

## 1. My Approach to Teaching

*The question is not whether we should take sides, since we inevitably will, but rather whose side we are on.*

-- Howard S. Becker, *The Society for the Study of Social Problems Presidential Address, 1966*

### The Transformative Power of Education

In my journey from student to teaching professional, I had amazing teachers, professors, and mentors, who inspired me to critically examine my values and beliefs, question what I took for granted, and become an active member of the communities in which I was embedded. The most memorable teachers skillfully guided my learning rather than telling me what or how to think, and captivated me with their passion and enthusiasm for the subject matter. Through their dedication to teaching, they laid the foundation for my subsequent academic work, my dedication to lifelong knowledge building, and most importantly, my contributions to the learning of others. I would like my students to have an equally rewarding and transformative educational experience that I had the privilege to enjoy. To that end, as **Figure 1** summarizes, my approach to teaching rests on three core pillars: a pronounced social justice orientation, the use of experiential learning to facilitate student learning and promote community welfare, and a strong commitment to student success.

**Figure 1: My Approach to Teaching**



### Social Justice-Informed Teaching

My personal experience with poverty and my sociological research, which explores the social organization of service delivery to homeless families, combined with my volunteer work in the homeless sector fundamentally shaped my interest in the systemic causes and individual consequences of social inequalities and social exclusions. In addition, my work focuses on the intersection of dimensions of inequalities, such as social class, race and ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, disability, etc. In my teaching, I pair my sociological knowledge with a pronounced social justice orientation and I firmly believe in contributing to social change and community welfare through scholarship and teaching (Alexander 2005).

My teaching is informed by social justice practices, such as representing diverse voices and perspectives in assigned readings and lecture content, examining the complexities of historical and contemporary social inequalities and injustices, and emphasizing the institutional arrangements rather than individual effort and choices as the motor of social inequalities. A social justice orientation in teaching also recognizes that the dimensions of inequality we study in class permeate the classroom itself. University classrooms are shaped by the very institutionalized inequalities sociologists study and seek to ameliorate (Ingraham 1996). Ultimately, I am not only teaching sociology as an academic discipline, I use 'sociology as pedagogy,' and use sociological insights in my teaching and learning practices themselves (Halasz and Kaufman 2008).

I believe social justice-informed learning and corresponding skills development is important for two reasons. First, social justice-informed sociological teaching prepares students of all backgrounds for an increasingly diverse and global workforce so that they themselves can work in and contribute to the creation of inclusive and respectful work environments. Secondly, to the

extent that social justice-informed sociological teaching emphasises the complex forms, causes, and consequences of social stratification and patterned inequalities, students as citizens and future leaders in various societal institutions can become catalysts of social change in the communities in which they live, learn, and work. As I will discuss in detail in **Section 3**, through my teaching, I encourage my students to become active members of their community and contribute to the social changes they wish to see therein. In addition, my teaching equips students with the tools sociology has to offer so that they can become effective agents of social change (Ropers-Huilman 1999), which is a benefit to students, as well as the university community and society at large.

### Experiential Learning

As I will describe in detail in **Section 3**, one teaching practice I use consistently is experiential learning, which is a useful tool in social justice-informed teaching that facilitates successful, student-driven, and collaborative learning. Rather than conceptualizing learning as a transfer of information, from instructor to student, experiential learning encourages students to become active learners and build knowledge themselves under the guidance of their instructor. To that end, throughout the term, students engage in in-class exercises and simulations as well as semester-long learning activities that encourage students to build knowledge independently and collaboratively, and apply it in real-life situations inside and outside the classroom. For example, social justice teaching paired with experiential learning in my courses means that students actively engage with the community through service-based learning, a university-wide goal outlined in both the University of Calgary's *Eyes High Strategy* as well as the *Faculty of Arts Strategic Plan*.

In class, my students and I critically examine a variety of complex social problems through hands-on learning activities, go beyond popular understandings and discourses of these phenomena, and discuss alternate interpretations and explanations that consider the interplay of individual action and social context. Consistent with my social justice orientation, it is important to me that my teaching promotes values such as empathy, compassion, respect, tolerance, solidarity, and social responsibility. Sociology, as a discipline and experiential learning as a learning strategy are uniquely suited to foster the skills and values discussed above. How I prepare students for experiential learning in my courses, I will discuss in more detail in **Sections 4 and 5**.

### Dedication to Student Success

My third focus in teaching is dedication to facilitating student success, which can be measured in various ways. At a basic level, teaching is about providing students with important marketable skills and knowledge so they can successfully compete in an increasingly demanding employment market. However, I believe that teaching should not stop at providing employment-relevant basic skills and knowledge. Instead, through my teaching I want to contribute to my students' intellectual and personal growth by encouraging them to become self-confident, independent learners and realize their potential. I believe it is my responsibility to encourage students to learn and lead them through the process effectively; not by indoctrination or force, but by motivating them to think for themselves. I encourage students to understand learning as work in progress, as a lifelong process that does not wane at the end of a course, or upon graduation. I will discuss specific teaching and feedback strategies to accomplish that in **Section 6**.

One strategy I use is encouraging students to select their own research topics, and methods of inquiry. I guide students through the learning process by providing them with the necessary skills to gather, analyze and critically evaluate information, consider various points of view, and come to their own conclusions. In addition, I provide them with detailed feedback throughout the learning process, which focuses on the refinement of their technical skills and their learning process itself. This approach fosters students' independent communication, critical and analytical thinking, and decision-making skills; important assets to them and the communities in which they live and work.