

## Teaching Statement

Ana Velitchkova

I have taught a graduate course on the Sociology of Citizenship and undergraduate courses on Research Methods, Global Studies, Global Sociology of Discontent, European Studies, Introductory Sociology, Social Problems, Introduction to International Studies, and a number of French, Spanish, and English language courses. I have also led a Senior/Honors Thesis Seminar. In the future, I am interested in developing a course on the Sociology of Violence, addressing different types of violence and the connections between them. I have supervised student research at the undergraduate and at the graduate level on a variety of topics, employing multiple methods, using or discussing multiple languages, and covering multiple regions.

My main objectives as a teacher are 1) to sensitize students to important social issues, 2) to help them understand and evaluate existing theories offering explanations for and approaches to analyzing these issues, and 3) to give students the tools needed to test their own approaches to addressing social issues that matter to them. Relatedly, I also aim at aiding students in developing a sociological lens through which they can see the interconnectedness among people at various social scales as well as appreciate the effects of social processes and institutions.

I see teaching as an interactive art form that aims not only at transmitting knowledge but also at shaping a person's ability to think critically and to become a good citizen. Teaching involves continuous skill accumulation and attunement. After over a decade and a half of practicing this art and relying on pedagogical research to support my teaching, I find principles that work well are a) encouraging autonomy, b) combining theory, practice, and storytelling, c) emphasizing multiple perspectives, d) creating an inclusive classroom, e) providing support, and f) transforming conflict and tension into learning opportunities. My teaching methods, based on these principles, were recognized early on with an Outstanding Graduate Student Teaching Award from the University of Notre Dame. I have continued to hone my teaching skills by developing pedagogical syllabi for all my courses. Pedagogical syllabi allow me to maintain a toolkit of effective teaching tools while continuously adding and testing new ones.

It is crucial to involve students in their own learning regardless of their level. I do this in two ways. First, I provide students with opportunities to engage in research through which they partake in the power of collecting evidence in the advancement of an argument. In my introductory courses, for example, I sensitize students to inequalities by instructing them how to interview members of minority groups different from their own about their experiences of race and/or ethnicity and how to survey women, men, and non-binary persons about the daily steps the interviewee takes to stay safe. Second, I develop open-ended assignments through which students can examine issues of interest to them. In all my courses, I guide students through the research process, from reviewing the literature and asking questions to collecting and interpreting evidence, while working on topics of their choosing.

My teaching brings together abstract concepts, theorizing, and empirical investigation and draws any practical implications. I also use storytelling as a tool to illustrate difficult concepts, theories, and empirical patterns. In my methods courses, for example, I introduce the research process through inviting students to develop plans for achieving a personal goal. I use these concrete student-generated practical examples to discuss abstract concepts, such as variables, measurement, theory, causality, data, and inference. I tell students the story of a friend who is an

accountant and who used a similar spreadsheet goal-setting method to find love. Students laugh. The story further personalizes and demystifies the research process.

I show students the value of considering multiple perspectives in a number of ways. First, I expose students to diverse theoretical approaches through the theoretical material I provide and through encouraging them to consider different explanations in their own research. Second, I invite students to conduct research by applying multiple methods and to reflect on the strengths and limitations of each method. Third, I expose students to a variety of experiences. One effective experiential approach is the use of simulations mirroring the interactions of multiple stakeholders. In a global studies course, for example, I ask students to research the positions of several stakeholders in an ongoing conflict (e.g., government, capitalists, or discontent citizens) or debate (e.g., scholars attending a conference). Students present each position and debate one another. In the debriefing, students are surprised at how the experience challenges some of their preconceived notions and forces them to examine unexpected angles of the issues at stake.

In order to make my teaching more inclusive, first, I expose any hidden rules of the curriculum and make them explicit. This allows first-generation students, students from disadvantaged educational backgrounds, and students from diverse cultural backgrounds to understand what it takes to succeed academically. Second, for upper-level courses, I attempt to even the playing field by breaking down complex assignments into manageable intermediate steps and I guide each student through completion of those steps. Third, I encourage minority voices. For example, during an activity designed to sensitize students to connections between their values and social institutions, a student admitted she valued money. The class responded with disapproval. I pointed out that, whether we like it or not, money plays a central role in our society. This intervention prompted a discussion on inequality and capitalism. The student, a minority woman and first-generation college student, wrote to me: "I have seen so much improvement in just these last two weeks in my ability to talk in class. You make the environment so welcoming."

To provide additional support to students, I schedule individual meetings (for small classes) or group meetings (for large classes) outside class time. Students may be uncomfortable coming to office hours or may not even be aware of the benefits of talking to their professors. Being available for meeting students helps allay some of their worries. Showing availability and interest also helps with establishing personal rapport and with motivating students to identify and pursue their unique learning goals.

Sociological discussions often involve controversial matters. To manage conflict and tension in the classroom, I use the "Ouch!" rule. If participants feel an overwhelming emotional reaction during a discussion, they can say "Ouch!" Then, we stop our discussion and talk about why the "Ouch!" rule was invoked. Spelling out which norms are violated and which stakeholders are affected helps diffuse tensions while simultaneously creating meaningful learning moments.

Teachers recognize the value of resilient teaching. The pandemic has highlighted its importance to an extreme degree. Our profession asks us to constantly learn, adapt, and help our students through technological changes and through social upheavals. I have tried my best to live up to this tall order.