

CURTIS SMITH

Teaching Philosophy and Experience

My teaching philosophy is centered on inspiring students to realize the various frameworks that have constructed how they see the world and, also, how the social sciences can help them understand and develop their own perspectives of how they want the world to be. I prioritize the development of their own scientific inquiry by encouraging them to entertain multiple positions on topics while covering various theoretical perspectives of social issues, as social scientists do. I value the “funds of knowledge” theory that acknowledges students’ valuable backgrounds that often contribute greatly to class discussion and go beyond simple call-and-response-based lecture. I actively move around the room calling on students during class discussion to share their own ideas. I encourage student involvement, community engagement, and classroom discussion and debate. Using a combination of Socratic questioning and their input, I utilize discussion-based engagement allowing students to share their own personal experiences to hone their collective thoughts and ideas to direct discussion of formal topics covered in class. Research shows that students remember more when they are emotionally responsive to topics covered, so I design my courses so that learning is as immersive as possible relating to ideas beyond the classroom. I recently submitted a paper for publication that used student-researchers in a research methods course to study homelessness, which was facilitated in a project-based learning environment (available upon request).

Teaching has been a passion of mine since I was a substitute teacher during my undergraduate studies. I then gained valuable teaching experience in the College of Education at the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) before pursuing a Ph.D. There I attained a Texas Teaching Certificate while taking graduate courses in education for a year-and-a-half. I taught social studies for four years at Clarke Middle School, and was the recipient of a \$5,000 Texas Educators Excellence Grant award in 2011 for dramatically improving students’ scores on standardized tests. While teaching middle school, I pursued a Master’s degree in sociology at UTEP. I then gained further teaching experience as a teaching assistant where I was given an informal lead on a project that used over one hundred students to gather research data. I believe that the project’s focus on student-based research had the dual effect of offering methodological contributions to research while also providing hands-on experience in social-science research to students studying in this field.

I had the opportunity to bring my teaching experience to Utah State University (USU) as a doctoral student in the Department of Sociology, Social Work & Anthropology by teaching several courses, including Introductory Sociology, Social Problems, Social Inequality. I was honored to receive the departmental Graduate Instructor of the Year award for the past two years in the Department of Sociology, Social Work, & Anthropology at USU I was a finalist for the College of Humanities and Social Sciences Graduate Instructor of the Year award.

I have always found that designating freedom to students promotes the development of their own interests, thus engaging them as learners. For example, I introduce the concept of social stratification by explaining that simply by virtue of being students at a university they have privileges that are not available to others, such as access to online academic journals that will no longer be available to them for free once they leave college. A week before each test, I ask students to summarize an academic article of their own choice to immerse them into available

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information that they can seek out on their own, beyond the classroom. I encourage students to search for the topics that either reinforce their interests from class or promote looking further into a topic they may question or find counterintuitive. As such, each semester has evoked many additional reported interests and perspectives from students that inform how I teach topics in the future.

The most recent semester has been my most successful as a classroom instructor. Four students approached me after class about switching their major to sociology. I responded by taking them directly to the college Advising Office. Another three students communicated to me through email that they were switching to sociology after the semester ended. One student wrote: "I want to thank you, Curtis Smith, for not only teaching us Social Problems but how to live a better life...Searching Google Scholar made me want to look further into issues that were not discussed in class. I sought out answers to thoughts I had on my own time." Another student said, "In the beginning of the semester, I looked at most of the social issues from a conservative, blame the victim, point of view. I now realize that these issues are much more complex. I enjoyed identifying the lenses that I see out of so that I could take a step back and look at things in a new light."

I have personally sought out feedback from students midway through each semester via open-ended questions, such as "What do you like/dislike about the course?" and "How would you improve the way this course is taught?" Over time, this feedback has allowed me to see their difficulties and make improvements. For example, students reported feeling that they learn better in groups in a classroom setting but coordinating outside the classroom in groups was more difficult. I have since prioritized group work in the classroom by making two in-class group assignments combined with two in-depth individual assignments at home to accommodate their needs. I also take more time explaining why we do assignments, which provides justification rather than assuming they fully understand the reasoning for the lesson as I did in my first instructed course. While some instructors may see this as a waste of time, I see it as an investment to save time spent explaining later in the semester. If topics are explained thoroughly once, small conceptual reminders save valuable time in the long run.

The Department of Sociology, Social Work & Anthropology has regularly had me instruct undergraduates at USU, including four Social Problems classes with an average of 30 students, two upper division Social Inequality classes that averaged 40 students, and my current Intro course that has 85 students. The department head also recommended me to instruct a general enrollment course called *Connections* in 2016 and 2017, which is devoted to welcoming and introducing students to college life. It focuses on building social networks among students, faculty, and local resources to promote student retention and bolster morale and confidence. Regardless of the topic, my pedagogical goals are to assist students in thinking critically about the social world, encourage them to engage with and develop their own personal inquiry and research, and also to provide them with applicable skills that they can use long after they leave my classroom. I am committed to striving to improve my ability to do this throughout my teaching career.