

TO OUR OWN SELVES BE TRUE: TEACHING STRATEGIES FOR THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

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The Two Epiphanies of College Life

The first sociology course I ever took as a sociology major in college was a class on the Sociology of Religion. It was taught by Fr. John Doherty, a Jesuit sociologist, now deceased, rest in peace. Midway through the course, I got an epiphany. I discovered that God did not make man (and woman and L and G and B and T) but that man (and woman and L and G and B and T) made God. It was a liberating epiphany! If people like us made God, it follows that we are free to shape the divine anyway we want -- or choose *not* to shape a divine at all. This realization was also empowering for it meant that religion, or faith if you wish, was not something handed down to us for obligatory spiritual consumption, but something we ourselves have to fashion out of our wits and resources - if we choose to do so.

Then, in college history classes, I learned that Papal soldiers slaughtered infidels in the name of God, that clerics tortured and killed heretics in the name of God, and that Galileo was sequestered and made to recant in the name of God. Closer to home, my beautiful half-Indian mother, a devout Catholic who went to mass everyday at six in the morning, forbade me to play with my friend, Nelson, because he was Protestant! And then I got a second epiphany: that not all human effort, not all acts of empowerment, are liberating; some of them can be downright barbaric, oppressive, or suffocating. They may have been empowering, but empowering only to a few.

The Limitations of Presentation Skills

I cradled these insights in my final years in college, in my year of teaching in Sulu (where I tore down all my stereotypes about Muslims), and in graduate school where I saw these insights re-surfacing in my sociology subjects and my elective courses in political science and social psychology. A few years after I returned to the Ateneo to teach, I became active in the theater (a college passion), and learned a lot about presentation skills, all of which served me

well in my sociology classes. But not for long. While the use of presentation skills made my class livelier, I wasn't sure after a while that students were learning enough from my courses. Some of my former students would come to me and say "I miss your class, sir," or "Your class was one of the most memorable for me in college," or "May I sit in one of your classes again, sir?" But when I asked them what they remembered the most about the class, several said things along the lines of "It was fun, sir." Or "I remember the jokes, sir." Or "You kept us awake all the time." Jesus, I said to myself, I am a teacher, not an entertainer!

The Third Epiphany

It was then that I began to do my own research on teaching methods, experimenting with them in class, and the result of that effort led me to put together the Dynamic Classrooms workshop in 2006 with the support of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology. I had in mind to help social science teachers manage classrooms in ways to communicate their disciplines to students. How can we give students a sense of intellectual liberation from the constraints of their social worlds? How can they sharpen their critical faculties so that they can become like the little boy who tells the Emperor he has no clothes on -- the little boy who saw through the costumes of wealth and power to expose what lies underneath? (And believe me, what lay underneath wasn't Calvin Klein!)

I picked up many teaching strategies in the course of my research. But which of these teaching strategies mattered the most? In attempting to answer that question, I discovered another epiphany. I thought that if social science teachers remain true to themselves, i.e., true to their disciplines, then the best teaching strategies were those that arose from what we preached and what kind of students that we want for the social sciences.

What the Social Sciences Preach: Five Points

What, then, do we preach -- and not preach?

I. We do not preach that individual traits are the only variables to explain human behavior, a point of view that Margaret Thatcher proclaimed three decades ago when she said that "there is no such thing as society." Only individuals and markets. Nor do we preach that personal successes arise simply from inherent talent and hard work, and that personal failures are the result of individual weaknesses like the lack of discipline, the loss of self-control, laziness, wrong values, or genetic make-up.

Rather, we preach that people's lives caught in the intersections of larger worlds -- the context of community, region, nation, and the globe; the worlds of culture, structure, and historical forces; the world of capital flows, social media, and technological growth. Our social life is like the "beta coefficient" of a multiple regression equation: it is affected by many control variables, some of which depress our value, others keep it stable, and still others enhance it.

Thus, personal successes emerge not simply from talent and hard work, but from "opportunity structures," -- the control variables so to speak -- embedded in the historical moment in which we live. Why some people land in favorable structures and others don't is a constant question we ask.

2. We do not preach that the social world around us -- our system of governance, religion, family arrangements, cultural values, or our school system -- can be taken for granted as part of the natural world, the kind of thinking that says that's the way it is and we can do little or nothing about it.

Rather, we preach that existing or proposed social arrangements that make up our social world is best seen as a continuous site of struggle, negotiation, and compromise. They are exercises in dominance, efforts pursued to advance an idea, practice, or group interest, each one loaded with varying degrees of inclusion and exclusion, and with varying consequences to the community. Those arrangements did not arise on their own. They are, in the phrase dear to social scientists, "socially constructed."

3. We do not preach singularity -- that we must believe, for example, in one faith, subscribe to one form of government, one evolutionary line, one ideal of male and female body, or one imagined nation. Henry Giroux refers to these as the "fundamentalisms" of the modern world.

What we preach, instead, is diversity: that there are many routes to faith, many paths to good governance, many evolutionary lines, many ideals of physical beauty, and many imagined nations. What we come to accept now may be the best for a given historical moment, but that acceptance isn't absolute as it may change given new data or a new set of historical circumstances. Zealotry to an idea or practice that run against new evidence and altered events is, intellectually, anathema to social science.

It is this sense of detachment to existing ideologies and practice that make social scientists problematize singularity be it found, for example, official views on multiculturalism, responsible parenthood, or socioeconomic development. And it is that same sense of detachment that social scientists problematize diversity when one idea or practice is privileged more than others to the point of oppression, suffering, and even death. Diversity can metamorphose easily into inequality if we don't watch out.

4. We do not preach that it is enough to think about development and change from a utilitarian view, i.e. from the numbers of people who benefitted from a project or campaign, or from how much a project or campaign increases sales or profits, or how much a program receives favourable press releases or wins awards.

Rather we also consider, of greater importance, how development and change advance and widen the popular base for human values, among them freedom, trust, mutual respect, equality and justice. At least for the time being, at least at this moment of time and place.

5. We do not preach apathy to practices that diminish our humanity.

Rather, we act to change society in the spirit of social justice, democratic ideals, and ecological sustainability – and also debating what these terms mean in the process. We strive towards greater inclusivity and collaboration, and towards a reduction in inequalities. And in doing so, we also align ourselves with the marginalized and the stigmatized while continuing to be reflexive about our values and our actions.

Student Formation: Five Outcomes

.What kind of students do we want, then, based on what we preach? I list five outcomes. You can name more.

First, a *cognitive* outcome. We want students understand, time and time again, the larger and diverse social milieu within which their lives unfold, a world where humans create and recreate the social world through the exercise of power and will.

Second, a *skills* outcome. We want students to acquire the technical skills to investigate the social world and the imagination to interpret that world through concepts and theories.

Third, a *critical* outcome: We want to instil in students a realization that precisely because the social world is created and recreated through the

exercise of power and will, students should always ask who benefits and who loses out in any existing arrangement. Peter Berger, my favorite sociologist when I was in college, called this the “dubunking motif” of the sociological enterprise. We can now call it the “debunking motif” of the social sciences.

Fourth, a *participatory* outcome. We want to give students with many opportunities within the classroom (and not solely in Facebook or Twitter) to express their thoughts on the topic at hand – their insights and opinions, their doubts and concerns, their joys and their anger. Let this participation be a rehearsal of their participation in larger, sometimes less friendly, public spheres where they will find themselves after college

Fifth, an *affective* outcome. We want to arouse in students a sense of sympathy for those marginalized and stigmatized from existing social arrangements. Not a melodramatic sympathy, mind you, but an informed one, something we can call “evidence-based sympathy.” Beyond this, we want students to translate this sympathy eventually into some form of action where they will fight hard to retain something that works and to be motivated to change something that they think doesn’t work.

At Last, The Teaching Strategies: Seven of Them

We turn to the last question: what teaching strategies will help produce these outcomes? My research and applications in the classroom identify seven strategies, some of them cutting across different outcomes. You can add more. All of these boost opportunities to create, communicate, and collaborate – the essential traits to achieve a “climate for learning” in the classroom.

Now I’m sure many of you are using all or some these strategies, or versions of these strategies, in your present classrooms. I bow to you in admiration, affirm your work, and seek your patience while I run through what may be familiar territory.

1. Use the interactive lecture strategy

Scrap the 50-minute or the 1 hour and 20-minute lecture routine. Lecture less, perhaps in 15-20 minute segments, then engage students in activities that turn on their heads and hearts, then go back to the lecture. These activities are structured (you prepare them beforehand). Sometimes they take a short time to complete, sometimes longer. The important point is to get students doing something beyond listening to the teacher: time to think, question, discuss,

summarize, or solve problems. This, to me, is the essence of student-centered learning – students doing and thinking about what they’re doing.

2. Hear the voices of students.

Don’t fall in love with your own voice too much. Instead, look forward to hearing the different voices awaiting to be heard in the classroom. Learn to facilitate group discussions. Coax students to give opinions without fear of ridicule or reprisal. Let them talk to each other. Let them present reports and have reactors among them. Find ways to get students to ask questions or give comments if they are too shy or intimidated to ask questions themselves. Give essay exams so they can articulate what they think and feel. Give them confidence to talk in public. Make them realize the value of listening to one another, and to react in a respectful manner. Let them practice in the classroom what they are expected to do well in their professional lives.

3. Make them work together.

Collaboration is vital in doing science and art – and in working towards social change. Teach students to share ideas, write joint reports, ask joint questions, or conduct group projects. Let them learn collective responsibility and figure out what to do with classmates who turn out to be free riders. Give group grades in addition to individual grades. Let students realize that success in the course is not simply a matter of personal achievement but also, perhaps more importantly, collective achievement. Encourage them to communicate within and across groups. Teach them to work with students they do not know very well, or may even dislike, as this will teach them the value of creating bridging social capital that is the key to a vibrant civic life. And note that collaboration is not cronyism – a point Walden Bello alludes to when he says that P-Noy’s style of leadership is a “fraternity-like” leadership.

4. Be relevant.

Bring the student’s world into the classroom. Take a song, a film, a tweet, a basketball game, a fad, or anything that interests them at the moment and relate it to the lesson at hand.

Bring the teacher’s world into the classroom. Take a biographical moment, a paper you are writing, an outreach program you’re involved, a story about some social scientist, a movie you watched, a sickness you had, anything, and relate it to the topic at hand.

Bring the word outside into the classroom. Take an item in the news, a school policy or program, a global event, a disaster in Japan, a series of bombings in Thailand, or the attack in Syria, and relate it to the topic at hand.

In doing so, we show students how their lives intersect with many contexts, near and far.

5. Make diversity visible.

Some of our students are females, others males, others LGBT. Some are rich, some are middle class, some are working class, and some are poor. Many are Filipinos, but a growing number are not. Many are Catholics, some are non-Catholics, and still others are agnostics or atheists. Some will vote for Binay, some for Poe, some for Mar, some want Miriam instead. And others can't choose and others want to abstain from voting. The point is that our students and carry different beliefs. How can we align our teaching to meet this diverse group – and in the process teach students that different voices matter? And more critically, understand that some voices can overpower others as well?

One, we can use language and bring in resources (textual and audio-visual, among others) that is inclusive of diverse groups rather than use language and bring in resources that privileges the dominant group.

Two, we can expose students to diverse perspectives to give them a chance to compare views and articulate their preferences and to build for the class a wellspring of other ideas, beliefs, and feelings that may be put to good use later.

Three, we can foster discussion on ways that a particular perspective becomes accepted as the so-called “official” view. This will be a one way for students to understand how social worlds are built, others ignored, and still others crushed. Such inclusive content does not imply that we embrace all views with a kind of postmodern blandness. Rather, we show how diverse perspectives and experiences can enrich discussion and dialogue.

By making diversity visible, we also avoid biased or stereotyped representations. We destroy the walls that create a “them” and an “us,” and build a more inclusive “us.”

6. Share the power

Traditional authoritarian teaching strategies reinforce the power of the teacher in imparting knowledge. If we get students to speak out, participate, and collaborate, we are also teaching ways for students to handle themselves in a

truly democratic space. So share the power. Make students teach other students. Let them start the class, summarize the day's lessons, suggest questions for a test, give them a share in giving out grades to others, and even recommend activities for the class.

Here's a thought: why don't we get the teacher and the student to work out a common syllabus for the course. Teachers prepare a draft document, discuss it with the class for the first couple of days, get suggestions on the students on interesting topics, activities or assessment methods, and then re-submit the common syllabus. Treat the syllabus as a contract; with their input, students now become responsible for their own learning – and not solely the teacher's own.

7. Walk the talk

Be passionately engaged in some form of social transformation or service learning in the public sphere. Student need to have models on what engaged social scientists do, and the best examples should come from their teachers. Show them how we, in our own way, lead lives true to what we preach. Then perhaps we can also talk meaningfully about the joys and frustrations of social change, about the ways we create and create the world out there. Show them we care and they, too, will learn to care.

The Fourth Epiphany

I just had another epiphany. I realize that if we practice these and other strategies, we can make teaching in the School of Social Sciences a model for other schools to follow. That way, we can collectively transform the teaching life of this university, and maybe one day, of the entire country.

Call us the Genghis Khans of the teaching profession.

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