

Teaching Responsibilities

Now starting my tenth year at Appalachian State University (ASU), I can honestly say that I have thoroughly enjoyed my experiences as an instructor and feel that I have truly honed my pedagogical skills. I also believe that having a 3-3 teaching load with multiple preps each semester has provided me many opportunities to have multiple teaching experiences. I have taught introductory and advanced courses, developed independent study courses and study abroad programs, as well as supervised student research projects and internships, which have allowed me to create a pedagogy that is engaging that encourages critical thinking and practical application.

As a specialist in social inequalities and research methods, I have prepared and taught 14 different courses, representing close to a third of the courses offered regularly by the Department of Sociology. These courses included introductory-level, discipline-specific, and writing-intensive courses for undergraduate and graduate students, including *Research Methods I and II* and *Senior Seminar*. My expertise in social inequality has led me to teach a number of courses including, *Sociology of War*, *Constructions of Gender, Race and Ethnicity*, and *Social Stratification*, which are often cross-listed or dual-listed courses enrolling undergraduate and graduate students across several disciplines.

In addition to on-campus teaching, I have been successful in developing five study abroad programs to Europe and Costa Rica. The summer programs based in Europe have created opportunities for undergraduate students to examine race relations, immigration, and the consequences of war, conflict, and peace processes within a global context. The Costa Rica program was a Spring Break program examining the coffee industry and migrant labor. My study abroad programs have been particularly rewarding because they have led to interdisciplinary work with several departments and students across the university including History, Languages, Literatures, and Cultures, and Supply Chain Management.

I have also had the privilege of conducting several independent studies that have focused on various issues facing racial and ethnic minorities. In addition, I directed four undergraduate Honor's theses and served as a secondary reader for five other theses. I have also served as a committee member for five Master's theses outside of my department. As the Internship Supervisor, I have also supervised over 80 undergraduate student internships required for Bachelor of Science sociology majors.

Beyond the classroom, I believe my service roles at ASU have been important in shaping my pedagogical views. For example, I have serviced in a number of roles to assist with the transitions into new iterations of our general education program. I have also served on college and university AP&P and assessment committees to assess our abilities to meet learning outcomes, as well as served on the Common Reading Committee to shape first-year student

academic experiences. I also have guest lectured at several other universities and other academic venues, teaching about pedagogical “tricks” teaching about race and racism or spreading more knowledge to folks outside of academia who wanted to learn more about the world around them.

Teaching Philosophy

In my experiences as a student throughout my life, the best teachers and mentors for me have been those who have ruffled my feathers and challenged my beliefs. More important, they encouraged me to think critically and to figure out ways to apply my knowledge to affect change. I have used this inspiration to foster a teaching philosophy that focuses on creating an engaging environment that encourages students to cultivate a hunger for critical thinking, open debate, and application of scientific tools to decipher and challenge the world around them.

Here at App State I have created several courses, study abroad programs, guided research projects, and service-learning opportunities that have pushed students to apply and synthesize principles of sociology into their already existing knowledge base. While I believe that many students already have a complex understanding of the world around them, it is my goal to broaden my students’ scopes of understanding and challenge them to analyze their surroundings from multiple perspectives that may align, or be in opposition, to their own. Though I do not want them to shed their own milieu, I do want them to build on their experiences with new and relevant information so they can affect change or apply it to their lives or careers.

To accomplish these objectives, I believe that it is important to provide: (1) an open and dynamic classroom culture, (2) a variety in teaching styles and assignments that challenge and encourage students to apply their knowledge, and (3) productive relationships with students and community members to encourage open debate and application. I describe these efforts below.

- 1) **Open and dynamic classroom culture.** As any teacher will attest, the classroom is a delicate orchestration of developing rapport, disseminating knowledge, and boosting skill acquisition that has to happen within a short amount of time. I also find that since my courses cover controversial or sensitive subjects like racism, immigration, domestic violence, and war that I have to create a welcoming but safe classroom for honest and informed discussions. To accomplish this, I deploy several techniques to make the classroom mentally and physically open to critical thought. This includes changing the seating arrangements to encourage discussions or arrange students into small discussion groups for larger classes. I also use relevant music, documentary clips, ice-breakers, and facilitated debates before diving into the day’s topics to get students warmed up and focused. I find humor expressed through *Youtube* clips and my own witty banter necessary to relax students but also keep them on their toes. I also give my students ownership over their learning environment by having students develop their own set of ground rules for discussions and classroom behavior (i.e., cell phone use, bathroom breaks) at the beginning of the semester.
- 2) **Varieties in teaching styles and assignments.** Because I have taught several different classes, I have found that I have to use different styles of delivery and innovative

assignments to help students grasp the concepts. Changing up my styles and assignments also gives students creative spaces to apply their knowledge. Thus, I have used a number of formats for my courses. Although it is almost inevitable that I rely on traditional lectures to deliver information to students, I find that sociology courses naturally provide space for discussion and debate. Therefore, I have styled many of my classes, even introductory courses with 200 students, to be in a seminar format. With this format, I have open but facilitated discussions with my students on various current events and concepts. I also provide in-class activities that allow small groups to wrangle abstract concepts. For example, in my larger introductory courses, while I use lectures more, I do schedule structured debates about policies to address poverty, immigration, and the impact of HB2 on college campuses so students can digest these intimidating subjects. Of course, the seminar format is extremely helpful for research and writing intensive courses where I have writing workshops, data analysis reviews, and peer-editing sessions to help students work their way through daunting tasks such as research papers or projects.

I have also used a number of short assignments, activities, or games to bring concepts to light for students. In my larger courses, I find that quick demonstrations using *Oreo* cookies or a game of *Monopoly* to represent wealth distribution in U.S. helps students grasp the notion that wealth is an important concept in understanding economic problems for families. I also find that using short writing assignments (an index card response or less than two pages) or creative projects such as documentaries and skits help students relate abstract concepts to current events. For instance, one concept all sociology students need to understand is what sociology does for its users. Therefore, I have asked students to use photographs, poetry, songs, or popular media to show me how the sociological perspective informs us on current event topics such as the Syrian war or Black Lives Matter. With these assignments, students get to be creative but also think critically about various topics they often fear talking about or even approaching with strangers.

Another style of delivery I use is community-engaged research, activist projects, and guest speakers. My students learn about the social problems of the world but cry out for ways to apply their knowledge and skills to create solutions. For many of the upper level courses, I require a combination of research and activism. For example, in my *Race and Ethnicity* course, students conduct in-depth interview research projects that ask participants about their attitudes towards race relations or compiling existing data to examine whether school segregation is still a problem in their home towns. Students also work in groups to develop an “activist project” in which they attempt to make communities aware of the impacts of racism in various settings. I also do this in my *Sociology of War* course to give students the chance to do service-learning projects focusing the life course events veterans face such as PTSD and homelessness. I also bring in guest speakers and experts on various subjects such as having American veterans discuss how the military service impacted their lives, representatives from the Southern Poverty Law Center discuss the rise of hate groups, and local non-profits have often discussed with my classes how they have combatted poverty in Watauga County.

In my senior capstone courses, I have included community-engaged scholarship as a way to engage students. Each semester I have taught this course, students had to develop either

individual or group research projects that addressed a social issue that existed in the immediate community. For instance, one class examined and created an assessment model for a non-profit groups working with veterans hoping to reduce conflict in the home after deployment. Other student groups have examined the issues of affordable housing for the Town of Boone and collected data for local law enforcement to assess whether there were youth gangs in the area. A recent community-based project was working with local economic-assistance programs to assess what barriers women faced in Avery and Watauga counties when attempting to become economically self-sufficient. This required the students to secure grant-funding from the ASU ACT office, locate and interview key informants and residents, collect and analyze statistical data, and present their findings to agencies and the community at-large. These projects showed students the linkages between their degree and how it could impact change. As one student wrote, “Now I know what to do with my degree and I get sociology and its importance.”

One final technique I have used and love is providing students with tangible and contextual applications of sociological material through study abroad programs. One of the major goals at ASU is to have students not only apply their knowledge but to understand the local-to-global connections. I have successfully led five study abroad programs to Western Europe (Belgium, France, Germany, Ireland, and Spain) and Costa Rica. My first program introduced students to how Europeans view race, ethnicity, and immigration. During this trip, students were able to meet with people and organizations who were currently working to address immigration issues in France and Germany. They also went to Jewish Holocaust museums and concentration camps and met survivors. Another program that I have successfully completed four times has focused on the social, economic, and political impacts of war in Europe. Working with an interdisciplinary team comprising of history, foreign languages, and sociology, we visited several locations, organizations, and museums to see how World War I, World War II, and the Cold War impacted Belgium, France, and Germany. Students also created interdisciplinary video documentaries on how Europeans commemorated warfare. As suggested in my program evaluations, students indicated that these programs “changed their lives” and provided a new global perspective. In 2013 and 2015, I also co-led study abroad program that examined religious and ethnic conflict in Ireland, Northern Ireland, and Spain. We examined the various peace processes and local resistance movements currently underway in these countries in relation to global issues of terrorism. In 2016, I partnered with the Department of Supply Chain Management to co-lead a Spring Break program to study the coffee industry in Costa Rica.

- 3) **Productive relationships.** I believe that being a good teacher requires developing productive relationships outside of the classroom. Working with students and community members is fundamental in me reaching my goal of fostering a passion for knowledge and application. As a sociologist who often works in communities who fear outsider intervention, I have learned that developing a relationship based on trust and mutual respect is pivotal. I also find this to be true with students want a teacher who is not only an “academic on high” but someone who can be trusted to mentor them throughout their academic and professional careers.

To encourage rapport and trust, I first see teaching as reciprocal. I believe that my students bring knowledge and experiences to the table and I view them as invaluable sources of information. I also have discovered myself soaking up my students' suggestions to develop more thought-provoking and contemporary arguments for topics that tend to be too dry, such as theory. On many occasions, students have helped me better understand topics by bringing in examples through music, movie clips, newspaper articles and even their own research.

Building this rapport has led to me working with a number of student and community members to do research or talk about local issues. As mentioned above, I've served on a number of thesis committees, as well as directed undergraduate and graduate research projects. I have also actively recruited students to assist me in my research endeavors on immigration. I have also worked with a number of faculty throughout this campus to examine various pedagogical challenges including writing within the discipline, creating and managing a new general education system, teaching students how to do qualitative research, as well as serving on college and university curriculum committees like Academic Policies and Procedures.

Finally, I have attempted to be available to the general public to present and teach within several venues outside the classroom including being a panelist from theatrical performances on racism and to local community members wanting to better understand poverty, immigration, the confederate flag, and racism in within the local community. Overall, I find the working with students and the community at-large rewarding and an extension of my teaching responsibilities.

Evaluating My Teaching Effectiveness and Setting Goals

Assessing my teaching strategies and finding ways to improve or adjust them are essential to my teaching philosophy. The evaluation of my teaching abilities is regularly assessed through student evaluations each semester and peer evaluations. I take these evaluations seriously and I explain my approaches to these in my "Evaluation of Teaching" document submitted.

However, I also do extra evaluations in my courses to monitor student comprehension and engagement. In many of my courses, I ask students to complete an anonymous mid-term evaluation so that I might correct any shortcomings early on in the course. I also conduct "feedback sessions" for students to explain to me how they received assignments and my teaching strategies, particularly in upper level courses where the seminar-style is most utilized. I have also started using online software tools such as *Polleverywhere.com*, that allows students to text in questions, comments, and concerns to me about the course or materials. Finally, I attend professional regional and national conferences and trainings to further my knowledge and expertise in the latest theoretical and empirical arguments within sociology. I also have attended several pedagogical workshops to learn the latest software used in the classroom (i.e., *Prezi*, *Moodle*, e-portfolios, online text polling, webinars/video lecturing).

My future teaching goals at ASU are to continue my work in bringing about awareness to important topics and making sure that my students see the link between their education and their futures. While I hope that my courses continue to do this, I know that there is always room for

improvement and more important, I have to find ways to keep myself engaged and in love with teaching. At present, I have four tasks I plan to execute to accomplish my goals.

First, I hope to combine my love of research and study abroad. My research specialty is studying Latino immigrants living and integrating into the American South. In recent years, I have found that Mexican immigrants living in western North Carolina face a unique set of hardships. While I have primarily done this research alone, I hope to include undergraduate students, providing them opportunities to do research at the undergraduate level. I also hope that I can secure external funding to take students abroad to learn about the lives Mexican migrant Christmas tree farmers face migrating to and from Mexico, following them back to their communities in Mexico. Recently, Dr. Timothy Smith and I received a small URC grant to fund a program that will hopefully make this come true.

Second, I would like to introduce new and innovative courses to the Department of Sociology and ASU. Since my specialties are in race relations and immigration, I would like to develop a course focusing primarily on immigration, refugees, and asylum seekers in a global context. This course would be great for students to get a sense of a growing population in America that many will likely encounter in their careers.

Third, I plan to continue to expand my teaching knowledge. One way I do this currently is taking Spanish language courses and hope to use this to help with my research and teaching efforts. I will also continue to enroll in teaching workshops about future pedagogies including the recent focus on mass education through online courses. I also plan on attending interdisciplinary forums to further investigate the links between sociology and health sciences.

Finally, I want to continue doing research on pedagogy. In 2013, I co-authored a research article in *Teaching Sociology* that examined whether using implicit bias as a teaching tool better helped students understand the continuing significance of race and racism in America. Through a collaboration with ASU's Fermentation Sciences, I also published an article with Dr. Seth Cohen on the pedagogy of teaching about brewing beer. At present, I have another pedagogical article under review focusing on who to effectively teach about controversial topics; namely, the confederate flag. |