

Teaching Philosophy

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We share an understanding of teaching that, unsurprisingly, is built around collaboration: amongst colleagues and peers, between instructors and students, and amongst students themselves. Our coordination of experiential learning across the Sociology curriculum is successful, in part, because we largely share an approach to teaching that has an intentional goal of professional independence for students; incorporates a reflective understanding of knowledge; integrates theoretical knowledge and technical skill with personal experience; iterates these principles across a curriculum; and ultimately has students engage with statistics as a 'craft skill' and a professional practice. This framework reflects the model developed in the May 2006 Report to the Provost on Experiential Learning at Ryerson.

Intentionality - Our overall approach is to mentor students toward independence as researchers: observers, readers, interpreters, writers, and producers of knowledge. We conceptualize all of our teaching as collegial, if in a future or hypothetical sense. The aim of teaching is to see peers emerge out of students. Students' ability to surprise us with new and interesting ideas and approaches to complex issues is there from the start, and emerges as they develop confidence in us as teachers and themselves as researchers.

Reflection - One of the ways confidence is nurtured is through reflection within an experiential approach to learning. Our design for undergraduate courses in research methodology includes independent research, combining comprehensive observations and reading with interpretive nuance in writing the essay or report. In the classroom, we model reflexive approaches to research and prompt students to do the same throughout their projects. When students understand how 'scientific knowledge' is produced and validated, they are better able to understand and critically assess more of the material that they encounter.

Integration - In coordinating our teaching of statistics, we strive to bring potentially dry numbers and formulas to life by linking them to meaningful elements of students' lives. For example, in Noack's course, students investigate the effect of a having university degree on future wages, and in Moore's course, a more complex model is used to estimate the effect of having a social science degree, relative to other disciplines. We also strive to disrupt the 'truth' that many students perceive in quantitative or statistical reports by encouraging them to understand these facts as a cultural production.

Iteration - This approach needs sustained, iterative reinforcement-it must be instituted as a curriculum, not just a series of courses. Our teaching philosophy puts collaboration at the centre, even as we maintain responsibility and independence in our individual classrooms: this is not team teaching; this is integrated, sustained cooperation between two professors. The success of our approach is evident on a daily basis in that students often treat us as interchangeable, dropping in to ask the one a question if the other is not in the office at the time. We also encourage our students to collaborate with each other - again, this is not simply group work, but a more sustained form of peer mentoring, discussion, and sharing of ideas, advice and results.

Engagement - A key component of teaching the production of quantitative knowledge is conceiving of statistical analysis as a 'craft skill' that can only be learned through experience. Much as a student cannot become a good painter by reading a book about painting techniques; a student cannot become a good social statistician by reading a book about statistical techniques. In contrast to the idea of statistics as a mechanical practice, statistical modeling is treated as a nuanced, complex skill that is shaped by practical limitations and sociological ideas about how the world works. In our courses, students are actively engaged in the practice of creating knowledge, and thus they are motivated to learn and to succeed. The applied knowledge that students gain through this approach is not just practical, it is integral to what makes the knowledge gained truly sociological, in that students reflexively recognize their own power in continually creating and re-creating knowledge.

These five ideas inform our overall approach to teaching and the initiatives we have developed.

In our statistics classes, we provide Service Learning opportunities that allow students to link their learning of quantitative analysis to everyday experience and practical problems. Students build math and statistical confidence in their introductory course by teaching data management to primary school students in an inner-city school. Then, in an advanced statistics course, students conduct original data analysis by designing and analyzing multiple-regression results from Statistics Canada dataset, collaborating to meet the research needs of a community partner.

In further methodology courses, students learn the techniques of questionnaires by composing, testing, conducting and analyzing the results of a survey of their own design; Service Learning students do this, again, working to meet

the evaluation needs of a community program. In a capstone course, senior students have an opportunity to develop program evaluation skills by mentoring third-year students as consultants and knowledge brokers, providing workshops and reviewing reports-in-progress.

Finally, with the support of the Faculty of Arts, our Sociology Statistics Peer Mentor program provides another opportunity for experiential learning. In this pilot project, several senior students act as statistics peer mentors, scheduling drop-in time when junior students can get help, and assisting during the labs of the statistics courses.

Each of these Service Learning elements is ongoing, but together they have already become an integral part of the Sociology curriculum. For all students, experiential learning is enriched through collaborating on real life, real time decision-making and research-based problem solving. Altogether, this reflects our approach to the practice of arts and sciences as the production of knowledge, understood as a collective human effort that cannot be accomplished in isolation.