

Statement of teaching philosophy

As an ethnographer, I have been trained to make observations and distinguish patterns from specific places and moments in time—spoken words, visual snapshots of people and events, pieces of information that may seem meaningless in isolation. I use them in my research and my teaching to construct a picture of something larger, such as a community, a historical trend, or even a global social process. I ask questions about what I observe and try to assemble these questions and the responses they elicit into a coherent narrative or theory. One of the most crucial skills I aim to develop in my students is the ability to piece together data from various sources about the world in which they live, to use inductive reasoning to recognize recurring themes and large-scale processes at work. In the classroom, I conduct exercises in which I present students with various news items and ask them to “connect the dots” between them. What, for example, does the sacrifice of a goat by Nepali airline officials have to do with the creation of a British fund to protect African children accused of witchcraft? How does the election of a French president with an anti-immigration platform relate to the Australian government’s establishment of a new test for prospective citizens? I encourage students to ground their far-reaching analyses in a local-level, ethnographic sensibility. To me, “thinking globally” means considering distant, seemingly isolated events as interconnected, and then pondering how those events affect our own lives.

I believe in the power of books. When I think back to courses I took in college or even graduate school, the articles and chapters I read have usually faded from memory. This is not true of the full-length monographs. A good, in-depth ethnographic study can embed itself in the reader’s mind, permanently altering his or her perception of the world and the human condition. Hence, I structure my courses primarily around books (especially ethnographies by anthropologists, along with monographs by other social scientists or journalists) rather than shorter readings.

Another key principle of my teaching style is the promotion of active learning. Students are not passive receptacles of knowledge, and meaningful learning only takes place when students use the information they find in the classroom and through readings to construct their own cognitive models. I learned the importance of this fact years ago as a volunteer with a neighborhood organization in the District of Columbia, helping a diverse group of students learn English. What I had long considered the essence of instruction—talking in front of a class—didn’t get us very far; the best way to help my students learn English was to find creative ways to get them to *use it themselves*. They could only absorb the words or phrases I spoke once they were able to put them into practice. So, after introducing new vocabulary or grammar, I immediately turned to the class and had students practice with each other. In the most successful classes, students were so engrossed in the problems they were trying to solve that they temporarily forgot they were doing so in an unfamiliar language. My role, I realized, was to provide my students with the tools to make their own discoveries, and to create an atmosphere in which they could learn to use these tools easily and effectively.

I continue to find these lessons helpful as a teacher of university students. I try to the extent possible to limit my role as information dispenser; I see lectures as a necessary pedagogical instrument, and use them in moderation. In the classroom, I encourage dialogue by asking students to bring in their own questions pertaining to each session’s issues and readings, and to post them to on-line discussion forums. I then use their observations and questions to synthesize an agenda for class discussion. Sometimes I divide a class into two arbitrary groups and ask each group to formulate an

Bruce Whitehouse

argument either for or against a proposition related to the week's theme, such as the inevitability of armed conflict or the capacity for democratization in the Muslim world. Each student, regardless of his or her own beliefs, must work together with the group to muster evidence, state a position, and then anticipate and counter their opponents' claims.

Perhaps the most important skill I can foster in students is critical thinking. There is no source of information which must be taken at face value. Students must learn to be skeptical toward assertions of fact, to consider the interests and limitations that generate specific claims to knowledge, and to challenge the logical or ideological foundations of each argument they encounter. When teaching about Islam (see sample syllabus), I can use passages from multiple and conflicting translations of the Qur'an to prompt students to think about and engage with the multivocal nature of religious scripture. This encourages critical questions about the relationship between believers and scripture—not “What does Islam say?” about a given topic, but rather “What do Muslims believe, and why do those beliefs often vary from one group to another?” Such exercises almost always prove gratifying for my students and me. As my teaching practice has evolved, feedback from professors and students has assured me that, though I still have much to learn, I am clearly moving in the right direction.

What I set out to do as an instructor is to help students *see their world in new ways*, and *think about the world differently*. When I succeed in this, I also prepare them to live as informed participants in democratic government, conscious citizens of the world, and empowered agents of their own destinies. My ultimate goal is to help them develop conceptual tools with which they may not only live better lives, but also act to change the world for the better. Because I believe that the social sciences (and anthropology in particular) have the potential to inspire social transformation, my professional interest lies less in helping train the next generation of anthropologists than in helping train the next generation of community leaders, teachers, doctors, artists, and businesspeople. Of course no academic discipline can claim to have all the answers, but it is clear to me that almost everyone could use a little anthropology, and that the world would be a better place if more people were asking the kinds of questions we anthropologists ask.