

## Teaching Philosophy of Aaron M. McCright

Today's citizens must be able to realize the stakes of increasingly complex policy issues, understand interrelated bodies of knowledge, and deliberate in public settings to promote the public good. Also, employers desire more than just knowledgeable workers; they want people who can learn new techniques and information quickly and solve emergent problems. My goal is to teach young adults to become lifelong learners through fulfilling educational experiences, which help them sharpen their critical thinking, analytical reasoning, and problem solving skills. Such experiences empower students, facilitating their enlightened involvement in public decision-making and their successful participation in our increasingly global labor force.

I teach by leading students out of their comfort zones, where they are more likely to have deep learning experiences. I expose students to what Max Weber called "inconvenient facts"—social facts contrary to conventional wisdom and prevailing ideology. Topics such as structural inequality, power disparities, and unintended consequences are usually foreign to most students. Sociological theories, concepts, and methods designed to help us better explain and understand social structures and processes often challenge many students' pre-existing worldviews. I navigate this terrain by creating a classroom setting that closely approximates what Jürgen Habermas terms an "unconstrained discourse setting," where the best ideas, arguments, and evidence—and not power differences among individuals—carry the day. I prompt my students to critique the reliability and validity of various bodies of evidence for different arguments about social forces and processes all around them. By doing this, my students learn the importance of marshalling high-quality evidence for their logically structured arguments.

I employ a few specific strategies to help students learn effectively. First, *I try to utilize the best teaching practices from the scholarship of teaching and learning.* I employ active learning techniques to facilitate student investment in and ownership of the course. Students show up each day knowing that they will *do* something (if not a few things) relevant to the assigned reading/topic. I prefer various styles of collaborative learning, ranging from basic work between pairs of students (e.g., think-pair-share) to short-term small group assignments (e.g., creation of a visual model) to more complex collective activities (e.g., week-long simulations). My primary teaching goal for the next few years is to develop an effective inquiry-based learning component in my upper-level social science classes that (1) provides students with hands-on learning experiences about real-world issues outside of the classroom and (2) helps students examine relationships between natural sciences and social sciences in ways that improve their general scientific and quantitative literacy.

Second, *I employ a student-centered model and accommodate diverse learning styles.* From the outset, I stress that a course is "ours" and not "mine," and I tell students I see them as collaborators in the learning process. I believe students will significantly invest themselves in a course if you give them multiple, diverse opportunities to become engaged—and especially if you give students a real role to play in defining these opportunities. To optimize student ownership of a course, I diversify our class activities (e.g., interactive lecture, student discussion leaders, simulations, short videos, field trips, etc.) to accommodate different learning styles. Also, I regularly have my students help design many of their assignments, whether they are group projects or essay exams. I believe that students sometimes can learn just as much when asked to write and defend intriguing essay questions than they can when eventually answering them. After all, knowing which questions to ask and how to ask them is a skill that will serve them well as a lifelong learner. Overall, I set high expectations, maintain rigorous standards, and give students ample opportunities to perform to the best of their abilities. I pay particular attention to the personal growth and skills development of my students over each semester.

Third, *I model the behavior I expect from my students.* I carefully organize an intellectually engaging course and prepare daily for each class with a level of enthusiasm and energy I hope my students display. On the first few days of class, I demonstrate my commitment to student-centered learning by having the students first discuss and then establish the standards for class participation we will use throughout the semester. Not only does this transparent discussion help raise their behavioral expectations, it also shows my students my honest desire to focus on their needs and skills development. I also demonstrate to my students that I am a lifelong learner. I find this works best when one of my students asks me a conceptual or empirical question I cannot answer. After acknowledging I do not know the answer, I engage my students in a brief discussion about how we might go about answering the question. Not only does this allow for a brief discussion of research methods, but I believe it also helps students see that learning is a lifelong process—as they witness their instructor enthusiastically working to learn more.

I evaluate the effectiveness of my teaching methods in four ways. First, I regularly evaluate myself through self-reflection, thinking critically about the extent to which I accomplish my teaching objectives. Second, I seek constructive, anonymous, mid-semester feedback from my students about how course activities are affecting their learning. I then typically revise key parts of the remainder of the course in response to the most robust themes. Third, I have benefited via informal and formal feedback from my faculty peers. We analyze specific course activities (e.g., what is working, what is not working so well, and why) and longer-term trends in our courses on an almost daily basis. I find it quite beneficial to draw upon the pedagogical expertise of my colleagues, and I believe that my teaching has improved considerably in no small measure to their input. Finally, I have recently begun to evaluate and modify my teaching strategies based on my increasing understanding of the scholarship on teaching and learning. In the next few years, I expect to contribute to this literature with my own pedagogical research.