

My first time teaching was as an assistant, leading discussion sections under Pastor Larry Brown. This was in my MA program for geography, and as a newly minted teaching assistant leading a classroom, his advice to me was this: "the success of a lecture does not depend entirely on the lecturer." Over a decade later, I can't imagine another statement that so closely approaches a general truth about teaching. No matter how meticulously crafted a PowerPoint, or how on point I may be in presenting it, the work of lecturing is but one of many factors necessary to a successful class - and no single lecture supplants the work necessary for the success of an entire course.

Now when I approach teaching a course for the first time I work to create a mental map of the course's entire layout from beginning to end. It is a journey from one point of knowledge in the landscape to a new one, with significant landmarks and stops along the way. There is a set of directions for how to get there and, as with any journey, room built in to get lost or take alternative routes as necessary. My map has directions across the whole course, but also maps for navigating within each lesson and between lessons in the course. The key to success does not simply rest on the lecture, but in the structure of the class, the assignments the students do, and how I work to empower their discussions, whether they be on-ground or online in forums.

I think about teaching as a map because it is scalable: the whole course is mapped while each unit and each lesson are a map of something more focused. A course is not just a series of lectures, and students are not empty vessels of simply waiting to be filled with knowledge through a skillful presentation. Each course is a journey along which students acquire knowledge and skills, and each lesson a field trip to a site along the way. Knowledge is provided at each stop, where students are exposed to a new idea, method, or pieces of information. The skills they develop along the route are connected to the one before and the one after through the common threads those lesson share *on purpose, by design* that comes from having a big map for the whole course.

This has been true across the various settings in which I have taught. Each of these schools have their own student body milieu with varied needs and goals. At the community college and large private college, there were a lot of non-traditional students that brought varied life experiences to the classroom. I therefore encouraged them to share anecdotes about their life and to describe whether or not their experience supported or contradicted the week's lesson - always with an explanation of why. At the R-1 state university, I gear lessons towards the students' younger minds and their propensity for asking "why?" by sending that question out to them. Most of my classes at that school have been large lectures, and so this technique sometimes involves getting a few volunteers to participate but just as often I have students text in to a program that puts their responses on the projector screen.

One of my favorite assignments that exemplifies this mix is asking the student to create their own "ideal types" of some social phenomenon. This gives students the opportunity to pick a topic of their own interest, and begin to look at it systematically. In my Sociology of Sport class, for example, students create a typology

of “fans” from die-hards to fair-weatherers, which we then compare between different sports to compare and contrast.

I also use a mix of academic and non-academic sources both in teaching and in assignments. This is to ensure that students gain an understanding of their different uses and attributes. For example, in a typical long essay assignment, I will require that they use a mix of peer-reviewed and journalistic sources. This allows room for opinion as the “jumping off” point for their essay, but within the constraints of what research and data actually show. The goal in this is that by using each side by side they will be able to read non-academic sources with a more critical eye towards separating empirical truths about the world from other ways of knowing. It also allows room for students to find complexity within the world and their own view points - if they are presented with too heavy a hand they will reject said findings, so I have found it effective to ask them to make use of and reflect, rather than absorb, sociology.

My goal at the end of each class, then, is to have students come to their own conclusions. When I give the final few lectures, they should be asking questions as much as they are listening to a lecture. Those lectures are often about current events, for which I ask them to apply sociological concepts. For example, at the conclusion of my Research Methods class, I have them find an example of journalistic reporting on some piece of social science research and deconstruct it for what might have been left out in writing for general audience. As some students share their critiques of the reporting, others jump in to ask more questions about what might have been left out for a general audience but is vital to the nature of the study.

This philosophy may seem a bit positivist since I place such an emphasis on empirical observation, but my approach is hardly that. Rather, I want to acknowledge that while students come from a variety of backgrounds, and that their relative positions in society are frequently dictated by oppression and inequality of one form or another, they all stand to gain from questioning how they have come to understand the social world thus far in their lives. No means of teaching is “one size fits all,” and I don’t try to be that because success in the class isn’t simply meted out through the standard of the lectures that give a capital-T Truth.

Instead, I hand the students a map at the beginning of the semester, and say “we’re following this path.” If each lecture is a place of interest on that journey, and each assignment a new component for their vehicle, then some students will be more interested in some stops than others, and no one stop is vital to everybody. Rather it is being present for the journey as a whole that leads students to accomplish the goals I set out for them in my class. If I am successful, it is not solely for being an excellent orator or PowerPoint designer, but for making an easy to read map for the students to follow to their destination.

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