

Writing Tips

Use vivid language but use words with emotional connotations sparingly. It is better to convey passion through evidence than through literally saying words like “passion.” While we recommend writing in the first person pronoun, try not to overuse “I”, and keep the focus of your description on what your students are doing and learning in the classroom.

This example is excerpted from a teaching statement by Tahseen Shams, who received a PhD in 2018. Dr. Shams is now an Assistant Professor at the University of Toronto.

I find teaching, both as a process of learning and the passing on of knowledge, extremely challenging, and yet, equally rewarding. As a teacher, I want to impart to my students the same sense of wonder I felt years ago when I first read C. Wright Mills' *The Sociological Imagination*. My approach to teaching, thus, is to nurture students so they can think critically about how larger social processes shape their personal experiences and of those around them. I encourage my students to identify social problems and scientifically pursue their intellectual curiosities, providing them support to develop those interests along the way.

In the classroom, I constantly strive to understand my students' personal life experiences so that I can present class materials in ways that would make sociology relevant to their lives. My class discussions incorporate a combination of classical and contemporary theoretical literatures as well as the personal views students bring with them to the classroom. For example, as a teaching assistant affiliated with UCLA's Academic Advancement Program, I helped teach "Introduction to Cultural Geography," a course in which many of the students were children of immigrants, racial minorities, and first-generation college students. I was responsible for two discussion sections (each with 20 students and held twice a week), for which I created a syllabus, gave lectures on readings not covered by the main instructor (roughly half), facilitated discussions, held office hours, and graded all materials turned in by students. The readings reviewed in section included selected works of numerous social scientists including Karl Marx, Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, Erving Goffman, and Clifford Geertz. Some of my guiding questions to encourage students to engage critically with the readings were: "What is the main argument of the text?," "Do you agree or disagree, and why?," "How does the text apply to real-life situations?"

In one of the class discussions, students were assigned to read Erving Goffman, Clifford Geertz, Denis Cosgrove, and Doreen Massey under the overarching themes of place, interactions, and meaning-making. Going around the room, I found that the students, many of whom were beginning to see the world sociologically for the first time, struggled to grasp how the abstract notions of time, space, and place shaped individuals' interactions on the ground or how the assigned readings could relate to everyday life. I asked my students to describe the classroom setting including where and how they were located in it. Based on their descriptions, I explained the Goffmanian concepts of props, performance, and presentation of self as based on context. I then asked the students to share how they think their experiences and interactions within the same classroom could be different from each other based on gender, race, class, and generation of college education. Taking the classroom as a microcosm of the larger society, the students were engaged to think about how social norms, power dynamics, and historical precedence shaped these interactions. I found this strategy of asking students and combining their narratives with scholarly discourses to be an effective way to convey the ways in which social science is useful in viewing the world. At the end of each class, I asked my students to write and submit a self-reflection piece incorporating the readings and examples from outside the assigned texts. These in-class submissions were an excellent reflection of the students' performance as they captured each student's grasp of the material and their ability to apply sociological concepts to their own lives. Nothing gave me greater joy to learn at the end of the course that a handful of my students changed their majors to sociology, having been inspired by our class discussions to learn more about the discipline.

What indicators best reflect students' growth? How do you assess learning, and how does this approach fit with your teaching philosophy?

Introduce your central teaching philosophy – How do you approach teaching and learning in the classroom?

Give concrete examples as evidence. These examples can include classroom interactions, realizations, lesson plans, challenges, and even lessons you have learned from mistakes.

Present a glimpse into your classroom. This example describes how challenging materials were approached in a creative way.