

## Teaching Philosophy, Background and Interests Josh Packard, Ph.D.

### Teaching Philosophy

As I look back over the various teaching statements I have written throughout my career, I am struck by how consistent they all are. The content often varies as sometimes I choose to highlight my stance on student learning and other times I focus on teacher-student relationships, but what is unchanging is how closely my beliefs and practice are linked. In short, what remains constant is my philosophy of teaching. Teaching at a liberal arts university as an assistant professor crystallized this for me as I came to understand that I was teaching the same two or three skills over and over.

First, I strive to teach students to identify and use a sociological perspective. This sounds trite as write it, but my students consistently confirm that this is the most important thing we can do for them. The reflections that I hear from students after a semester is over rarely have to do with crime statistics or the nature of secularization or the national health care system. No, what students continually communicate to me is that the class “changed the way they think.”

*“Very, very important subject to know. Changed my understanding of the world.”*

*“Fundamentally changed my view of the world.”*

The student comments above reflect what good sociology classes can do. The specific topics, at least at the level of students taking introductory classes, are a vehicle for teaching and demonstrating this perspective.

Second, and related, I work to communicate to my students the value of approaching a problem holistically. Too often in sociology we undercut the value of the sociological perspective by teaching as though the chapters in the book are unrelated. While I realize that, in the words of one student, “You can’t talk about race, class and gender every single day,” this is precisely what I want them to do.

This perspective gets translated directly into practice for me. In the classroom I am much more likely to allow discussions and conversations to go in directions that I did not anticipate at first, and while I am careful to make sure that these discussions do not get off track, I see a real value in letting the students guide the process as much as possible. I often generate paper topics directly from these discussions so that by the time students get the assignment, they have had a chance to talk about their thoughts with both their peers and their instructor in a relatively low-pressure situation. When students come to me struggling with a paper assignment, I often find that I refer them back to their own comments during our class discussions. This gives them a solid place to start while building their self-confidence.

I cede some of this control in my classroom because I know that I have intentionally structured the classroom to be a place of personal discovery within a sociological context. I take the perspective that if the students are challenged by the structure of the classroom, then there is not a need for me to personally challenge them every time they open their mouths or raise their hands. By contextualizing each exercise according to the two principles above, I can be reasonably assured that class discussions and activities will occur within this particular framework. This has resulted in a highly collaborative (as opposed to combative or dictatorial) classroom where the students and I learn from each other. Power in the classroom is traditionally an important issue, because it is traditionally concentrated. I seek to diffuse this power as much possible while ultimately realizing that it is my responsibility to create a successful experience. Full responsibility with decreased power is a difficult thing to get used to, but I am convinced that it is the best way for me to teach, and an effective way for undergraduates to learn.

*“I liked his enthusiasm and use of discussion (which is often more interesting and enlightening than any lecture.)”*

*“The hands-on demonstrations we did were great. They really made the concepts more real.”*

*“Prof. Packard has a great way of getting students to think about ‘why’ things are the way they are in society and is very accepting of everyone’s comments.”*

One of the greatest advantages of this kind of approach is that it allows for the learning experience to extend beyond the classroom walls very easily. My students are continually engaged in experiences which challenge and push them to expand their boundaries. I frequently offer extra credit for attending community events (e.g., lecture, film, etc.) which are germane to our discussions and writing a sociological analysis of experience. This has the effect of making abstract theoretical concepts more concrete for students, something I believe is necessary for true learning to take place. I believe that my students are willing to take advantage of these opportunities because they gain the skills needed to make sense of these experiences in the classroom. They are not able to write off something which is different as simply “weird.”

Consciously focusing on teaching a sociological perspective and holistic problem solving does not mean expecting less from the students or trying to impart less information to them. Rather, if one commits to teaching from that perspective it means quite the opposite. It means that the students will be challenged at nearly every turn by each other, and that I must be there to help them meet that challenge.

### **Teaching Experience**

I teach two sections of Introduction to Sociology every semester which has given me the opportunity to polish this course so that I am freed up to make tweaks during the semester which are relevant to a particular class. In my Introduction to Sociology class we center our discussions around three main phenomena: religious extremism, hurricane Katrina, and the national debate over same-sex marriage. I use these particular topics to help the various chapters and concepts from the textbook to have some real world anchors that the students can relate to. For example, we cover race, ethnicity, stratification and organizations during the sections about Katrina.

In addition to teaching Introduction to Sociology on a regular basis, I also teach Social Problems, Research Methods and Race and Ethnic Relations every year for my department, and I have developed and taught Sociology of Religion and Sociology of Public Health as electives. These upper-level classes in the major have given me experience teaching smaller courses (often around 15 students) in a seminar setting that is more conducive to in-depth exploration of a single topic. I think of these courses as good preparation for our students that go on to graduate programs where this kind of classroom interaction will be the norm.

### **Teaching Interests**

Although I enjoy teaching a broad array of courses, I am especially interested in continuing to teach introductory level classes and health related courses. I look forward to the opportunity to teach students who’s primary interests lie in another field as is so often the case with introductory sociology classes. While I enjoy teaching classes that fall within my substantive interests of health, organizations and religion, I am also very interested in teaching and developing courses which are interdisciplinary. One of the things which characterized my graduate school experience was that I took multiple classes in other academic departments including the divinity school, community research and action, and leadership, policy and organizations. In particular, I am interested in developing and teaching a course which explores an important local issue from a number of disciplinary perspectives and which requires students to incorporate both research and service.

## *Teaching Effectiveness and Evaluations*

I believe that teaching effectiveness can only be properly assessed by combining the insights of both the students and the instructor. My evaluations have been very positive, consistently placing me and the class at or near the top of student's favorites, but I would be a poor instructor if student comments were the only way that I evaluated a course. So, before moving on to the positive comments from my students, I think it is important to indicate how I interpret these evaluations.

After each semester I write my own course evaluation before I read the comments from my students. I find this to be a helpful way of making sure that student ratings and comments are kept in proper perspective. I take student evaluations very seriously, and I often make very specific adjustments based on student comments. For example, after the first courses that I taught as a graduate student I was not satisfied with the amount application that my students were doing with the material that we covered. My own evaluations suggested that while I they were doing just fine theoretically, they were struggling to make the link between sociological theories and everyday events. The student evaluations confirmed this.

Obviously, this is distressing for any sociology instructor to see, but as it confirmed what I already suspected was a weakness in my teaching, it simply sent me back to the drawing board. Sociology is nothing if not practical. As a result of this, I crafted and tweaked a number of exercises and techniques, specifically in my Social Problems course. In particular, I developed a project centered around letters to elected representatives which now stands at the heart of my Social Problems course. Working in small groups of three or four, students must take one topic from each quarter of the class and produce a one page, single spaced, letter to an elected representative lobbying them about an issue they believe needs to be addressed. The assignment has a number of strengths including requiring students to reach a consensus about a controversial issue, engage in outside research to define the problem, develop and propose a solution to a problem, and write effectively in a relatively small amount of space. Although students are not required to mail the letters, I do have them prepare them with addresses to the representatives so that they are ready to be mailed if they choose, and in fact, many students have told me that they take the opportunity to do so. The result of these efforts is that what was once a weakness in my teaching has become a strong point. I managed to incorporate practical connections without sacrificing any of the theoretical understanding.

## Numerical Evaluations of Teaching Effectiveness

<u>MWSU</u> <sup>1</sup> (5=Excellent; 1=Poor)	<u>2008-2009</u>	<u>2009-2010</u>	<u>2010-2011</u>
Overall Rating of Instructor	4.6	4.6	4.7
Overall Rating of Course	4.4	4.4	4.6
Instructor Knowledge	4.7	4.8	4.9
Instructor Helpfulness	4.6	4.5	4.6
Timeliness of Instructor Responses	4.5	4.6	4.6
How Much I Was Challenged	4.6	4.6	4.7
Teaching Strategies	N/A	4.6	4.7

### Written Comments from Course Evaluations

- I found I was **learning more in this class than any other**, overall very helpful in my decision to become a soc. major.
- **This was the best class/teacher I have had.** Lectures were interesting, high class involvement kept me awake and outside sources like movies and guest lecturers brought other points of view.
- Prof. Packard was always prepared for class and did a good job of incorporating alternative methods of teaching (apart from straight lectures) to get the class involved.
- I found this class to be quite enjoyable as the discussions are something that can be thought about everyday. It **causes you to question** why our society acts a certain way and what can be done to change it.
- Excellent course, Packard is a good Prof. and carries the class very well...**would definitely take another course with him.**
- **I learned how to apply the things I learned** to real life situations. It has opened my mind to sociological thinking.
- After completing this course, **I really want to enroll in other sociology courses.**
- Dr. Packard was an excellent professor and I enjoyed the fact that **he genuinely cared about the students** as well as the subject.
- You are a great instructor. **Made me want to major in sociology.**
- This class has been one of my favorite classes so far. **I've never learned so much.** I love the topics, discussions, and even tests!
- Professor Packard was awesome! He was always willing to help as much as he could. Made the class exciting.
- Dr. Packard's excitement and creativeness toward sociology really made this class enjoyable.
- **The methods and examples he used to teach were incredible!**
- He was very enthusiastic and you could tell he enjoyed teaching the class.
- I loved that we had freedom of expression to discuss personal insights and opinions on current and relevant topics. **The instructor enjoyed his students input and valued their insights, etc.**
- I'm a graduating senior, and I thought this was one of the most interesting courses I have taken because of the way the entire class interacted with one another. **Every college class should have this atmosphere.**
- **Dr. Packard has an inspiring teaching style.** He provokes thought by posing concepts as questions. This is very helpful.
- What I believe I really got out of this class was the ability to be more tolerant of other religions. Before this class I had all kinds of preconceived notions about the other two main religions. After taking this class my views on those religions has changed.
- The instructor incorporated activities during class time to make each class fresh and exciting.
- Dr. Packard is an absolutely amazing teacher. **I would take any of his classes just to be taught by him.**
- The intertwining of all the material presented and the multitude of examples was especially helpful in making the material clear.
- There need to be more teachers who love what they do like Packard. Even if you were not interested in sociology **his love for it makes you want to know more.**
- Very knowledgeable instructor. He was very good at relating the big social issues to us and making us see the relevance.
- This was **hands down the best professor I have had** in 4 years at 3 different schools. Phenomenal job.
- Very good job at making information interesting. **I really wanted to come to class.**
- I liked that we got a real world look through this class at how public health works.
- You are the best, I know I have told you this several times but I really do feel that you are the best Professor I have ever had. **Your teaching style is truly unique** and I am so happy to have sat under it for an entire semester.
- Dr. Packard does a great job of making the class interesting. The in-class activities kept our attention and **made us want to learn.**
- Dr. Packard is extremely helpful. **The class was not easy, but the demands were worth the knowledge I gained.**
- I'm not a soc. major but would be willing to take another one of his classes just to learn.
- Professor Packard always comes to class prepared and is energetic and positive in his teachings and trying to help his students.

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We switched evaluation templates after the 2008-2009 academic year. I have chosen the categories from the two evaluations that remained and are most relevant to include here as well as two other items that seemed especially germane. If you wish to see the full evaluations, please let me know, and I'll be happy to provide them.