

## TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

**Indeterminacy:** My style of teaching comes first from Wesleyan, where I was once a faculty brat, and John Cage's notion of indeterminacy. When I stand in a classroom, I aim to have things go not as I would expect. This is about taking risks. My students take risks every time they speak in class, read a difficult text, or write a complex paper. Since I expect and demand that they take risks, I am under moral obligation to take some as well, and I do so by embracing the indeterminate. This approach is not about refusing to put in the necessary preparation for teaching a course. Instead, it is about programming into a class moments that are un-programmed.

I structure my courses so that my students and I confront surprises. When I taught *Social Problems*, I asked the students to read *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. Unsure how the students would take the book or how I would use it, I worked with a faculty member to write an exercise that developed Agee's observations about "the altar" in the Gudger house: the fireplace mantel in the parents' bedroom on which sat, carefully arranged, the Gudger family's prized possessions. I asked students to bring in a small object about which they had once cared, but which they were now willing to relinquish. I asked them each to place their object, without speaking, on a square piece of foam board I had put on the floor in the center of the room. The students carefully made their placements, and without my directing them to do so, positioned their objects at right angles to one another and with buffer space between. The exercise opened the door for three fascinating discussions: one about how people use material objects to make statements about who they are and what they care about, one about unwritten rules, and a third in which the students described why the object they had chosen to bring mattered to them. When a senior football player in the class—who had recently been passed up by the NFL—described the rubber band he had worn to every game in his college career, the class audibly gasped.

Indeterminacy arises when you teach outside of the fields and subfields in which you wrote your qualifying exam and dissertation. At Indiana, our department was adamant that its graduate students receive broad theoretical, methodological, and substantive training. The faculty members' role in the department was to teach us to teach anything. After I left Indiana, I benefited from having received that style of graduate education, since the life of an adjunct forced me to teach topics that were new to me. Teaching *Sociology of the Family* was probably the biggest stretch in my life as adjunct and, hence, also the most rewarding. When I came to Trinity, I assumed even more risks when I had to develop a teaching repertoire aimed to help students find Census and macroeconomic data and to teach faculty how to download data from ICPSR and use software packages like SPSS, Stata, and Atlast.ti.

At Trinity, I have embraced indeterminacy by co-teaching. I recently taught a class with Dan Lloyd, chair of the Philosophy Department. On Dan's suggestion, we titled the course *Invisible Cities*. All Dan and I knew when we agreed to teach the class was that we would base it loosely on Italo Calvino's poetic novel and that it would involve students working with social-science data and

thinking about Hartford. As the class progressed, it became about data visualization and using Google map mash-up technology, only months old at the time. Although we prepared endlessly for this class both the summer before the semester began and during the week leading up to each class meeting, the class was a hallmark of indeterminacy. Our reading list was composed of books that both Dan and I had suggested; while half the books were new to me, half were new to Dan. Class discussions were wild. Although I went as far as printing an agenda so that Dan and I would have some sense of who would cover what, we both threw curve balls at one another, teasing each other with tangents and winking as the other was forced to respond. The students enjoyed our banter and were more likely to jump in with their own thoughts when they knew the day's agenda was not entirely decided.

A good number of the Trinity faculty members with whom I work teach courses with a “Community Learning Initiative” or “CLI” component. *Invisible Cities* was one. CLI courses never go the way you plan, and this waywardness has nothing to do with faulty preparation. CLI courses require that faculty and students work with non-academic organizations that operate on their own (not-semester-bound) schedules and must respond to legislative mandates and political constituencies. Work with such organizations can quickly go awry; the syllabus requires second and third lives, class sessions are rescheduled at new times and places, project deadlines slip and slide and sometimes even persist through winter and summer breaks. CLI courses are rewarding (and devastating) to teach for exactly these reasons. The faculty member puts herself on the line, embracing the premise that the class will not work perfectly, nor should it. Of course, CLI courses—and their counterparts at other schools—can serve as vehicles for the performance of public sociology. And the risks involved in doing public sociology are ones I look forward to watching my students and myself assume.

**Silence:** I have worked at multiple writing centers. But Indiana's Center taught me how difficult it is to read a paper, know why it reads badly and how to fix it, and *not* say “do this and all will be well.” The mantra of Indiana's Center is that telling students “the answers” to their imperfect papers does not teach them how to write. The tutor's job is not to fix a student's paper. Instead, the role of the tutor is to use the paper as a vehicle to get the student talking about writing. The idea: a student becomes a better writer when forced to reflect on what and how he writes. Such forced reflection requires that the student speak and the tutor remain silent.

When I teach, I remain silent in many ways. I welcome students to speak in class, instead of me. I ask that they question my own interpretation of readings and ideas and offer up their own. I also remain silent in how I approach the practice of reading for a course. Some students are quick to give up on readings they do not immediately understand. They do not know that it is normal and acceptable not to understand everything you read the first time. Part of good reading, I tell them, involves marking passages that are opaque, that invite further muddling-through. I take seriously the lesson I learned from my *Modern Political Philosophy* professor at Washington and Lee

and from what I have learned as a sociologist analyzing qualitative data: all texts contain two levels of discourse. There is what is said, and there is the “between-the-lines” dialogue that we must laboriously identify, unpack and interpret. Philosophers often write consciously in this dual form: what they say is not as important as how what they say forces the reader to “realize” an argument. Texts that force readers to think are not easy to read. My role as a teacher, then, is not to “teach.” Instead of explaining away every reading, I must hold my tongue and let students do the work. Whether those students arrive at a certain “right” conclusion about Thorstein Veblen is less important than that they tackle him, pull out their hair as they suffer through this tackling, and plaster the margins of his text with question marks.

I also remain quiet by not teaching. Instead, I watch others teach. This is something I first learned to do in my department at Indiana, a department where graduate students often observed the classes taught by their fellow graduate students. The idea was that good teachers do not operate in isolation, but consistently renew their teaching perspective by watching others teach. When I began working at Trinity, I began to attend classes across six social-science departments. I did this to gauge how I could serve Trinity faculty in my role as the data coordinator, but I also wanted to see more faculty members teach. I wanted to absorb their pedagogical practices and disciplinary enthusiasm and use what I had absorbed to further develop my own teaching style. The experience has been crucial to my growth as teacher. I plan to continue observing classes wherever I go.

I have learned new ways to remain silent by working at Trinity, where faculty encourage students to conduct independent research projects and then present their work to those outside of their field. Trinity has a strong tradition of end-of-the-semester poster presentations; the end of the semester has become my favorite time of year. I love watching students (and not just students in the social sciences) describe their projects to me. The skill to translate one’s disciplinary-bound work into laypersons’ terms is crucial. I hope to develop it in my own students.

**Honesty:** What I have described is not specific to teaching sociology. It is simply about teaching. What discipline or sub-discipline I teach is hardly at issue. An anthropologist I know once described for his students what he thought anthropological theory to be: ways of organizing one’s attention. This is very much how I think about teaching sociology. I do not aim to train my students to go to graduate school in my discipline; few will anyway and few should. Instead, I use sociology as a way to organize my students’ attention, to have them see the world in a few ways that they may have not seen it before. This all sounds a bit trite. But I am enough of a romantic to be enticed by William Arrowsmith’s decades-old characterization of the ideal relationship between college faculty members and students. Of faculty members, he argued, “It is because they have seen *something* that they can talk to those who may have seen less, but who want to see more.”<sup>1</sup> I do

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<sup>1</sup> William Arrowsmith, “The Shame of the Graduate Schools: A Plea for a New American Scholar,” *Harper’s Magazine* 232, no. 1390.

not argue to have seen a lot. I have been teaching college-aged students since I was twenty-three, and I learned early on the dangers of presenting myself as a sage before I have become one. But I have probably seen through the lens of a sociologist more than the average student I encounter. And so that is how I approach my students: as someone who has seen a little more—by virtue of age, accumulated experience, and some formal training—and wants to talk about what she has seen.