

Center for Excellence
in Teaching



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REFLECTIVE PORTFOLIO

1. Define your teaching philosophy.

My teaching philosophy centers on the expression, enactment, and assessment of student-oriented goals for learning. As an instructor of undergraduate students in sociology at FIT, I am aware that most of the students I teach aim for careers outside of academia and in non-sociology related professions (although knowledge of sociological concepts and theories is always useful – regardless of the fields students enter upon graduation). Accordingly, my student goals are fourfold:

Goal 1. introduce students to core sociological concepts and perspectives;

Goal 2. teach students the logic and application of sociological research and analysis – particularly how qualitative and quantitative methods provide new insights into matters they already care about;

Goal 3. show students how to effectively communicate ideas and findings from sociological research and analysis to diverse audiences;

Goal 4. and cultivate appreciation of the relevance of sociological thinking to their future careers.

To achieve these student goals a single pedagogical approach cannot adequately convey the layered complexity of the social and digital world we are living in. Therefore, I apply sociological theories, concepts, and methodologies to randomly selected global case studies (since students attend FIT from all over the world) and use visuals, discussion, lecture, and technology to make these cases studies relevant to students' life experiences.

When teaching sociology, I have three rules. **Rule 1:** teach through a prism because there is no universal truth. The social environments people experience as they live their lives shape their belief systems and behaviors. As people experience life, these environments change and – oftentimes – so do people's perspectives of the world. Therefore, I believe it is important

to teach sociology through a prism and show students that an essential part of critical thinking is having an open mind. There exists an assumption that looking at social issues from various perspectives means acceptance of practices one ideologically disagrees with. By teaching sociology through a prism hopefully students realize that objectivity does not equal ideological acceptance. Part of sociological analysis is figuring out the various perspectives people in different societies hold on social issues. **Rule 2:** life can be random despite sociological theories and methods trying to fit social life neatly into structured and rational categories. Therefore, it is important that students can apply sociological analysis to everyday life and random events – to “life as it happens.” Lastly, rule 3 applies to my own growth as educator and is the reason why I participated in the Teaching with Tech Certificate Program. **Rule 3:** enthusiasm for and knowledge of the topic one is teaching needs to be combined with an active research agenda and **training in the latest technological and pedagogical tools.** I strongly support the inclusion of the latest technologies in the classroom and as part of the curriculum. With the emergence of the digital sociology field and widespread digitalization of information and availability of digital information technologies, students need to become familiar with the latest (digital) sociological methods to analyze data. If not, they will fail to understand the fundamental influence of digitalization and with-it globalization on human interaction and on society. This is particularly relevant during unexpected times such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. Have you ever observed a master teacher? If the answer is yes, what do you recall most from the experience?

Before I entered graduate school – the University of Southern California in the 2000s – I had no intention to enter a teaching-centered career. I considered myself too shy to stand in front of a classroom (it was my intention to become a researcher and teach on the side only). In my second year, all graduate students were encouraged to apply for a Teaching Assistantship and work with a seasoned instructor to gain teaching experience. I had the good fortune to assist one of the best instructors I ever worked with. Equipped with a down-to-earth personality, genuine love for sociology, and kindness to her students – no comedy routine, fancy technology, or funny videos – she delivered dynamic and engaging two-hour lectures. She gave me the advice that being shy is perfectly fine as long as (1) I am myself in the classroom – foreign accent and corny jokes included – and (2) show a genuine passion for sociology and (3) kindness to the students. Thus far, she has proven to be right.

3. Give an example of your most successful lesson. Why do you feel it was successful?

My most successful class ended recently – during the COVID-19 pandemic. I have been teaching SS379 Sociology of the Digital Era since 2012. In SS379 we discuss how digitalization, technological convergence, and digital technology such as the internet, mobile phones, and social media impact society at large and everyday life specifically. Within sociology, these discussions are mostly theoretical, e.g., when it comes to the impact of A.I. or 4G or 5G

networks on digital divides or mediated communication on emotional presence and socialization (as we are only in the early stages of the social media and social network era and cannot yet measure the long term sociological effects). We started the semester like every other semester – with a discussion of theoretical foundations – and went remote in mid-March.

The students and I were able to relate the course work to the transition from life in the “offline” digital society to life in the “online” digital society to life in the “post-online” digital society. We applied sociological theories discussed in the first part of the semester – when things were still academic – to our life in the “online” digital society – when we were forced to learn, work, shop, and socialize remotely. Discussions about digital divides that seemed theoretical in late-January and early-February became real in mid-March and April as some of us were faced with slow internet and Wi-Fi connections and lack of privacy because of cramped living conditions with roommates or relatives. We were able to understand what “online discourses of hate and xenophobia” looked like as anti-China sentiment spread in online forums during the COVID-19 pandemic. We also began to understand Sherry Turkle’s notion of “Connected, but alone” as we stayed in touched with friends through online games and other digital devices, yet were not able to “truly” emotionally connect to our closest loved ones who were dispersed all over the world.

As the world slowly returned to a “new normal,” we also were able to reflect on the transition from “remote” to “semi-remote” and wonder whether work, shopping, learning, or socializing would ever return to “normal” now the full potential of digital technology had been exposed (and “dystopian” views of digital technology had taken a backseat) during the COVID-19 lockdown. At the end of the Spring 2020 semester, the students and I concluded that COVID-19 is devastating and taking and teaching SS379 pre, during, and post the COVID-19 lockdown a surreal and fascinating academic experience.

4. Do you have an example of an unsuccessful lesson? How did you address the challenges?

In my first year at FIT, I was not yet committed to the four student goals discussed in the beginning of my reflective portfolio. I approached my first class thinking I had to present all the lecture material I had prepared for that day. Because of this inflexibility, it became a long, dry, boring, and one-dimensional learning experience for the students and me. The next class, I made sure to be much more flexible and varied in the teaching methods I used.

5/6. Why are you introducing and/or expanding the use of technology into your teaching? How do you feel these technology innovations will affect the student experience? How do you think it will affect your experience?

This is also related to rule 3 which is mentioned in “Define your teaching philosophy”:
enthusiasm for and knowledge of the topic one is teaching needs to be combined with an active research agenda **and training in the latest technological and pedagogical tools** (especially as I

teach courses in digital sociology and digital criminology). I have always used instructional technology in the courses I teach, such as uploading materials to Blackboard or using the internet to supplement class discussions or in analysis of sociological case studies. However, with ongoing advances in instructional technology, there are many more technologies I can incorporate. To continue my growth as an educator, enrich my teaching and increase my teaching effectiveness, and give students a more dynamic and updated learning experience, I regularly take courses in instructional technology such as the one offered by the CET.

7/8. Please describe new teaching ideas you plan to implement because of this technology certificate program. How will these new technology tools/approaches contribute to your classroom practice?

While I upload PowerPoint lectures to or open extra credit assignment drop-boxes in Blackboard, I rarely make use of Blackboard's other services for the face-to-face classes I teach (under the assumption that these are reserved for online classes only). However, after participating in the Teaching with Tech Certificate Program, I will reconsider that assumption. Number four of my student goals (see "Define your teaching philosophy") is also one of the hardest to achieve: **cultivate appreciation of the relevance of sociological thinking to their future careers**. Once students leave the classroom, they move on to other FIT- and work-related activities. It is all too easy to leave sociological thinking behind once a textbook is closed and the PowerPoint projector is switched off. One way to maintain students' engagement in sociological thinking beyond the FIT classroom might be within the online realm – with creative activities using Padlet, online music-related exercises, or Pecha Kucha sessions. I found the pedagogical creative potential of Padlet particularly inspirational! Lastly, I intend to use VoiceThread for some PowerPoint lectures uploaded to Blackboard for face-to-face classes, for example, to clarify tables, graphics, or visuals used to support sociological theories. It might be helpful for students who are reluctant to reach out or who do not have time to visit during office hours and ask for additional clarification.

9. What do you consider to be the bigger picture items regarding technology and learning?

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, we have all come to realize the importance of and pedagogical possibilities inherent in online learning and digital and mobile convergence technologies. As a sociologist who teaches courses examining the digital society, digital crime, and global culture industries, I believe that digital and mobile convergence technologies and the internet are no longer separate structures from but inherent (and thus foundational) to societies – both on the micro and macro levels of everyday life. As such, I believe that online pedagogy should be acknowledged as having equal value to (and in certain instances more than equal value to) face-to-face instruction. I hope that we will reach a nearby future in which online pedagogy is not considered an emergency option during pandemics only or a "for profit"

option for “non-traditional” students, but understood and embraced **as a pedagogically effective option for all students at all times**. At the same time, the digital divide is real and has a significant impact on students’ quality of learning. To create a truly equitable learning experience, it also is important that technological inequalities are address when it comes to technology and learning – this also is part of the bigger picture items regarding technology and learning.