

Annika Wilcox • Teaching Statement

The learning objectives that sociologists tend to focus their teaching on – such as ability to recognize the relationships between individuals and society, to make evidence-based arguments, to recognize inequalities in various domains of social life, and to question taken-for-granted assumptions – make the utility of sociology as part of a university education clear. By teaching students how to think outside the confines of individualism and meritocracy, and rather showing them how to take on a more collectively-oriented mindset, we help them to develop self-reflexivity and become greater contributors to society. Similarly, by teaching students the importance of evidence-based arguments, we encourage them to become stronger and more effective communicators.

Various teaching strategies facilitate students' abilities to meet these important sociological learning objectives. I personally use the “flipped classroom” form of class organization and employ active learning and inquiry guided learning in each class period in order to maximize my teaching effectiveness. My students participate in discussion and low-stakes, informal writing in each class period. Directed discussion, buzz groups, and think-pair-shares are some of my more favored discussion-based instructional techniques, while my writing-focused instructional techniques often include free-writes, concept mapping, and one-sentence summaries. I deliver student-centered lectures by asking students, at various points throughout my presentations, to answer questions and offer reflections on the materials presented. I similarly use a range of specific inquiry guided learning activities that ask students to play a role in the process of knowledge construction, drawing on existing resources (such as those available in TRAILS) in addition to creating my own inquiry guided learning activities.

Student-centered classes are extremely useful for helping students to recognize the validity of even the more controversial ideas in introductory sociology coursework. For example, some students are inclined to dismiss a sociological perspective on the “American Dream” because it contradicts their socialization. In teaching students about the limits of the ideologies feeding the “American Dream,” I utilize data drawn from the Pew Research Center. I show students graphs depicting the common buy-in to meritocratic and individualistic ideologies in the U.S. alongside graphs illustrating that most people also tend to recognize social inequalities here. I ask students to interpret these graphs. Then, I ask them to make sense of (and also explore) their findings: How might you explain this contradiction? What are the social consequences of adherence to meritocratic ideologies? Students recognize that such ideologies normalize and justify inequalities and serve to divide individuals (which offers an opportunity for me to tie Conflict Theory back into class discussion). This point, made memorable by graphical evidence, is revisited and reinforced throughout the following course lessons on class, race, and gender inequalities.

Students are quite receptive to my student-centered teaching strategies. In my Fall 2018 course evaluations, I received a mean score of 4.2/5 on the survey item “Overall, this course was excellent” and a mean score of 4.5/5 on the survey item “This course improved my knowledge of the subject.” Similarly, I received a mean score of 4.3/5 on the survey item “The instructor’s teaching aligned with the course learning objectives.” In their qualitative evaluations, students pointed out how useful they found class discussions and activities, especially for enhancing their ability to apply and analyze the course materials.

In the future, I look forward to reaching a wider student audience and further incorporating my research concerns into my courses. I will continue to make use of my knowledge of diversity ideology and diversity initiatives in order to encourage my future students to become reflexive, impartial, and collaborative thinkers.