Personal Teaching Philosophy

My teaching philosophy can be summarized as follows:

*There ain’t no teachin’ where there ain’t no learnin’.*

Intrigued? Hopefully. Let me explain.

As a college-level sociology professor, I see my role as both an educator and an administrator of various courses within an institution of higher education. This is to say that I am expected to fulfill the formal obligations of constructing and following a syllabus that accommodates students’ legitimate performances of earning course credit. Students should have the opportunity to work hard toward earning their desired grades, and at the end of the semester, my role is to provide performance-based information for their transcript. While in the classroom, students should be presented with opportunities to earn credit while learning critical material and maturing intellectually. At one level, I am an administrator of course syllabi, assignments, assessments, and an intermediary between the student and university in terms of the efforts, abilities and achievements. With that said, true education is a bit of a challenge in the context of mass education.

As a social scientist, I am particularly interested in evidence-based and theoretically supported pedagogy, which is why I often turn to *Teaching Sociology* for methods to bring students to the doors of critical sociological thinking. Students arrive in the classroom with many similarities and differences in terms of how humans learn, which should be met with both consistency and a variety of teaching and assessment methods. Each student has their own web of concepts within which they make meaningful connections to course content. It is difficult, but not impossible, to reach students individually and all together as a class at the same time. Students who have already had their curiosity peeked should be shown beaten paths on the intellectual terrain and how to further pave their own way, but some students are still in need of a crucial set of lessons that inspires, initiates, or instigates their desire to begin asking and answering questions for themselves. (And this is to not even take into account the many differences in academic competency students bring to any given educational setting.)

Sociological explanations of the social universe often challenge students to go beyond their comfort zones and into uncharted territories. We humans are on a constant journey down various paths simultaneously, and a steady, reliable guide ensures safe travels. The intellectual growth students experience via assigned readings, in-class presentations and discussions, and from out-of-class exercises can alter their perceptions of the social world in such a way that they feel a profound sense of community they had previously overlooked, ignored, or neglected. And for those who had been thoroughly steeped in limited community experiences, new perspectives and being introduced to novel worldviews adopted from sociology and other courses in the
liberal arts provide new opportunities to think about and interact with communities they had previously held at a distance or in disrepute. In one sense, being a sociology professor is to have the task of teaching future generations of scholars and citizens to use evidence and logic, data and theory, in the reasoning of how and why the social world appears the way it does. In another sense, I see my work as a sociology instructor as a way to teach the discipline and practice I love and respect to people who will take those lessons with them into their occupations, family lives, friendships, and activist-oriented practices. The topics we get to profess as sociologists have the potential to spread out into the public, solving social problems as they ripple out into oceanic societies.

The philosophy I have developed over the past several years has progressed and morphed from various incarnations. Below is an excerpt from the teaching philosophy statement I was encouraged to develop during a course called Teaching Introductory Sociology that I took during my Master’s program, and it was written for the audience of my students:

I view students like bonsai trees; they will grow on their own, but through careful treatment they can turn out to be beautiful structures full of life and integrity. For one reason or another, people who attend my classes will find themselves in learning environments, and for this reason these students would benefit from adopting attitudes conducive to learning. The student-teacher relationship is like that of Master-apprentice; you are here because you need a craft, and I am here because I want to teach mine. Like other educators, I value what I teach, and I value that I teach; please respect your position and mine. I hope you will realize I have your best interest in mind, but keep in mind also that education is a self-improvement and a self-rewarding process: you must take charge of your own education in order for you to reap the benefits. I am here for your benefit and your service, and I hope to contribute toward your positive growth, but to do so we will need to cooperate toward that end. To paraphrase, education is not the filling of a pale, but the lighting of a fire (I believe somebody real smart said that once); I hope to at least add some fuel to your fire.

As I have been practicing using a thorough yet minimalistic syllabus in my courses for several semesters now, which seems to be very practical and efficient, I have discontinued attaching this philosophy statement to my syllabi. However, while I still retain much of the philosophy above, I have merely simplified this to a verbal statement I give on the first day of class (as well as intermittently throughout a semester): “There ain’t no teachin’ where there ain’t no learnin’.” The improper language usually gets the attention of my students, and the content supports what I currently believe to be true about my role as an educator: I am not doing my job if students are not succeeding in my class as well as learning lifelong lessons, lessons that hopefully help them grow and benefit our social world.

Only years after I began using it did I discover that this idiom share’s Paulo Freire’s title to his second chapter in Pedagogy of Freedom, “There Is No Teaching without Learning.” At its most profound level, learning is the process and outcome of
being epistemologically curious. Below is an especially rich passage by Freire (1998) regarding what he refers to as “epistemological curiosity:”

Curiosity as restless questioning, as movement toward the revelation of something hidden, as a question verbalized or not, as search for clarity, as a moment of attention, suggestion, and vigilance, constitutes an integral part of the phenomenon of being alive. There could be no creativity without the curiosity that moves us and sets us patiently impatient before a world that we did not make, to add to it something of our own making. (p. 37-38)

Inspiring epistemological curiosity is not enough, for students should begin to ask and answer their own questions, but, in doing so, they will soon discover why it is that so many of us have dedicated our lives to studying society, social constructions, and social behavior.

In *The Sociological Imagination*, C. Wright Mills (1959) famously pointed out that while individuals certainly experience troubling choices and situations, social problems arise from and lead to circumstances beyond any individual’s choice. In making his moral argument about what should be pursued in light of this, Mills highlighted the place of reason and freedom in social life: “Freedom is not merely the chance to do as one pleases; neither is it merely the opportunity to choose between set alternatives. Freedom is, first of all, the chance to formulate the available choices, to argue over them—and then, the opportunity to choose” (174). Without the ability to reason through choices, freedom would be for not, and without freedom, locating one’s biography within his or her social structure and historical nexus would be moot.

Teaching our students that through the methodical collection of evidence, the rigorous application of theory, and sharing our results with our peers (and taking their critiques seriously—and criticisms lightly), we can all become freer in our own abilities.

Helping students initiate, recognize, and/or develop their epistemological curiosity and sociological imagination is the most important task I have set out for myself as professor of sociology. I take very seriously my role as an administrator of lessons, assessments, and grades, but to turn our curiosity to alleviating social problems, whether in terms of their consequences in our own lives or to reduce them through engagement in civil society, is among the greatest achievements of sociology. Given the opportunity to recognize choices where they previously saw only dead ends, students of sociology can take better hold over the reins of some of the wild horses that take us through the many paths of life if and when social controversies and crises spill over into the personal issues we all face on a daily basis.

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Research Statement

My research interests currently center on three areas. I have been interested in studying effective teaching methods for sociological and social scientific theories and concepts, and I have presented and published material in these regards. I have also worked on a project with former students, and while these have fallen to the wayside so that I could spend time finishing my dissertation, I will return to work on studying internet memes from structuralist and critical feminist perspectives. Lastly, I am currently working on turning my dissertation into a book, and I hope to have this published in the next year.

Pedagogical

My interests in publishing research that advances pedagogy are based in two areas. First, I have already published a book chapter that demonstrates how editorial cartoons can be used to teach about social constructionism, ideology, hegemony, and other concepts and theories that can be difficult to grasp for early learners in higher education, such as feminist and critical race theories. I have spoken with an editor of Teaching Sociology about publishing an article on this topic, as well as an article on an in-class exercise I constructed that demonstrates the concepts of social constructionism, power, deviance, and social control. I have many artifacts from student writing assignments about this project that I plan to turn into data for a second article in Teaching Sociology. Lastly, I am interested in gathering data about student knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs that are related to common sense, folk wisdom, and citizen science. I hope to demonstrate that gathering data from the people in our classrooms is an important component for effectively and efficiently teaching and imparting the sociological imagination.

Critical Structuralist

I currently have a paper in the works for Social Forces that I began writing with two of my students from Social Stratification in the spring of 2012. The three of us presented our research during our university’s research week, with my role serving to organize and introduce my students’ contributions. Since that time the students and I have not kept up with this project. They have graduated, and I needed to focus my energy on completing my dissertation. Essentially, this study involved gathering Internet memes that depict stereotypes about traditional gender roles, such as “women’s place being in the kitchen,” or what is titled as the “Get Back in the Kitchen” meme. One webpage dedicated to this meme can be found at the following URL: http://i1.kym-cdn.com/entries/icons/original/000/002/157/1222see-that-get-back-in-kitchen.jpg. Theoretically, I combine social structural research based on patriarchy, prosumerism, and hegemony. The contribution of this work is, firstly, theoretical in that it combines theories not previously associated with each other. Substantively, I can
show that some Internet users have so thoroughly internalized these social structures that they begin to use the logics of these social structures in what otherwise would be images unassociated with gender role stereotypes (e.g., see the above URL).

*Sociology of Conspiracy*

Currently, there is no field, sub-field, disciplinary area, or topical consensus that could be called “the sociology of conspiracy,” although there are two essays that use this phrase in their title. Sociological work on elite deviance, organizational deviance, white collar crime, and power structure research either avoid the topic altogether or give passing references to the fact that conspiracy is a legal codification. Much sociological work can be done that highlights conspiracy as a regular occurrence, for example it is a charge typically given to illicit drug and prostitution networks. At another end of the sociological spectrum, there is currently much popular cultural attention given to “conspiracy theories,” whether stemming from those who believe and espouse them or from those who attempt to combat what they argue is the rising social problem of conspiracism. My work with the 9/11 Truth Movement shows that those labeled “conspiracy theorists” are marginalized, demonized, and excluded from the dominant discourse, and this is often accomplished without rigorous and systematic attention to their empirical claims. I am currently underway writing a book about the 9/11 Truth Movement. More generally, the book deals with the topic of conspiracy and its many facets and dimensions in contemporary society. Conspiracy is widely considered a taboo topic, and so it might be difficult to find funding for the national survey I would like to carry out. I have constructed and tested a questionnaire that I plan to use in a nationally representative sample, probably an online survey at this point. I wrote an NSF dissertation improvement grant based on this, but I was among the 122 people who did not receive it. This study will gather data about the general public’s knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs about conspiracy in general, as well as about specific “conspiracy theories.” There is a growing body of literature in this area produced by psychologists, political scientists, philosophers, historians, and anthropologists, but the sociological perspective is startlingly absent from most of this corpus. I plan to help fill this gap.