

Teaching Reflections Spring 2020

Soci 100B

What a semester. Things were going well; the students wrote their second midterm on Wednesday, March 11th and then on Friday the 13th for large lecture classes were suspended and on Monday the 16th the university was closed. In 5 days, the world changed. At the time, I was lecturing on Religion and the next class was going to review some work I did in graduate school looking into a local church. When classes were cancelled, I considered videotaping myself reviewing the research but I have to be honest, I did not want to. Trust me, I am not lazy nor intimidated by, or uncomfortable with, taping myself but I realized more than ever how much of my teaching relies on my “delivery” of the material. Yes, I post lecture notes, yes, I record and post MP3 recordings of all my lectures, but I am convinced that my presentation of the material is as much about my performance as it is about the concepts. Some might say that makes me an “actor” and while I understand that comment, it only gets to a part of what I am able to achieve with my students. My students this year, and every year, comment on enjoying my lectures but they also highlight how that by being engaged by my lectures that they are able to see the world in a different way. For me, sociology is more than concepts, theories and methodologies and is instead a perspective that allows sociologists to transcend the simple and obvious and revel (no pun intended) in the complex and the hidden. I have worked hard over the last 30 years to polish my lectures so that there are moments of humour but also spaces where students can sit back, relax, and see beyond the words I am saying and experience the larger point I am making (e.g., for students in my class, remember me making an *ss of myself when I put on all the makeup? The point was not only to make you laugh, but to help you see beyond the eye-liner and high-heels, and into the oppressive world that gender plays in contemporary society). However, I do appreciate that my approach does not work for every student, no teacher can connect with everyone, but I believe that many students, over the years, appreciate that what might seem simple (i.e., my “stories”) are, upon reflection, an intentional and practiced approach to convey deeply sociological insights.

My students remain frustrated by what some suggest are “unclear” grading criteria. While I agree that there is some variation between TAs (and that is something I agree with and will try to improve) I am not sure what else I can do to support students on their exams:

- questions (with grading rubrics) are sent to students at least 10 days before the test;
- I post an MP3 of what I am looking for (including when I talked about the topic in class or where it is located in the text);
- TAs review the question rubrics in tutorials the week before the exam;
- I made a video (posted to course website, “On How to Get an A”);
- I post previous graded exams on Ravelli.ca; and,
- I review many exams personally, as well as watch grade distributions across all TAs and make adjustments if/when there are statistically significant variations.

However, student frustrations are valid and I need to continue working on better ways for students to understand what we are looking for in our grading.

Soci 438

This year the students worked hard and completed all their community projects (this is incredible given the pandemic happened right when many students were trying to pull the final pieces of their projects together). Some things I need to work on over my sabbatical are:

- I enjoyed the class discussions but have to figure out how to ensure students do their readings even when they are not the “Lead” or the “Discussant” for that week. Perhaps have students provide a 1-page summary of the article at the beginning of class (for grading)?;
- Students complained that there were elements of the course that they were asked to do and were not given credit for (e.g., weekly readings, TCPS training);
- Some students (only 5 completed the Course Evaluation - COVID) suggested there was unclear grading criteria, and I agree this was/is a valid criticism. Some students were frustrated with their scores on the personal reflections – I need to provide more direction/support on what this writing actually looks like

(although I did provide support materials describing what reflective/reflexive writing is) but some students obviously figured it out as there were a number of 100% scores – I just don't know how to "teach" what reflexive writing looks like that doesn't make the assignment a simple "cut & paste" and therefore completely miss the point of the assignment;

- I do have to review the list of community partners as they vary greatly in their focus and ability to support the students. Over the next year I will contact each partner, as well as seek new ones, to ensure they offer more consistent support;
- Students enjoyed the guest-speakers but there was too much overlap and inconsistency in the presentations;
- With the move to make the class a full-year course I will have lots more time to work with students on their projects as well as the community partners; and,
- I felt so badly that we were not able to end the semester in a way I could help celebrate the students' work and the fact many of them were graduating. This was not fair and they deserved to have a better conclusion to their degree.

Lots to work on but all things considered, we all made the best of a very difficult time for all of us. As always, my thanks to all my students and my hardworking TAs.

/Bruce