

## TEACHING STATEMENT

For many, the concept of the public intellectual conjures up images of writers and policymakers. But for myself, it is the act of teaching which best embodies the public intellectual role. A recent book by Jeffrey Goldfarb<sup>1</sup> argues that intellectuals have a dual role: civility and subversion. They stimulate informed discussion about important social problems by both cultivating civility in public life and promoting subversion of restrictive common sense.

I apply this framework to my own teaching, working to maintain both civility and subversion in the classroom. Both are necessary for effective teaching. Civility without subversion is simply polite agreement; subversion without civility is a war zone. To foster civility, I work together with the students to generate an atmosphere of mutual respect and trust. Discussion is the keystone of my classes. For that to work, students must feel safe not only to express themselves, but also to be able to expect others to take their ideas seriously and respond in kind. Subversion is the key to critical thinking. What I have always found so attractive about sociology as a field is the way it simultaneously challenges and respects the common sense of people. My courses are fundamentally about learning how to question received wisdom. One must be careful here. To question common sense is not the same as questioning the common sense of students. Students' ability to think and learn for themselves must always be respected. Furthermore, too often those who employ subversion as a teaching technique end up engaging in some form of ideology critique. That is, while they claim to be teaching critical thinking, they confuse their own ideology with being critical, rarely allowing a critical eye to be cast upon their own golden calves. As a teacher, I try not to put myself above others. Students are free to question and challenge me, just as I question and challenge them. We are all both teachers and learners.

Thus, I place a strong emphasis on the students' ability and interest in learning in my classes. This means that I have very high expectations for my students. In order to participate in class discussions, it is necessary that they do the reading everyday. Assignments are written to challenge them to be creative and critical in their work, not just to spit back facts and figures. In turn, it is fair that the students can also have high expectation of me as a teacher. This involves fairness and rigorousness in grading, as well as timeliness in returning their assignments, so that they can best use the comments given in grading. While one of my goals is to put more emphasis on the process of learning rather than the grade attached to that process, I find teaching works best if you meet students where they already are, rather than lecturing them about the "unimportance" of grades. To this end, I often give students opportunities to revise and resubmit assignments. While most do this "just" to improve their grades, my hope is that it will also give them another chance to more deeply engage the questions and concepts of the assignment. Another important responsibility I have is to keep the class interesting and relevant for the students. While more concrete topics such as politics and crime lend themselves more easily to this, I find that, with a little work, it is possible to make sociological theory a vibrant and important topic for students, one that helps them to make sense of their own lives.

Classroom discussion as a goal of teaching is all well and good, but it does not happen without doing the necessary work beforehand. Even if the students come to class prepared, many feel uncomfortable participating in class discussions. Consequently, I try to build in mechanisms to

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<sup>1</sup> Goldfarb, Jeffrey. 1998. *Civility and Subversion: The Intellectual in Democratic Society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

make it less difficult to be prepared to speak when the time comes. Often, I will begin a class with a short writing assignment, in which I have them answer a question related to the day's reading. In addition to being a useful way to monitor whether students are keeping up with the reading, it also gives each student the opportunity to formulate her or his thoughts on topics for the day's discussion. Another technique I have employed is to have students turn in discussion questions before the day's class. This requires the students to read with an eye towards to the classroom discussion, as well as helping me to know the issues that they find interesting, relevant, or confusing.

The fear of losing control can be one of the most anxiety-inducing aspects of teaching. Control is equated with safety. Nevertheless, I actively work to loosen my control over the class. It is not simply my class; I share it with each of the students. Lessening control does not mean that I give up responsibility. On the contrary, I must often work much harder than if I were in complete control. One example of this is allowing the students to participate in planning the syllabus for the class. Generally, I set the schedule for the first part of the course before class begins, but I frequently leave several weeks near the end of the course open. As a class, we decide what topics and readings should be covered during this time. Again, this way I better ensure that the students will have the opportunity to explore their own interests. Often this means that I must work to track down readings previously unknown to me, but this provides the added benefit that it is not only the students who are learning in the class. Another example is an alternative final exam I often use in my classes. Students are asked to write their own final exam for the class, as well as a detailed justification as to why this is an appropriate exam for the class. This forces students to take responsibility for what they have learned, making them think about what really matters in the class and how. Although most students find this exam is often more work than a traditional type, many find it very rewarding when they finally come up with a finished product. I am currently writing an article for *Teaching Sociology* about this and other alternative testing methods.

In addition to teaching my own courses, I have also worked for several years at the university writing center, working with graduate and undergraduate students on improving their writing. The one-on-one tutoring style in an environment free from the context of grading has really helped me to improve my own teaching. I have learned how to better teach writing to my own students, learning the important differences between clear and unclear writing assignments. Second, it has helped me to become a better evaluator, since I have a better understanding of the common problems experienced by student writers, which allows me to give more useful feedback. Most importantly, I have learned sympathy for students, realizing that many of the problems faced by students are not questions of a lack of comprehension, but rather of the inability to put their thoughts into words.

Of course, not everyone who wants a university education has the opportunity to follow the traditional paths. In an effort to help make these opportunities more available to everyone, I taught an introductory sociology course for two years through the independent studies program at UNC. This experience was much more challenging than I originally expected. I found I had to learn new strategies to teach, since many of my techniques were developed in the classroom. Nevertheless, the experience was a rewarding one. Not simply because of the new skills I acquired, but particularly through the contact with different types of students and the positive feedback I received from them.

I was recognized in 2001 with the Everett Wilson award. This award, which goes to the most outstanding graduate instructor, is chosen from nominations from students, peers, and the sociology faculty. This award means a lot to me. I place a lot of importance on teaching, and it is flattering when others express their appreciation for my efforts.

In the end, I simply love to teach. Despite all the work, effort, and time required to create a successful class, it is never less than immensely gratifying. Finding a balance between time for teaching and time for research is not always easy. Yet, my experience has been that, in practice, these two are rarely at odds. Research brings new ideas into the classroom, while teaching helps give these ideas a broader significance,