MY APPROACH TO TEACHING

Gerardo Otero

My courses have several simultaneous goals, regardless of their level: students should be able to learn (1) a certain amount of the most up-to-date knowledge existing in the course's subject matter, including the most salient debates; (2) how to do critical reading and research; and (3) how to report it in written and oral form. It is on writing and presentations that the level of the course (introductory, upper level or graduate) involves a different emphasis.

In lower level courses the main emphasis is on improving analytical writing skills and I limit student verbal interventions to participation during class discussion; there are no student presentations in my introductory courses. I strongly encourage participation during class discussion, and am generally successful in using participatory and experiential learning techniques. As far as writing goes, I usually require between two and four written products of 2 to 8 pages each during the semester, in addition to four one-page newspaper article reviews using sociological imagination. When the number of students in a class is small enough I encourage them to hand in a draft of their papers, so that I can return them with suggestions for revision. In this case students must hand in their drafts one week prior to the established deadline. For those who take this opportunity, it is usually the case that one can see substantial improvements in their final drafts. Students are usually given several options for paper topics early in the semester.

In upper level and graduate courses my expectations are considerably more ambitious. I usually require a combination of what I call "discussion papers," response questions, a student presentation, one-two review or analytical essays, and/or a research-term paper. "Discussion papers" consist of 300-400

words critical syntheses of the assigned readings for a given week. They must be handed in one day before the readings are to be discussed in class (four to six reaction papers required per course). These papers must be structured along four explicit sections: introduction, synthesis, evaluation, and discussion questions. The purpose of this exercise is twofold: on one hand, writing these papers will greatly sharpen the students' ability to focus on core issues and analyze them critically; on the other, it ensures that most students will have done a thorough reading of the material and will be well prepared to participate in class discussion. Discussion papers can also be used as raw materials to write review essays and/or final-term papers. Normally only half the class will write discussion papers in any given week, with the other half writing "response questions." These consist of attempting to answer or comment on at least two students' discussion papers and raising a new question. This exercise presumes that students, having done the required readings, are also reading each other's work, thus learning from each other how to compose short essays.

Review essays consist of comparing and contrasting two authors or perspectives, using at least four sources, two of which must be from the required readings. Similarly to the discussion papers, this exercise should give the students an opportunity to engage the readings in some depth and to assess their relative strengths and weaknesses. The research-term paper is a more standard requirement which has the usual expectations of sound scholarship (12-14 pages in upper division courses, 20-25 in graduate courses).

Class presentations, required only in upper division and graduate courses, have two main purposes: to provide students with an experience in cooperative academic work (when group-presentations are required, they are prepared by teams, although each individual does his/her own presentation) and to be able to speak to a challenging public - their class. Students are required to prepare

their presentations using Power Point with specific technical guidelines in regard to the number of slides they can use, font sizes, etc.

One of the things that students have found most difficult in my classes is writing discussion papers. Yet, they also think it is one of the best learning devices they have had to prepare in any course. Thus, despite the fact that they are time consuming, both for the student and for me in grading them, this continues to be a central element of my advanced courses. When the course is very large in student numbers, I modify the requirement to a "research index card" which consists of synthesizing the core theses of an author in one paragraph (up to 200 words).

With regard to class dynamics, my sessions are usually divided into three parts. During the first part I deliver a lecture on the theoretical and/or historical background or context of assigned readings. The second part is devoted to discuss and clarify readings, using questions from discussion papers and response questions, which can rarely be exhausted. This is an excellent inductive method of focusing seminar discussion on students' questions. A third part of the session is usually devoted to participatory learning, often utilizing current-events news materials putting concepts or theories learned in class to work as analytical tools. As part of enhancing experiential learning, when possible, I show a relevant documentary film (of up to one hour in duration). As the old Chinese proverb says: "Tell me and I forget. Show me and I remember. Involve me and I understand."

In most upper-level courses, the themes of my classes are closely related to my ongoing research. Because I am deeply interested their topics, I have no problem in showing a great deal of enthusiasm and passion in my lectures. I have found that this is often contagious to students.

Besides the elements stated for upper division and graduate courses, a crucial component in my teaching relationship with graduate students is a concerted effort to collaborate in some publication. This has not been limited to those students for whom I have been senior supervisor; I have also published with several other students for whom I have been second supervisor. Alongside with the intrinsic research learning in writing an article, engaging in a publication effort also exposes students to the practical details of getting them submitted and often getting one or two rejections before the work can actually get published. My hope is that this experience will raise students' frustration level in dealing with the academic peer review process, which can be devastating for new scholars. Adequately dealing with this process as a normal part of the job makes it easier to accept the challenges and frustrations of academia. I trust that this experience also teaches graduate students how to enjoy the rewards of scholarly activity.