

# TEACHING PHILOSOPHY<sup>1</sup>

JOSH PACKARD, PH.D.  
ASSISTANT PROFESSOR  
MIDWESTERN STATE UNIVERSITY

## ***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 my own courses has 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 (or lack thereof). 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

---

<sup>1</sup> It is important to recognize that statements such as these are simply snapshots of thoughts and feelings at a particular time. Teaching is not static and thus my thoughts about teaching are constantly in flux. Thus, this document, which has already undergone many changes in my brief career, will continue to undergo changes as I move forward and come into contact with more and more students who inevitably shape my thinking about what good instruction looks like.

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.)"*

*"Very effective in getting through to the students and engaging us in class discussions."*

*"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 which are germane to our discussions. 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.