

Ensure Students Are Learning: Faculty Descriptions of Innovative Teaching Practices

Personal Experience and Creative Practice Connect Students to Subject Matter

Innovative Teaching Practice Description:

The instructor contextualizes learning by using creative practices to engage students in sociological imagination—a process through which students learn that seemingly personal or private matters are often connected to larger social and historical conditions. This practice involves a series of creatively based activities—songs, poetry, and short stories—that take place both inside and outside of the classroom over three weeks. This teaching practice is used at the point in the semester focused on race, class, and gender inequality to help students explore critical social justice issues throughout history. To prepare for the lesson, students are assigned relevant readings that should be completed prior to each class so that students are familiar with key concepts and are prepared to discuss the readings.

During the first week, the instructor builds on prior lessons about the nature of socialization, the social construction of reality, and the concept of deviance. Using deviance as a segue, the instructor introduces art as a communication tool and engages students in a class-wide discussion about how art, which can be viewed as deviant, often reflects what is happening in society at any given point. To illustrate this point, the instructor introduces a song or poem. As an example, the instructor may play Bob Dylan’s “Only a Pawn in Their Game” about the murder of Medgar Evers to demonstrate how this song pushed boundaries by addressing race discrimination and inequality. Depending on the size of the class, the instructor will

either engage students in a class-wide discussion or break the students into groups to answer three questions about the piece: 1) What social issues is the artist responding to? 2) What sociological perspective (from prior lessons) is the artist using to interpret the world? and 3) What was happening in society at the time? To keep students engaged, the instructor encourages students to use Google to identify relevant social issues during the time the song was released.

During the second week, there is an asynchronous homework activity where students are required to select a song or poem they believe represents a social issue and post it to an online discussion board. Notably, there are no specific guidelines for the types of songs or poems that can be used and explicit lyrics are allowed. Students are then asked to respond to at least two of their classmates’ posts. Students’ posts and reactions are discussed as a large group in a subsequent class meeting.

This lesson concludes in the third week with individual submissions of original work. For this creative practice, students take an active role as artists and are asked to create a song, poem, or short story that reflects a personally meaningful social issue. There are no specific guidelines for this activity and submissions have ranged anywhere from a six-word poem to a six-page short story. The work is approximately 10% of the overall course grade and is mostly graded for completion; however, the work does need to reflect a social justice issue.