

Christof Demont-Heinrich: Teaching Statement of Purpose

At its most fundamental level, I believe that teaching is about engaging the mind. It is about introducing students to a conceptual framework with which they can begin to, in a deep and profound way, make sense of, understand, and actively (re)produce and alter the dynamic social world they shape and which shapes them. It is about inspiring students to reflect intelligently about diverse macro- and micro-level sociological issues. These issues might range from the question of increasing concentration of media ownership and the influence of American culture around the globe to the ways in which the choice of this word over that one -- "terrorist" over "revolutionary", for example -- might reflect *and* potentially (re)produce a particular framework of understanding. In short, for me, teaching is about challenging and inspiring students to think.

As someone who is virtually constantly engaged in critical reflection, I feel that I have succeeded as a teacher -- of media studies, of writing, of rhetoric, etc., -- when I get feedback from students such as:

- "(Christof) made students think critically, instead of simple regurgitation";
 - "(Christof) really motivated us to think more critically";
- and, simply --
- "This class made me think."

At the core of thinking, or really, critical thinking, is the ability to pose informed, probing, difficult, and even contentious and unsettling questions -- questions about language, culture, representation, mediation, politics, economics, everyday life, the larger social order, the relation between the macro- and the micro, the nature of human socio-historical being, to note just a few. I believe that there are no more profoundly important questions a teacher can inspire students to ask than questions about power. Such questions necessarily entail unpacking basic assumptions, deconstructing the taken-for-granted terrain upon which larger human social relations are (re)produced and (ideologically) justified, as well as sometimes challenged and altered. Such questions require that students and teachers alike challenge the conceptual categories we apply to the world around us. They force us to ask a simple yet paradoxically complex question: "What do you mean by that?," or, more specifically: "What do you mean by 'the' media?," "What do you mean by culture (or 'American', or 'German', or 'French' culture)?", "What do you mean by power?," "patriotism", "politics?," "the global?," and even "thinking"?

I do not mean to suggest that critical engagement of basic analytical categories constitutes the whole of "thinking," or that I view the facilitation of such engagement as my sole

mandate as a teacher. Other questions are equally crucial. Among them: "Where is power?", "How is it distributed (who has more/less of it), with what potential implications for whom?", "How do we socially construct and materially (re)produce the world in which we, and others, live?" "How did the world come to be as it 'is'?" and, "How might it have come to be/and yet come to be different than it 'is'?" Such macro-level questions lie beneath the more specific sorts of concerns we often deal with when we teach media studies, news writing, freshman composition, or even web design. Thus, for example, I would suggest that a lecture on the problematic of 'high'/'low' culture in contemporary American society cannot be meaningfully engaged by students in a media studies class without some sort of introduction to macro-level social theory (Marx, Bourdieu, Althusser, etc.). My basic point is this: in order to inspire students toward reflexive engagement of media, culture, (mass) communication, politics, economics, etc., on a micro and/or perhaps mezza-level, one must introduce them to the basic conceptual framework within which those components of human society are situated -- that of the larger human social order. One cannot critically study, or teach, media, communication, culture, or economics in isolation.

To concretize my basic teaching philosophy I refer to a couple of specific class lectures/exercises in which I aim to meld macro-level sociological contextualization with more micro-level student activities. I have, for example, asked students to analyze media accounts of particular events/people/happenings on the basis of, among other things, placement of a story within an edition of a daily newspaper, the story's headline, byline(s) (is it an AP story, etc.), length, style, use of visual imagery, (perhaps strategic) placement vis-à-vis advertisements, who is interviewed (and who is not), what questions are asked (and which ones are not), etc. This sort of analysis encourages students to ask questions such as: "what do they (media professionals) mean by 'we Americans,' or even 'Americans,'?" in a story headlined "Americans support war in Iraq," (which Americans? how many Americans? what are some potential (power) implications of defining Americans in this, and not another, way?) Alternatively, I have asked students to outline and describe their understanding of Gerber's "cultivation analysis" theory, and then to take a specific cultural object (for example, a TV sitcom) and argue for/against the basic utility of his theory in terms of its ability to help one make sense of that object. This project requires students to engage crucial theoretical constructs and, by way of a "real world" application, begin to apply various theories (and perhaps challenge them) in a practical way.

Teaching is not only about inspiring other human beings to question the nature of the larger socio-historical order and their own, and others', place within it. Teaching is also about

inspiring people at a basic human level. As teachers, we must project an enthusiasm and excitement for learning ourselves, acknowledge that we (quite often, in fact) do not have all the answers, that we do not know it all, and that we can, and do, learn quite a lot from our students. Successful teaching is also about listening to students and fostering, to the best of our ability, a classroom environment which encourages healthy, vigorous debate and discussion among, and by, as many students as possible. It is about taking the time to work with students one-on-one, whether that time is devoted to in-class and/or out-of-class academic projects, or simply applied toward helping students manage the demands the university, and life in general, place on all of us. Furthermore, as a teacher, one must also be fair, consistent, and as clear (without being pedantic) as possible about assignments, tests, grading policies, and general class expectations. One must, I think, strike a sometimes difficult balance between providing students with enough information (class lecture notes online, for example) and not making class so easy that it devolves into a matter of memorization and regurgitation of reified facts. Where possible, an emphasis on essays and writing is a highly effective way to strike such a balance, and to motivate and create the context for, exactly the sort of critical engagement, reflection, and question posing that I have contended is so central to effective and meaningful teaching and learning.

Finally, as a teacher whose basic teaching philosophy rests on questioning that which 'is',¹ I believe that it is crucial to be, where and when it makes sense, explicit about that philosophy. Students deserve to know why we are teaching what we are teaching, why we are taking the approach we are taking. Responsible, responsive teachers explain how the skills they are teaching might be used -- in and out of the classroom. Without relevance, students will fail to see a need to grasp what it is that is being taught. In other words, it is often (though perhaps not always) a good idea to explain the rationale behind a particular assignment, project, etc. Where possible, it is also a good idea, I think, to meld practicality with more abstract-level critical engagement, for example, in an exercise which encourages would-be journalists to reflect upon the potential impact of the sources they do, or do not, interview for a given story. I do not, however, ascribe to the notion that the university is, or should be, driven by an exclusively "skills-oriented" approach. Such an approach sacrifices the perhaps more abstract, but in the long run, clear material benefits of a collectively practiced critical social engagement on the altar of unadulterated instrumental reason. At its core, teaching is not simply about getting students a job -- although this is part of the material equation -- it is about providing students with a set of

¹ To question is not necessarily to destroy -- indeed it is to challenge, and problematize exactly the sort of, "if A, then B" simplistic "thinking" that often implies that to question is essentially destructive.

conceptual tools that can be, and ultimately will be, used in a variety of disparate contexts. It is, in other words, about inspiring students to think -- in- and out-side of the classroom.