Teaching Philosophy

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My approach to teaching comes from a few guiding principles. First, I want to make sure that time in the classroom is well spent, doing things that cannot easily be replicated outside of class. Related to this, I also carefully guard students' time and work to make it clear to them why they are asked to do what they do. Furthermore, as a social scientist, I believe in using scientific evidence to inform my teaching whenever possible. Philosophically, I aim to create an inclusive environment that works for students with different abilities, experiences, preferences, and backgrounds.

After teaching an online course for the first time, I realized how straightforward it would be to create a course that is almost totally automated: readings can be assigned, lectures recorded, quizzes and tests pre-programmed. Although this is far from the ideal model, and not the one I follow, the technological feasibility of courses without instructors helped to clarify my approach to teaching because it prompted me to ask what I can contribute to student learning beyond curating course content. When teaching in a face-to-face setting, I had to think beyond repeating similar lectures that in an online format would have been recorded a single time and reused in subsequent semesters.

One way in which I do this is by promoting active learning, one of the best-researched and supported teaching strategies (Freeman et al., 2014). Given the many activities that fall under this umbrella, I also find the active learning approach to be a way to create an inclusive learning environment since it allows for learning and assessment with different methods, accommodating students with varying skills and preferences. Indeed, there is evidence that it particularly benefits learners of diverse backgrounds, reducing achievement gaps (Haak, HilleRisLambers, Pitre, & Freeman, 2011; Marrone, Taylor, & Hammerle, 2018) without harming the highest-performing students.

The particular ways I use active learning strategies differ according to the course content and context, but I generally look to one of a small number of methods. Most straightforward is the instructor-led discussion format, which characterized almost all of the courses I took as an undergraduate. Of course, it is not always practical — some classes are too large and it does not transfer cleanly to the online context — and I have come to believe that the benefits to students are too unevenly distributed (e.g., to extroverts, senior students, native English speakers) for me to use it exclusively. I also make use of the "minute paper," typically at the beginning of a class period, in which students must write down the answer to a relatively straightforward question in a short period of time. This is to get students thinking about the material to start the class, incentivize preparation for the class, and give an alternate means for students to show their engagement. Expanding on this, I use versions of the "think–pair–share" strategy in which students develop an idea independently, then work in pairs or small groups on a task and then briefly present the gist of their discussion. To be clear, I present these not as my own innovations but rather examples of my use of established tools of our trade.

For a concrete example, in my Media and Terrorism course I devoted considerable time to the definition of "terrorism," which is a matter of considerable debate among experts and carries significant moral implications. During the semester, a man in Florida sent pipe bombs to a number of President Trump's political opponents, prompting a public debate about domestic terrorism and whether this was an instance of it. At the first class meeting after this story broke, I asked students to write down in a few sentences whether they felt the incidents were terrorism and to ground that determination in the definitions and criteria they had already learned. Next, they discussed their

answer with a partner, during which time they were free to make edits. After that, students shared their responses and reasoning while I took notes on the chalkboard to synthesize the answers and the rationale given until all students felt theirs were represented. In addition to prompting students to think more deeply through the problem than a lecture might have, the subsequent discussion of the responses allows for immediate feedback, which is one of the most effective learning methods (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). These activities also give me feedback as an instructor by showing what students know and giving me the opportunity to tailor the lesson to fill in gaps or expand upon areas of common interest.

I collected the written responses and used them as part of their participation assessment; students could satisfy the participation requirement via oral contributions to discussion *or* via thoughtful contributions in low stakes in-class assignments like this. This is one way in which I try to make my classes inclusive; students can rely on their strengths in either writing or speaking. More generally, I design my courses such that most of the grade comes from frequent, relatively low stakes assignments to allow students to develop and recover from mistakes. I always use multiple methods of assessment, with a mixture of short writing assignments, quizzes or exams with some multiple choice and some open response questions, and participation requirements that can be satisfied via in-class activities. Assessment is focused solely on whether the student has demonstrated they have learned material; for this reason, penalties for late work are mild and I almost invariably accommodate students who need extensions (Boucher, 2016). I conceptualize this as an inclusive policy because students from marginalized communities or with learning differences are far more likely to see their grades fall due to difficulties meeting deadlines rather than their ability to master the material.

My desire to make efficient and transparent use of my students' time is intertwined with these other goals. It is part of inclusive teaching because using too much of students' time, or being inflexible about when it is used, will disproportionately affect people with children, caring responsibilities, and other pressures outside of class. Using active learning methods ensures that the time in the classroom is uniquely valuable and could not have been replicated elsewhere. Transparency about the purpose of assigned work also helps to promote buy-in among students and clarity about the goals of the course. For example, I start each class period with an agenda (usually one or two bullet points) and the learning goals for the day (also typically one or two items) to reduce uncertainty about what we are doing and why. For assigned readings, I always include a "reading memo," which describes in a paragraph or two which parts of the reading(s) are essential, what can be skimmed if time is short, and what can be skipped entirely. I generally include other guidance in these memos, like which concepts may be difficult to understand and the extent to which I expect students to come to class with a full or partial understanding of them.

References

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