Statement of Teaching Philosophy

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When I first became a graduate teaching assistant, I believed that teaching was all about the transference of facts from the expert instructor to the students. As I have progressed in my academic career, I have come to believe that education is an iterative and reflexive process that necessitates communication between instructor and students in order to identify goals and best approaches. This represents a shift from a ‘teaching philosophy’ to a ‘teaching and learning philosophy’ in which reciprocal learning, respect, and engagement between instructor and students is fundamental. There are several connective factors that I use in my efforts to reciprocally engage with students. These are 1) passion for the subject that I am able to incite in students 2) continuous dialogue between instructor and students for a student-led iterative learning process 3) matching of diverse and appropriate teaching methods to the course material and to student learning styles.

I believe communicating my passion for the topic at hand and the students’ mastery of it is absolutely fundamental to student’s learning. I have personally seen how being enthusiastic and caring can inspire students to interact and engage in knowledge creation. As a recitation section leader for Introduction to Sociology, I was in charge of two sections of 80 students each. These sections were part of the larger 500-student lecture. It is easy for students in this context to become disengaged – many of them were not particularly interested in sociology and were taking the class to fill a university requirement. However, I received very positive feedback from students regarding my enthusiasm and clear concern for each student’s learning. As a result, consistently engaging group discussions were a hallmark of these sections.

In my teaching, I encourage dialogue between the instructor and students throughout the semester to ensure that students’ needs are being met. In addition, I take steps to help students create dialogues with one another in order to create a learning environment that is as open and inclusive as possible. Students often learn not only from the instructor, but also from fellow students and from their own experiences. In particular, I am a proponent of learning through teaching others – this is something that aligns well with UW-M’s focus on student-directed learning as demonstrated by on-campus organizations such as the Peer Learning Association. Dialogue and teaching that occurs between students encourages them to think more expansively and critically about their world and our societies, effectively expanding on the instructor’s curriculum. To this end, I foster group discussion, respectful debates, and a friendly classroom based on acceptance of all viewpoints in order to encourage the expression of thoughts and ideas that may otherwise go unheard.

Passion and iterative discourse are important to any form of teaching, but there should also be awareness that every course is different and may require a different approach. I believe it is necessary to adapt one’s teaching techniques, as well as one’s materials and learning experiences, in ways that foster learning and engagement for different types of students and diverse classroom contexts. One technique I have used is to incorporate diverse and engaging in-class activities that excite different segments of students. For example, I have used in-class debates, creative arts presentations, lectures, actor-network diagramming, and film discussion groups to engage students with different interests and learning styles in the subject material. The care I take in choosing diverse activities that appeal to different kinds of students helps me reach out to students with different interests and skills in a large enrollment context.
In the future, I see my teaching philosophy expanding to incorporate community learning as an enhancement to my current focus on passion, discourse, and diverse teaching methods. For example, I would be interested in teaching a course on community food systems. This could incorporate a group project requiring creative thinking, collaborative research, presentations, and community engagement with a local food organization. A desired end product would be an evaluation and presentation by the students on how to improve the environmental and social sustainability of local food producers. This would work in tandem with a lecture format to stimulate different types of learners, encourage discourse between students and community members, and encourage passionate engagement through embedded learning experiences. This would also provide an opportunity to connect my research with my teaching agenda, as I could engage in both research projects and community/student learning within a single local food organization – a format that would play to the holistic nature of the teaching/learning/research relationship.

My experience and passion in environmental and agricultural sociology mean that I have a vested interest in teaching courses such as Environmental Sociology; Community, Environment, and Agriculture; Community Food Systems, etc. My degree in Sociology and training in mixed methods would also enable me to teach methodological and research design classes. I would also be interested in developing research design courses that have a special advanced focus in the context of community, environmental, and agricultural studies. This would give students the opportunity to apply their knowledge of social research within their degree specialization, perhaps incorporating a student-led and community-involved research project.