

Teaching Philosophy and Experience¹

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My goal in teaching is to engage students to become active thinkers who can critically evaluate theoretical arguments and use them to interpret real-life situations. By creating an interactive classroom experience, I seek to encourage students to question the implicit assumptions in theoretical claims or in empirical methods, and develop a coherent framework for evaluating others' work. In both my graduate and undergraduate courses, I challenge my students to go beyond textbook and lecture material, and bridge theoretical knowledge with empirical applications.

At the undergraduate level, I have taught a lecture course on economic sociology, [Soc 137: Money, Work and Social Life](#), and three junior tutorials on migration. Due to the different class sizes, I adopt different teaching styles in these courses, yet my emphasis on student-instructor interaction, and connecting theory to application remains the same. In the lecture course, I provide several examples from movies, newspaper articles and novels to illuminate some of the concepts that are at first difficult to grasp. In one lecture, for example, I show the first scene from the *Godfather*, where Bonasera asks Don Corleone to avenge the assailants of his daughter. In return, Don Corleone asks Bonasera to be "his friend." And he adds, "Some day, and that day may never come, I'll call upon you to do a service for me. But, until that day, accept this justice as a gift." This exchange is a perfect example of what sociologists mean by "social capital". Don Corleone does not receive immediate monetary payback, but gains social capital, that is, a potential resource that he can access in the future. Such resources, I then explain, are crucial to understanding various economic outcomes.

By using such concrete examples throughout the course, I seek to help students to better grasp the course material, and also to gain the habit of relating theoretical concepts to real-life situations. Students, so far, have responded very positively to this approach as reflected in the high ratings (4 or higher for the instructor) in the course evaluations and the high demand for the course. (In its first offering, 88 students entered a lottery for the 40 spots in the course. In the second offering, 225 students entered a lottery for the 60 spots. I eliminated the enrollment limit starting with the third offering. The number of students remained high, peaking at 122 in Spring 2014.)

Sociology majors, who usually make up about half of the class, presented me with the *George I. Kahrl Excellence in Teaching Award* in the spring of 2009. The most rewarding aspect of teaching this course, however, is to receive messages from students about the course years after they have graduated. An economics graduate, for example, wrote a few years ago: "I took [soc 137] when the class was first offered in the fall of 2008. It truly was one of my most favorite courses at Harvard and remains the most widely applicable class that I took over my four years there... I still notice things in my day-to-day life that bring me back to certain lecture topics." Students often send me

¹ This document is web-enabled and gives you access to all my syllabi.

references (movies, TV shows, books) that remind them of the theoretical concepts covered in the course, and I use some of these references to update my lectures.

In my first junior tutorial on migration, [Soc 98G: Understanding Latin American Migration Flows to the United States](#), I employ a slightly different strategy that exploits the small class size, but still encourages students to participate and apply course material to real-life issues. In our first meeting, for instance, I begin by asking each student to elaborate on the reasons that compel individuals to migrate from, say, Mexico to the United States. I then connect each student's answer to a theory of migration. This exercise makes students an active part of the learning process and allows them to understand how each theory applies to the case of Mexico-U.S. migration. The exercise also makes students realize that they can be part of the scholarly discourse on migration, and helps them overcome their initial concerns related to producing an original research paper for the course. A student's comment in the evaluation forms explains this process: "[The course] challenged me to do something that I didn't think I could do." Another student writes: "This class... will teach you a lot and boost your confidence in your ability to conduct sociological research and write academic research articles."

I have had an opportunity to revise this tutorial with the support of a Junior Faculty Synergy Semester Grant from the Weatherhead Center for International Affairs. This grant allowed me to dedicate a semester to my research project on Mexico-U.S. migration. I was then able to integrate the findings from this research into my course material, and thus, carry the excitement of my own explorations into the classroom setting. In the revised version of the junior tutorial ([Soc 98Ga: Understanding Mexican Migration Flows to the United States](#)), I gave students access to my own data set on Mexico-U.S. migration. Each student then used the data to answer their own research questions on migration. At the end of the course, the students gained experience in conducting research with real-life data and produced results with important implications related to migration to the United States. In Spring 2014, I have broadened the scope my junior tutorial to cover a wider range of issues related to migration, and to allow for a more eclectic combination of data and methods in student papers. The new course, [Soc 98Gc: Global Workers, Professionals & Entrepreneurs](#), has also been well received by the students, as evidenced by the high scores (4.75 or higher out of 5) in the evaluations.

I strongly believe that all undergraduates should have the opportunity to do empirical research. I have supervised four senior theses and two independent studies at Harvard. I have collaborated with undergraduate students on my research projects. I have also served as the Director of the Undergraduate Research Scholars Program at the Institute for Quantitative Social Science. The program gives undergraduates the opportunity to work on faculty-led research projects, and creates a research community through bi-weekly meetings, where students present their on-going work. In a few years, I have seen the program grow from a handful of students into a large and dynamic group. Most importantly, I have seen students' amazement as they learn about research, gain new skills and even a new perspective on their future careers. For some students, this experience has been life changing. Yvette Ramirez, a student who worked with me as part of this program in coding my interviews with Mexican migrants, for example, went

on to volunteer in migrant shelters on the Mexican border after graduation. Observing first-hand the psychological difficulties faced by migrants and their children, Yvette decided to study clinical psychology in graduate school with the goal of being able to help those migrants in the future.

My experience with graduate students at Harvard has been equally rewarding. I have taught two graduate-level courses. The first course, [Soc 310: Qualifying Paper Seminar](#), guides students through the preparation of a research paper and is required of second-year graduate students in sociology. The second course, [Soc 243: Economic Sociology](#), is elective, but attracts a diverse group of graduate students from sociology, psychology, and economics, as well as Harvard Business School and MIT Sloan School of Management. Both courses are interactive, and rely heavily on student-led discussions. Thus, in both courses, I work to create a collaborative environment, where students can learn from one another both in and outside the classroom. I also design the assignments to encourage collaboration, for example, by requiring students to comment on each other's research proposals in the qualifying paper seminar. These exercises teach students to incorporate (or respond to) feedback from others, and thus contribute to their scholarly development.

In addition to encouraging scholarly interactions, in my graduate-level courses, I aim to help students use the course material to develop or improve their own research projects. In the qualifying paper seminar, I make this goal explicit by requiring students to submit a progressively more detailed draft of their research paper each week. Similarly, in my economic sociology seminar, I ask students to write a final paper or proposal, applying the course material to their own research topic. This exercise, so far, has provided the impetus for a number of interesting projects, some of which are now in print. For example, a Ph.D. candidate in organizational behavior, who took the course in its Spring 2007-08 offering, wrote a proposal to study how implicit stereotypes relate to the formation of collaborative networks in a work setting. A paper based on this proposal recently appeared in a top sociology journal. Similarly, a Ph.D. candidate in psychology, who took the course in its Fall 2008-09 offering, proposed to study 'trust' in online social networks combining insights from psychology and sociology. She presented this work at an interdisciplinary conference and later decided to expand it into a dissertation.

In addition to teaching these courses, I have served on nine doctoral committees. I have also mentored several graduate student research papers. My approach in mentoring is to give students enough room to explore their ideas and be creative, while setting strict deadlines to monitor their progress. I usually hold weekly or bi-weekly meetings with each student. Before these meetings, students send me a report discussing their progress to date, on which I provide detailed, written feedback. Our meetings are then focused on discussing the next steps for the student's project. I find this process an efficient way of keeping students on their toes and speeding up their progress. The students must have found this process helpful too as they have nominated me for the GSC Everett Mendelsohn Excellence in Mentoring Award in 2013.

Other than these formal mentoring efforts, I have been collaborating with six graduate students on five separate research projects. In each project, the students involved are part of the whole research process, and thus, serve as co-authors rather than research assistants. This kind of collaboration increases students' motivation and contributes to their scholarly development. The collaboration also allows me to manage multiple projects at the same time.

In the future I am interested in expanding my repertoire of courses – particularly in developing courses on migration that might provide international experiences for students – traveling to sending and receiving societies, to border environments, and further developing links in my teaching between the theoretical and empirical research on migration and public policy issues. I hope to teach a course on this in the General Education program. I also hope to apply for funding to the David Rockefeller Center for International Affairs and the Weatherhead Center for International Affairs in order to give students some experience in Mexico (the setting of my research to date) and in Turkey and Europe (where my future work will focus).

I also would like to develop a course at the graduate level on new methods in the social sciences that bring new techniques such as agent-based modeling or data-driven machine learning to important questions of social inequality and social change. I hope to work with colleagues from the Statistics department and the SEAS in order to organize interdisciplinary guest lectures, and to open new paths for future collaborations.