, I pause frequently to ask questions and solicit responses. I use on-line discussion groups and other information technologies to create synchronous and asynchronous opportunities for discussion. The variety of my research interests is an asset for teaching, as well. Students enjoy discussing how disparate empirical cases can be drawn together with consistent analytic threads.

I have taken advantages of the many resources available at UTM and in the Peel region to enhance to my students' learning in and out of the classroom. I have taken students in two different courses to the Blackwood Gallery for educational tours of exhibits that connected directly to the course content—the #callresponse exhibition on Canadian indigeneity and the off-site "Work of Wind, Air, Land, and Sea" exhibition on climate change. I have been tapping into my growing network of environmental organizations, experts, and disaster management professions. Last semester, for example, my sociology of disasters students received a guest lecture from James Dann, Toronto Waterfront Parks Manager, who supervised the response and recovery from the 2017 flooding of the Toronto Islands. In sum, this range of pedagogical techniques and formats is fundamental to

my ability to stimulate curiosity and critical thinking and reach a wide range of students, from those struggling with new material to those with refined subject-area capabilities.

Diversity and Inclusion in the Classroom

The best way I know to support equity and diversity across gender, race, indigeneity, sexuality, (dis)ability, age, and other key vectors of inclusion is to foster an accessible and intellectually-safe classroom environment. I find that sociology courses work best for all students, but especially those coming from non-traditional, marginalized, or underserved educational backgrounds, when the classroom is that "third space" where mistakes, speculation, and a willingness to inquire are at the core of long-term learning. I also draw from a deep well of teaching techniques, including multi-media lectures that include video, group exercises, games, mock debates, and student-led instructional sessions. The goal is to engage students at multiple registers. That way, individuals and groups from different social and educational backgrounds can engage with ideas across multiple modalities, some of which are more familiar to them and others of which require them to stretch and grow. Finally, the content of course material itself covers core sociological themes of racial, economic, and gender inequalities. In my sociology of disaster course, for example, we draw from a variety of examples, including Hurricane Katrina, the 1997 Red River Flood in southern Manitoba, and the 2013 ice storm in Brampton, Ontario, to demonstrate why such extreme events tend to worsen pre-existing race and class inequities. We draw on examples like these to produce "social autopsies" of large-scale disaster that demonstrate the deep entanglement of political economy, urban development, spatial segregation, and community-level vulnerability to environmental hazards.