

## Teaching Philosophy

### What is the point of this?

As outlined in Brookfield (2015) one core feature of a skillful teacher is a critical and reflective stance towards own teaching practices. In the light of constant developments in education research, but also with respect to technological developments and societal change, such reflection is an ongoing process. Societal and technological change force a constant re-evaluation of teaching principles and methods in a changing world. In particular, Reoi (2012) outlines the importance of students' socialisation for learning, i.e. the way students are raised, the values they have, the teaching methods and styles they experience in school and the technology they are exposed to - not just in educational contexts, but in their life. In my opinion, a constant reflection of own teaching practices is necessary simply because students and the world around them change. Furthermore, I change as well, both as a researcher and as a teacher who draws on previous experiences.

Generally, I am inspired by a wise person who recently told me, "whenever one stops trying to become better, one stops being good" (My Dad 2017). Despite having been awarded the President's Award for Teaching Excellence this year, I feel the need to reflect and challenge my own teaching practices and entertain different conceptions of learning that I am not familiar with. Such curiosity not only motivates my own learning, but also the way I teach and what I teach. In fact, transmitting my curiosity and activating students' own curiosity in the world around them is my ultimate goal, which goes far beyond specific course curricular or specific learning outcomes.

For many of my students, I am one of the first university instructors they are exposed to. Hence, I feel responsible to not only provide an excellent learning environment, but also to guide my students in how to approach university life in general, which is quite different

from school. I want to inspire my students in ways that go far beyond my own courses and encourage them to believe in themselves, work hard and achieve their goals, not just at the university, but also in life more generally (see for example <http://bit.ly/2qjOfZK>). Considering the potential impact that educators can have on students' lives, it seems appropriate to ground my teaching on a solid foundation, which includes beliefs, philosophy and principles.

### **Why do we care about students?**

Hagopian (2013) observes that students questioning the content of a course and asking “why do we have to know this?” is absolutely legitimate. I believe that students need to be made aware of the rationale behind a course, but also, more generally, about the wider relevance of course material and how it helps them to become good sociologists and acquire transferrable skills and get good jobs and be successful in life. In this context, Brookfield (2015) mentions the “authoritative ally” as a role-model instructor, who is seen by students as somebody who works with them (and not against them) to achieve the learning outcomes. Positioning the instructor as a fair “companion” (see Sibi 2010) opens channels for communication between the learner and the instructor and motivates students to follow the instructor on an educational journey. Such student-buy-in is essential for the application of further teaching concepts.

In my courses, I aim to achieve this role-model relationship with students through extreme transparency with regards to course structure, content and assessment. By *being challenging, but being fair*, I design my courses in such a way that (in theory) every student can perform well. Communicating this clearly to my students has an empowering effect on all students when they realise that working for my courses is rewarded and pays. Pure talent, in my opinion, is overrated and by communicating this to my students, I manage to get less as well as highly talented students motivated because they (correctly) understand that they can do well in my class.

At the same time, students need clear structure, guidance and substantive competence. I believe that it is far more beneficial to have students use their time efficiently instead of wasting their (and my time) by letting them get lost while figuring out what the expectations are and what they actually have to do in my course. I attempt to give crystal-clear instructions to my students, but also be crystal-clear in whatever I say.

Furthermore, I hold myself to my own standards and deliberately expose myself by video-recording all lectures and by making them available to my students. Besides other benefits that I see with this practice (see further below), it clearly communicates to my students that I am “working with them”. In addition, it forces me to be knowledgeable and prepare course material extremely well, simply because “nobody wants to look stupid on tape” (My Mom 2017). But most importantly, my general rules are to *not teach anything when I cannot give a convincing argument why it is important* and *not to teach anything that I find boring* myself. Following these rules not only makes me a better and more motivated instructor, but also more convincing and authentic in the eyes of students, which is an essential component of Brookfield’s (2015) “authorative ally” metaphor.

The critical awareness of own teaching practices is tightly linked with the need to understand how students experience teaching. Different strategies, such as evidence based teaching (Buskist and Groccia 2011), classroom response systems (Bruff 2009) or classroom assessment techniques have been proposed in this regard. Underlying differential student experiences is the awareness that students are vastly different to begin with. There are different types of learners with different cognitive abilities, different backgrounds and educational histories. An educator needs to be aware of these differences and adjust accordingly. Csíkszentmihályi (1996) identifies “flows” as psychological states that people experience when they engage in activities that both challenge them, but which are also appropriate to their own skill level. Such “flows” have been associated with deep learning and high levels of personal and work satisfaction. Applied to university settings, students need to be challenged, but only in “fair” and “manageable” ways. Asking students to complete unrealistic tasks can lead to demotivation and demolition of the “authorative ally” relationship. Furthermore, it affects

students' self-awareness, which is particularly problematic for weaker students. Accepting that students are different, one of my main challenges in teaching is creating such "flows" for all students and making sure that not just the bad students or the good students improve, but both of them at the same time. Similarly, students during their first year at the university need to be treated differently than students in their second, third or fourth year. Learning occurs on all levels and a good instructor is not only aware of different levels of learners, but also *enables students on all levels to improve and become better than they thought they could ever be.*

For me it is incredibly rewarding to see how my students understand complicated issues and get excited about the social world. Seeing that spark in their eyes when they understand how something works is extremely motivating for me. Obviously, I am challenging my students every day, but they challenge me too, keep me on my toes and make me become a better version of myself.

### **What is this based on?**

My conception of learning somewhat resonates with cognitivism, which argues that the learner is an information processor. From a cognitive perspective, it is essential how information is received, how information is processed and organized into existing schema and how information is retrieved upon recall (Cooper 1993; Mandler 2002). While being cognisant of behaviorism (Skinner 1974), where behavior is seen as shaped by positive or negative reinforcements, I believe that students learn through active processing that changes the way they think and ultimately the way they act. Students are (generally) rational beings that require active participation in order to learn. At later stages of students' university career, I believe that a constructivist approach towards teaching can be useful as well. This perspective emphasizes that students construct and create their own subjective representation of objective reality. While remaining somewhat skeptical towards constructivism per se, I believe that a firm and solid foundation of knowledge is needed before constructing subjective perspectives is helpful.

My own sociological research stands in the tradition of Analytical Sociology (Hedstrom and Bearman 2009), which explicitly deals with the question how we make sociological explanations and what kind of sociological explanations we should be striving for. Outlined in Hedstrom (2006) it stresses the importance of clarity and precision when making an explanation and stands in stark contrast with some sociological traditions, which use overly complicated language to make simple points or to mask explanatory deficiencies. Furthermore, Analytical Sociology favours a generative approach and puts emphasis on “how” social phenomena come about. I am attempting to apply these substantive principles also in the way I teach. For example, I banned overly complicated (and pretentious) language from my classrooms and am appealing to students’ intuition when presenting course material. I partly achieve this through visually appealing lecture materials because I believe that students learn through visual stimuli and that a clear and aesthetically pleasing presentation and structure helps students to engage. I emphasize the structure of my own presentation with repeated visual cues. Hence, I do apply notions of behaviorism, but only in relation to course structure.

### **Why technology rocks (seriously)?**

Acknowledging technological developments (but also my tech-savvy student audience), most of my teaching sessions start with a movie trailer that I create. The trailer reflects the content of the lecture that is to follow. Besides being funny (and somewhat original), it creates an anchor point for each session which helps students when revising course material and when producing mental maps. Similarly, for one of my modules I produced a summary video in response to my students’ request to summarize “everything” in the last lecture before the exam. I produced and showed this video <http://bit.ly/2oC5IcN>, which not only rebuttals, but also creates a sense of achievement in students concerning all the material they successfully covered in a term. As already mentioned, I also video-record all my lectures and make these videos available to students (see <http://bit.ly/2nT58Jk> or <http://bit.ly/2oRgwDj>). Interestingly, research on the usefulness of

lecture-capturing remains limited to date. My intention with this practice is manifold. First, nowadays it's not finding and getting access to knowledge that is crucial anymore, but rather to make sense of all the knowledge that is readily available. I much rather have my students take their time to comprehend and understand the course content than having them use their time to hunt down course materials. Second, providing video-recordings of each lecture adds to general transparency. Third, there are no excuses anymore. All material is there and even if students miss a session, the material is readily available for them to revise.

Other technological developments assist in creating so-called "flipped" classrooms. A "flipped" or inverted classroom refers to an instructional strategy, where "events that have traditionally taken place inside the classroom now take place outside the classroom and vice versa" (Lage, Platt and Treglia 2000, p. 32). It deliberately adopts a learner-centered model in which class time explores topics in greater depth, while students conduct other learning activities, such as watching videos or reading research articles outside the classroom in advance of the class time. The theoretical foundations of such flipped classrooms are found in a large body of literature on student-centered learning. Furthermore, it has been suggested that the combination of flipped classrooms with educational developments, such as videos and clickers is beneficial. In all my courses, students have to prepare a short reading in advance. By doing so, they engage with material already before the teaching session starts. A mini-survey at the beginning of a teaching session provides live-feedback and allows me to see if students comprehend the reading or if I need to explain something in more detail (for more information on clickers see Bruff 2009). Whereas clickers used to be cumbersome and often impractical, nowadays, most of my students have a smartphone, tablet or computer with them all time. Instead of competing with these devices for the attention of students, I make active use of them in my lectures through <http://www.mentimeter.com/>, which allows live-surveys (e.g. <http://bit.ly/2nBqYif>). Such mini-surveys with one or two questions at the beginning of my lectures allow me to adjust my teaching "just-in-time".

In 2002, Pelling coined the term “gamification”, which refers to the application of game-like user interfaces, elements and experiences to make transactions in non-game settings enjoyable. The general idea behind “gamification” is that the more something feels like a fun game, the more likely users are to embrace it. While gamification is gaining ground in business, corporate management and wellness initiatives, its application to education is still an emerging trend (see for an overview Dicheva et al. 2015). Different game concepts and elements have been proposed to be useful in educational settings to motivate students. Leveraging the playful engagement with content may be a powerful tool and lead to intrinsic learning. Furthermore, some of the benefits of gamification include possibilities for instant feedback, progress indicators, student ownership, scaffolding learning with increasing challenges and the creation of a more relaxed atmosphere in which failure is encouraged and regarded as an essential component for further improvement. Despite research on “gamification” in higher education still being at its infancy, my own experiences with it in large classrooms are overwhelmingly positive. For example, I use <http://www.kahoot.it/> to review the contents of my courses together with students in game-show format (for a recent example see <http://bit.ly/2oCd9B0>). Students use their smartphones to answer questions under time pressure and receive points. The game-show format of the review session provides a relaxed and fun environment in which students can objectively assess their own learning progress in a safe and non-consequential manner and receive instant feedback. At the same time, it also provides instant feedback to me as an instructor, which allows the further clarification and explanation of concepts if needed. More generally, the benefits of “gamification” have been widely documented. Notwithstanding these benefits, educators should be very careful in the way game components are used. A major challenge, in my opinion, is to remain credible and content-focused.

The underlying question of such “infotainment” is, should we aspire to entertain our students? And I think, yes, for a very simple reason. When I do not like to talk about boring stuff myself, how can I expect my students to listen to boring stuff? It’s a simple fact that we are best and most inspiring when we talk about something that we love and are excited about ourselves. I think students really pick up on that. As a university instructor, it is my

job to provide the best education that a student can possibly get. And entertainment is one way of getting my students to engage with the course material and study hard. Entertainment by itself is useless, but as a tool to get my students excited and intrinsically motivated about the subject at hand it is extremely powerful.

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My Dad (2017). I think I deleted the internet – No, you did not, otherwise we wouldn't be speaking over Skype. *Skype Call*.



My Mom (2017). Can you explain to me again how these emojis work? 😊😊😊.  
*WhatsApp Chat.*

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