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Teaching philosophy statement

Teaching requires translation, connection, and (re)organization: demonstrating complex ideas through examples, helping students find effective ways to organize their thoughts and slot new information in. This document is an attempt to do the same: translate my jumble of experiences into a coherent statement of ideals, showing how a work-in-progress is taking shape into a professional and teaching identity as my experience deepens and widens.

I have organized what follows into three sections. First is a short catalog of what I want my students to learn. Second, I describe what learning is. Lastly, I detail how these principles shape my approach to teaching, from my broad priorities and strategies to the day-to-day work of planning lessons. Importantly, as much as I try to first articulate my principles and then put them into practice (the order that is generally considered to be best practice), sometimes I can only discern these principles after I have interpreted my (sometimes instinctive) actions in and out of the classroom. That is, my ideals about education's promises are made manifest in a Jeopardy game or negotiating with a student on an extension for an assignment, but my daily interactions with students have also come to shape my overall approach.[1] To that end, "teaching" for me is never a finished product, but an ever-unfolding process of bringing together what I do and what I believe. It requires a combination of examining my own learning style and experiences, trying to understand the classroom through my students' eyes, comparing notes with colleagues, and reading up on effective pedagogy.[2]

This is especially true since I have not yet taught a 100%-designed-by-me course. I am currently a teaching assistant at Cornell, with my own weekly discussion sections for an Introduction to Development Sociology class and the Social and Political Context of American Education. Before starting my PhD at Cornell, I taught in a range of contexts, for varied students: adult learners in a maximum security prison, high school girls in the Islamic Republic of Mauritania, and 9th graders at a Quaker boarding school in the US. I have tutored Harlem students, provided classroom enrichment for a local elementary school, and am now a teaching assistant fellow with Cornell's Center for Teaching Excellence. My philosophy is derived from all of these teaching experiences, and my own formal and informal education, of course (the same Quaker boarding school, a small liberal arts college, a public Swiss university, and other assorted workshops and trainings). The principles and day-to-day strategies described below, however, are largely designed for and derived from the context of higher education in the United States.

What I want students to learn

I have learned to learn with intention, by reading and listening and asking questions, by thinking and doing and writing. As I move towards a career in teaching, I am crafting a pedagogical approach that helps students to do the same. Indeed, my foremost goal is that

[1] See Argyris and Schon's distinction between a teacher's "espoused theory" and "theory in use" in Argyris, C. and Schon, D. (1974) *Theory in practice: Increasing professional effectiveness*. San Fransisco: Jossey-Bass.
[2] Brookfield, Stephen. (1995). *Becoming a critically reflective teacher*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

students learn to **think critically**. To me, that means they have to learn to ask questions; look at things from different angles; consider practical implications and maybe some impractical ones, too; read between the lines; feel a kinship to historical thinkers; move between generalizations and specifics; get lost for a while, and then find their way back. The "critical" edge to critical thinking requires **information and media literacy**: they have to be able to identify and understand the source of a given text, think about how whether and how they can verify it, and evaluate claims to authority.

I want students to apply both of these to their own lives. I think the most effective learning happens when students can see the connections to their own lives in the material. I am lucky to be mentored by a professor who believes similarly, and in a course on the sociology of education in the US, regularly asks students to reflect on aspects of their own schooling: classroom demographics, differences between districts, funding and other resources. As students learn new language to describe these experiences, they come to understand them in new ways. It is relatively easy for me to call for a **personal engagement** with course material because I teach environmental sociology and geography, or in other words, how people relate to one other, the resources they use, and the places they live in. While of course some factual information must be retained, and established theories understood, there often are not hard and fast answers to the most important sociological questions. These are questions that are analytical or normative or personal: Why does this happen? What should be done? What should *I* do? I want students to come away from my courses with a curiosity to learn more about the world and their place in it.

What I think learning is and what it requires

I am used to thinking of learning as something that happens in **quiet isolation**: writing a reflection paper, reading to myself. When I set aside time to study, I generally block out a few hours alone. I write, riffle through a few articles, consult a thesaurus, maybe play with a diagram to try to reorder thoughts or see them in new relation to one another. Perhaps I am influenced by my Quaker background, whereby a Meeting for Worship is anyplace where even just one person is sitting, at rest and open.

But of course learning is also deeply **social**. Some of the most pivotal moments in my intellectual life have come from conversations with friends, book recommendations from professors, interesting talks. When I am done with the quiet kind of work described above, I often get someone else to look at what I have written or drawn and comment. And so I wrestle with the tension between learning as personal and learning as social. Both are important, of course, and the job of teaching is to design coursework in such a way that the growth spurts from these personal and social dimensions build on one another.

How I (aim to) teach

My foremost strategy is to help students build **organizational frameworks**: how we organize our knowledge is key to retaining it, and so I get them make connections, relate the academic to the personal, slot them into chronological timelines, concept maps, or diagrams of their design. In particular, I emphasize the framing for the three or four big ideas in a course (e.g., the sociological functions of schooling, in the case of the course I've TAed for several times).

I give enormous priority to **writing**: I believe writing cogently is a crucial dimension of thinking critically, and it is a process that combines the personal and social dimensions

of learning. It is also a skill in and of itself that every college graduate needs to master. My insistence on the importance of organizational frameworks carries over into writing: I encourage students to consider the coherence of the whole, what metaphors might apply (a house, a hand, a meal), how they can effectively structure an argument or even a reflection paper. As a teaching assistant, I have not had much control over the amount of writing integrated into a given course: some have required weekly reflections, others two or three essays throughout the semester. I have been able to incorporate a few writing exercises, schedule peer review for the major writing assignments, and of course provide my own extended feedback. As I begin to design my own courses, I am looking forward to apply what I have learned as a TA and as a TA fellow about effectively combining low- and high-stakes writing, providing more useful feedback, using very brief writing assignments as a sort of stimulus in the beginning of class, and other techniques.

Throughout each course, I encourage (prod, cheerfully tease, expect, eventually require) students to be increasingly responsible for their own education. This requires introducing them to ideas of **metacognition**, asking them to think through their approaches to reading or writing, spending class time working on general or individualized study strategies, inviting them to assess the effectiveness of different activities for their overall progress, and asking them over time to take on more and more ownership of their education. I have also had the pleasure of helping the most involved students sequence their writing assignments and projects that allows them to blend their personal goals into the arc of the whole course.

Asking for feedback about specific activities is meant as an invitation to my students to learn how the knowledge itself is created and transmitted. To that end, I am also **transparent** about my own learning process. I try to demonstrate the kind of thoughtfulness I want them to reach; I share with them the pleasures of working something out or putting old ideas together in a new and compelling way. This is also true for when something in class hasn't gone as I had hoped. In modeling this sort of iterative practice, I try to demonstrate that I am learning alongside them -- not only the material, but also how best to teach the material to this particular crop of students. And done early enough in the semester -- asking students about their expectations and how they hope to spend their time in class (discussing big ideas, digesting content, working on real-world problems) -- allows me structure section time in a way that meets their specific needs and strengths.

It was in a mid-semester evaluation where I learned that one student wanted to ***discuss* less, and *do* more**. He was an engineering student who was perhaps unused to the friendly ferment of discussion, but I took his plea seriously – especially for introductory courses – and changed how I allot time in section. Nearly every hour of my section has at least one activity to supplement the discussion, based on that feedback and the belief that in order to learn new information, a student must do something with it, from small and mundane efforts like reporting back to a group or writing up notes, to the higher-stakes work of projects and essays. I want the activities I design for class time foremost to be useful for students in building their internal libraries, trying out new ways of organizing information. But of course I want them to be fun and memorable in their own right, too! To that end, I try to vary what we do in the classroom, starting with icebreakers on the first day, facilitating a privilege walk, trying out a "crowdsource cram" on various topics, showing relevant historical photographs, working on political cartoons, and playing Jeopardy and putting together concept maps at the end of the semester.

Discussion is still the fulcrum of my classes, however, and I am still perfecting the art of facilitation: being flexible and responsive to students' needs and interests; staying aware of timing and students' attention spans; and sequencing discussion questions in such a way that students get everything out of a given reading that I want them to, but that they come to it in their own ways. I have designed a rubric for in-class participation to give my students a clearer idea of the kind of efforts I expect them to make.

Finally, all of these goals are largely impossible to reach if students aren't **having fun** and letting loose! To build trust, I make an effort from before the day class even starts to demonstrate care and attentiveness. I learn their names and some details about who they are. As the course progresses, I am available and responsive, checking in if a student's attendance or performance lags, providing detailed and conversational feedback on their assignments. And of course, I bring in doughnuts on the last day! I want them to lose themselves in the pleasures of learning, and so sometimes I gently remind the more grade-conscious ones that sometimes what's most useful is what's most interesting – and of course, it's up to me to structure their learning in such a way that that is true.