Teaching Philosophy – Renee M. Shelby

My ideal classroom is an open space where students with different experience and from diverse backgrounds are urged to think critically, clarify their thoughts, and challenge their assumptions and beliefs. No matter which course I teach, I strive to create an enriching and stimulating environment that serves the personal and academic needs of my students. A key strength of sociology is that it encourages us to ask meaningful questions about our world. This includes analyzing patterns in social life, elements of social change, and the causes and consequences of human action. Ensuring that students not only understand this strength, but also have the opportunity to actively engage and apply it, is central in my classroom.

I balance lectures with a solid theoretical grounding, current empirical data, and personalize issues by providing relevant examples from everyday life. I carefully design my syllabi, readings and assignments, and lesson plans so that students develop the knowledge and skills necessary to ask meaningful questions about their social world, and are also given ample space to do so. My teaching philosophy is grounded in the following pedagogical principles:

- **Emphasis on critical thinking and writing:** In our lower-division courses, a number of students enroll having never challenged the status quo. Learning to adopt a critical sociological perspective allows students to interrogate the “taken-for-granted” and think differently about everyday phenomenon, including media, the government, prisons, and food systems. Helping students to think critically and theoretically is not only vital to their academic growth, but also necessary in creating citizens capable of making and sustaining positive social change. By using in-class exercises that require students to argue from a different perspective, analyze structural factors, or problem-solve social issues, students can get beyond rote memorization and into the realm of critical thinking.

- **Illuminating an intersectional perspective:** We all navigate raced, gendered, and classed dimensions of social life. I strive to illuminate how these dimensions shape behavior, opportunities, constraints, and taken-for-granted phenomenon. In each topic covered, I incorporate an analysis of intersectionality and encourage students to think about how identity and location shapes their own experience. With this, I go beyond simply tagging intersectionality
on to topics covered, and aim to expose how race, class, and gender function covertly and overtly in daily life.

• **Active classroom learning**: Paolo Freire asserts, “If the structure does not permit dialogue the structure must be changed.” By structuring my lectures around the broader goal of active learning, I incorporate a variety of learning activities and maintain a high level of student involvement. I strive to create a collaborative learning environment, in which throughout the course, students engage in guided discussion, are challenged with low stakes “thought exercises,” and have the opportunity to apply sociological theories to everyday life. In one particular exercise, students bring in lyrics to their favorite songs about deviance. We then deconstruct the songs’ message, including how the lyrics normalize or demonize particular behaviors, and use sociological theory to analyze the type of deviance presented. Students thoroughly enjoy this exercise, as they are able to see the relevance of sociology to their own lives, and actively see how culture shapes norms and beliefs.

• **Applied sociological exercises**: The adage, “the one doing the work is the one learning” is not lost in my courses. Using theories and methods, students conduct actual sociological research. In one exercise, students conduct a content analysis, comparing the presentation of gender in men’s and women’s magazines, and then analyze their findings using gender theory. Before the assignment, students often express skepticism in the level of gendered images they expect to find, but afterwards are shocked at the subtle and overt ways magazines perpetuate gender norms and standards of beauty. In another exercise, students analyze a song or poem dealing with race and deconstruct how race interacts with class, gender, sexuality, or other sociological topic. By allowing students freedom in selecting their own “data” their analysis is much more engaged and passionate. By repeatedly conducting applied exercises such as these, students become more critical and adept at using their sociological imaginations.

In sum, my pedagogical strategies are dedicated to fostering creative, critical thinking using dynamic and diverse methods. No matter the class, I aim to construct a memorable and insightful course that students are excited to engage in and will remember long after the semester is over.