

Practicing for a Many-Sided Sociology

“Think of an experience you’ve had that showed you that you mattered to your classmates or your instructor, and an experience that challenged you to seek truth by learning something new or considering a new perspective. When you’re ready, turn to your neighbor and share your stories.”

Of the activities I do with my students on the first day of class, this is one of my favorites. Each story offers another angle on mattering and challenge, and as we bring them together, a multifaceted vision of the classroom we want to create takes shape. From one angle, it is the joy of Black and Latine students who see their perspectives reflected in the curriculum. From another, it is first-generation students’ stories of finding mentorship on campus.

But the same lenses that bring this vision into focus also reveal the cracks in the learning environment we have—cracks whose jagged edges cut into students’ lives even as they remain hidden from more privileged standpoints. As the semester goes on and trust builds, the other stories surface: an international student disturbed by discriminatory comments from a faculty member; a non-binary student struggling to access mental health care; a student using Zoom to attend class while caring for a sick parent.

On the wall of my office, next to the computer where I write, I keep a printout of the seven-valued logic of India’s Jaina philosophy. Its core teaching, *anekāntavāda*, holds that reality is many-sided, so all knowledge claims must be qualified. The point is humility: no single standpoint captures the whole. Like the elephant in the Jaina parable or the house in Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception*, social truths come into focus only through the many-sided vision of a community. Cultivating this many-sidedness in my research, course design, teaching, and service has defined my contributions toward systemic change.

Decolonizing Research in Theory and Practice

My research subfield, like many others, has its roots in colonial forms of power-knowledge. The study of Hindu-Muslim riots developed alongside British colonial claims that only outside rule could keep communities from perpetual violence while colonial policies exacerbated tensions between Hindus and Muslims.

Decolonizing this line of research requires rethinking its frames. I draw on the theories of Ida B. Wells-Barnett, W. E. B. DuBois, B. R. Ambedkar, M. N. Srinivas, and Asghar Ali Engineer to ground my work in analyses that treat violence as a tool of domination, shaped by race, caste, religion, class, gender, and colonial power. These perspectives guide me to examine violence as both contingent and preventable, and to foreground community safety and justice over reliance on the state.

In my lab, I make research a democratic space. Undergraduates engage the full research agenda

and build theory alongside technical skills. While fully participatory methods are difficult in violence research, I am committed to moving further in that direction.

Centering Marginalized Students through Mattering and Challenging

While I, like most academics, hope that my research will contribute to a more just world, it is in the classroom that I have the most direct opportunity to center the needs of marginalized students. The teacher's podium has long been a place of power, but I work to turn my classrooms into communities where a many-sided truth emerges. This means continually asking, *Whose voice might be excluded? How can I invite them in?*

As I describe more fully in my teaching statement, I invite students to co-set goals and build structures for growth rather than conformity. These approaches counter patterns where disadvantaged students hesitate to ask for help while affirming student presence, challenge, and high expectations.

These approaches have made a real difference to students. One wrote, "Professor Sorge is one of the most understanding professors I've had when it comes to disability accommodations . . . his response showed me, right off the bat, that he cared about my success," while another said "David absolutely created an accessible and inclusive course experience. I struggle to think of a professor who has done this better."

Designing Many-Sided Perspective through Inclusive Syllabi

My commitment to equity is reflected not only in course structures, but also in the ways I choose course content. In my course on the criminal legal system, I realized that my initial design fell into the familiar ". . . and a chapter on gender" trap. To address this, I rebalanced the course to foreground the perspectives of criminalized young women, residents at women's prisons, and queer and racially marginalized transformative justice advocates. More broadly, I assign ethnographic work from the standpoint of those who are policed, incarcerated, and judged first, before supplementing with perspectives from officials who administer the system.

A similar equity concern drove my revisions to the Social Theory course. Students had long and rightly criticized the narrow canon that centered class, status, and the state, while ignoring equally vital theories of race, gender, and coloniality. My approach retools the course around concept-based dialogue, tracing conversations around key concepts between canonical authors, denied scholars like Du Bois, Cooper and Wells, and contemporary researchers and critics. The result is a more expansive vision of theory that affirms marginalized students' experiences and gives all students a wider set of intellectual resources. Students noticed this effort, with one noting that I "included readings to introduce a broad variety of identities and perspectives, as well as welcomed student interpretations that challenged the validity of aged concepts."

This commitment also requires flexibility and humility. When a trans student shared that Garfinkel's

'Agnes' case triggered dysphoria, we added the film *Reframing Agnes* in place of another reading, allowing students to revisit the case in dialogue with trans voices. The student's relief and excitement underscored for me the importance of treating the curriculum as a living resource. Other students have also written appreciatively about this flexibility, saying "He is extremely welcoming, positive and willing to adapt and be flexible to suit the class' needs."

Cultivating a more Diverse Discipline through Advocacy and Mentorship

As professionalization chair in our department's Graduate Sociology Society (GSS) during the pandemic, I hosted events to make the "hidden curriculum" of graduate education more transparent that also turned into oases of belonging. In the wake of broader racial justice movements, I also supported the GSS's campaign for greater diversity in faculty hiring and for equitable resources for Black and first-generation/low-income students. My contribution was mainly behind the scenes—tracking demands and monitoring progress. Together, these campaigns led to a senior hire in race and ethnicity, expanded course offerings in that area, funding for a Black graduate student association, and graduate student representation on several departmental committees.

At Bryn Mawr I've often worked individually to advocate for marginalized students, nominate them for prizes, and support diverse faculty recruitment. Additionally, a student colleague and I are now co-designing a library-based social problems course that brings students and community members together.

Envisioning a Just Future Together

Prioritizing inclusive practices in research, teaching, service, and mentoring sometimes feels like trying to catch students falling through cracks that are shifting and widening faster than any one of us can keep up. Octavia Butler reminds us, "There's no single answer that will solve all of our future problems. There's no magic bullet. Instead, there are thousands of answers—at least. You can be one of them if you choose to be."¹ The Jaina philosophy of many-sidedness resonates here: each effort is incomplete, but taken together our perspectives begin to reveal the outlines of a more equitable learning environment.

As I transition into my next role, I will continue to practice learner-centered pedagogies that narrow achievement gaps. I will design and redesign courses toward many-sided insight, and I will carry forward anticolonial approaches to the theory and practice of violence research. Most importantly, I will keep cultivating the kind of sociology that emerges when many voices — students, colleagues, and communities — are brought into conversation with one another. For me, this is what it means to practice for a many-sided sociology: to confront multifaceted problems with the shared vision that only many perspectives can provide.

¹Octavia Butler. 2000. "A Few Rules for Predicting the Future" *Essence* 31 (1): 164-166