

Teaching Philosophy

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With profound social inequalities, a dysfunctional political system, and a public oriented more towards consumerism than responsible citizenship, American democracy is in a state of crisis. Despite this bleak picture, I believe that the academy and, particularly the liberal arts education, stands as one of the few remaining bulwarks against a passive, unjust, and superficial society. As a teacher-scholar, I see my role as extending to students an invitation into “the life of the mind” and empowering them with the skills to responsibly engage in the world.

As a graduate of Skidmore College and having spent my entire professional career at small liberal arts colleges, I have a deep appreciation for the liberal arts. Part of the strength of the education offered at small liberal arts colleges stems from their small classes, which allow faculty members to use pedagogies that encourage deep reading, critical thinking, and empowered speech and writing. But even more fundamentally, the interdisciplinary nature of the liberal arts introduces students to the different epistemologies of each discipline, awakening the totality of their minds and allowing for more nuanced reasoning. Differing modes of intellectual engagement offer the students an opportunity to become more complex interpreters of the human experience.

But to what end? As mentors to our students, we naturally want them to develop aptitudes that will allow them to pursue careers that are fulfilling and rewarding. However, the *raison d'être* of the liberal arts education is to create empowered citizens who will contribute to a more just and democratic society. As Nussbaum (2010) writes, “If a nation wants to promote [a] humane, people sensitive to democracy ... [we must teach] the ability to think well about political issues affecting the nation, to examine, reflect, argue, and debate, deferring to neither tradition nor authority” (pg. 25).¹ Nussbaum’s “Human Development model” of education, which reflects the liberal arts commitment to cultivating critical and versatile modes of intellectual engagement, is not just to achieve individual success, but to promote the common good of society.

¹ Nussbaum, Martha. 2010. *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs The Humanities*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Echoing Nussbaum (2010), my broadest goal as a teacher is **to help students develop their capabilities as critical thinkers and their empathy for people with very different life experiences.** In addition to this widely-shared liberal arts goal, I share two other broad goals of sociology as a discipline. First, I aim **to teach students to use the “sociological imagination,”** a perspective that examines the dynamic relationship between society and the individual. By understanding how people are “selected and formed, liberated and repressed, made sensitive and blunted²,” students uncover their preconceived notions of how society is structured. Finally, I **instruct students in the use of social scientific research methods, qualitative and quantitative.** Of particular importance to me is educating students in the interpretation and use of quantitative research methods. In the age of “Big Data,” an increasing number of careers demand skills in the analysis of statistics. At the same time, with frequent references to the findings of polls and studies in news reports, quantitative literacy has become essential to informed citizenship.

To achieve these goals, I use a variety of tactics in my classes. First and most importantly, I attempt to create a forum for an exchange of ideas in which students are expected to think critically, clearly articulate their thoughts, and defend their views in relation to the ideas of others (either those of their peers or competing ideas from readings). Naturally, discussion must be accompanied by more structured lecture in order to introduce theories and research findings. But it is the application of sociological theories and the interpretation of research findings that I try to nurture with robust and thoughtful class discussion. At the same time, more nuanced, organized arguments can only be developed through writing. As Elie Wiesel once wrote, “I write to understand as much as to be understood.”³ For this reason, I have created a range of written assignments that require students to develop their critical analysis and writing skills.

If teaching critical thinking and oral and written communication are common among all disciplines in a liberal arts education, one of the ways in which sociology is uniquely useful for empowered citizenship is the training we offer in a wide range of qualitative and quantitative research methods. I believe that students tend to absorb the insights of sociology most deeply when conducting their own systematic studies of the world around them. Not only do such assignments introduce them to social science research methods, but they also make the learning

² Mills, C. Wright. 1959. *The Sociological Imagination*. New York: Oxford University Press. Pg. 7.

³ Wiesel, Elie. 1985. “Why I Write: Making No Become Yes.” *The New York Times*.

process more immediately relevant. In my introductory courses, rather than having students write long term-papers, they have to complete a series of smaller assignments that require them to critically analyze issues, but also to gather and interpret qualitative and quantitative data. Over the course of the semester, the students conduct qualitative interviews with people who have experienced social mobility and parents in a toy store, survey fellow students about their attitudes regarding racial inequalities (and compare them to General Social Survey results), and complete a simple media content analysis of a television program. Additionally, recognizing the range of learning styles, I give students an option of constructing a photo essay (with written introduction and captions) that explores how the built environment and social organization of various neighborhoods (urban, traditional suburban, sprawl, rural) affects the residents' way of life. On a few occasions, students with more limited writing abilities have nonetheless produced highly insightful works of visual sociology through this assignment.

In my upper level courses, I also construct assignments that require students to systematically examine subjects that are relevant to their lives, but significantly increase the duration and rigor of the projects. In May 2012, I co-taught a monthly intensive course called "The Ethnographic Essay" in Scotland. We introduced our students to the essential skills of ethnography including developing an interview schedule, transcription, recording jottings and fieldnotes. Then, we supervised as each student conducted their own research project in Glasgow over a two week period two weeks. In my Media and Society course, each student conducts her/his own content analysis of a television show, using both quantitative measures (ultimately producing simple contingency tables) and structured qualitative analysis. Finally, in Research Methods and Statistics, students design their own survey questions and collect a sample of survey responses from over 300 of their peers in the student body. Over the course of the semester, using the measures they constructed, students learn to recode variables and run cross-tabulations, correlation matrices, and run multivariate linear (and if necessary logistic) regression analysis. In both of these projects, I find that students are highly engaged because they are able to choose the topic and use social science methods to answer the questions they raise. Students in these upper level classes prepare journal-style manuscripts that incorporate literature review, methods, findings, and discussion sections, enhancing their technical writing abilities.

It is now common place to teach simple OLS analyses in upper level sociology courses. However, with advanced statistics being used in fields ranging from baseball to Wall Street to

political strategy, I introduce students in our statistics and research methods course the basics of analyzing nested data (e.g., students within schools, voters within districts, etc.). The type of multi-level models necessary to analyze nested data are not always easily learned and are not currently taught at many small liberal arts colleges. But introducing these somewhat more advanced statistics will give students powerful tools that will help them more readily step into leadership roles in many vocations.

In summary, as a teacher, I hope to help students gain skills of critical thinking and oral and written communication, a deep understanding of stratification within our society, and proficiency with a range of social science research methods. With these intellectual assets, students have the chance to become the sort of people Nussbaum believes education ought to produce: empowered citizens working towards the common good.