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TEACHING STATEMENT

My approach to teaching centers on the long-term value of active learning. In organizing my classes, I try to view students not as empty vessels that need to be filled with information, but as agents capable of taking an active role in the learning process. Research on student development strongly supports the idea that an active approach to learning is essential. “The theory . . . *students learn by becoming involved*,” writes Alexander Astin, “seems to explain most of the empirical knowledge gained over the years about environmental influences on student development” (*Achieving Educational Excellence*, 1985). According to Charles Bonwell and James Eison, “Analysis of the research literature . . . suggests that students must do more than just listen: They must read, write, discuss, or be engaged in solving problems” (*Active Learning: Creating Excitement in the Classroom*, 1991).

In every class I teach, therefore, I seek to involve students as much as possible in their own learning. Even in my introductory sociology courses, which typically enroll 35 students, I have tried to develop a strategy for having discussion-based classes. A couple of years ago, with the support of a grant from the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Program at the University of Notre Dame, I conducted an empirical evaluation of my approach, and the results of that evaluation were published recently in *Teaching Sociology* under the title, “Course Preparation Assignments: A Strategy for Creating Discussion-Based Courses” (see material on the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Materials). Course preparation assignments are a vehicle to ensure that students read and think about the course material prior to attending class so that class time can be devoted to more substantively engaging activities grounded in guided discussion. My assessment found that the use of these assignments to create a discussion-based course was a great success, allowing me to foster student engagement with the course material by spending the majority of class time coordinating, facilitating, and leading discussions, rather than constantly lecturing at the students.

When the fourth edition of David Newman’s textbook, *Sociology: Exploring the Architecture of Everyday Life*, was in development in 2001, Pine Forge Press asked me to overhaul the instructor’s manual. I was happy to do so and to take the opportunity to incorporate some active learning exercises into the manual. In my edition, the manual provides typical resources such as multiple choice exam questions, but it also includes class exercises and discussion questions, literary and visual resources, classic and exemplary sociological studies, and web resources. (A link to the instructor’s manual is available on my portfolio website under the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning.)

My favorite part of the instructor’s manual, though, is what I called “Exercising the Sociological Imagination.” For every chapter of the textbook, I provide ways for

instructors to get students to engage the material more actively and deeply, sometimes having them utilize the World Wide Web. For example, students can be asked to do the following to better understand the “social construction of reality” by the media:

Compare the analyses of the media by watchdog groups Fairness and Accuracy in Media (FAIR) [<http://www.aim.org>] and Accuracy in Media (AIM) [<http://www.fair.org>]. Is the media “biased”? In what way? Which organization’s analysis of the media is “true”? Sociologically, is it possible for the media *not* to be biased? What are the implications of this for understanding the social construction of knowledge?

There are certainly structural constraints on incorporating active learning into classes (e.g., other demands on the teacher’s and students’ time, class size). To think otherwise would be un-sociological. But I believe the benefits of active learning warrant the effort and I continually try to modify my teaching practices to make them embody more and more this approach.