

Creating Spaces to Practice the Community of Truth

“So why do you want to go to college?” a teaching assistant once asked me as I worked on my college applications.

“To learn,” I replied.

“That’s a silly reason. You can learn from a book anywhere. College is the place where people gather to sit around a table and talk about Shakespeare, or Marx, or Quantum Physics.”

That moment still shapes my teaching. In an age of online lectures and open-access resources, the precious hours students spend together in a classroom cannot be wasted on passive knowledge intake.

“To teach is to create a space in which the community of truth is practiced,” says the contemplative tradition,¹ and it captures the soul of my teaching. I want students to cultivate transferable skills: the ability to read critically, think sociologically, engage in dialogue across difference, and connect research to real-world challenges. These are capacities that will serve them not only in sociology classrooms, but in their careers, communities, and personal lives. More fundamentally, though, I want to welcome students into an ever-widening community consensually discovering truths about the social world—difficult truths about conflict, injustice, and violence, but also truths about transformation, reconciliation, and hope. The effects of this approach are palpable. As one student reflected: “I have never had a more caring instructor. He creates a learning environment where everyone feels supported.”

Creating Space

My pedagogy grows out of the active and experiential learning I learned to use at a peacebuilding nonprofit in India. In this approach, everything is built around the cycle of encounter and reflection. In practice, this means asking students to read DuBois on “double consciousness” and Cooley on the “looking-glass self” before class or analyze an email, flyer, or public speech from an activist organization in class. The really effective learning takes place in the in-class small-group dialogue and jigsaw activities that follow. There “[we] are listening others into existence.”² These give quieter students room to participate in ways that they might not in larger group sessions. As one student wrote, “it felt like more people got and took chances to talk.”

I also design assignments that connect course material to students’ skills and goals. Every course culminates in a portfolio project: while some choose my default projects—traditional papers, policy briefs, or movement profiles—I often work with students in office hours to craft projects that better fit their goals. The results have been breathtaking: humanizing portraits of prisoners overlaid with

¹Palmer, Parker J. *To Know as We Are Known: Education as a Spiritual Journey*. HarperOne, 1993, p. xii.

²O'Reilly, Mary Rose. *Radical Presence: Teaching as Contemplative Practice*. Boynton/Cook Publishers, 1998, p. 29.

dehumanizing quotes from their jailers, a podcast episode on a hostage-turned-insurrectionist, mini-documentaries interviewing student cafeteria workers about the emotional labor their jobs require, even a draft of a board game about the double binds of court routine.

In senior seminars and my theory course, I extend this ethos to co-creating syllabi. Students help shape the topics and concepts we study, making them active participants in defining the intellectual agenda. As one Social Theory student recalled, “This course allowed me to explore more my ideas on my thesis He allowed for student input and for the students to choose readings that reflected our interests.”

Nurturing Communities of Truth

“Whose truth?” we must ask. Following Parker Palmer, I understand truth as something that emerges out of relationships of care.³ In teaching, my care for my students becomes the vector by which my passion for my subject becomes contagious. Or, as one of my students put it, “David clearly cares so much about the subject matter and us as students. His enthusiasm for teaching really helped me be engaged.”

I center methods that build teamwork and empathy, even in challenging material. In my Punishment and Social Order course, students read material from both prisoners’ and prison guards’ perspectives, then engage in guided discussions about fear, morality, violence, and complicity. One of my students reflected: “He did a good job fostering community despite the heaviness of the subject material.” These conversations help students practice sociological sympathy⁴—seeing the world through perspectives that may initially feel uncomfortable, but that expand their capacity for understanding.

Supporting Practice

Behind the ideals are structures that help students grow. I align assignments with transferable skills—summarizing readings, tracing concepts across texts, writing policy briefs and op-eds, and developing research proposals that often feed into future thesis projects. Portfolio projects, research proposals, and policy briefs develop step by step, with drafts, peer reviews, and consultations along the way. This iterative structure lets me see not only the final product, but the growth that leads to it. Short reflective writings and reading responses give me a window into how students are processing ideas, while in-class discussions and small-group activities show me how they are applying concepts in real time.

I evaluate my own teaching through student feedback, peer consultation, and ongoing reflection. Students consistently highlight my accessibility, care, and ability to foster inclusive dialogue. Student reviews of my teaching have been consistently positive. One student even wrote “One of the main

³Palmer, p. xii.

⁴See Martineau, Harriet. *How to Observe Morals and Manners*. Charles Knight & Co., 1838.

reasons I decided to be a Sociology major was because of Professor Sorge.” I pair this feedback with input from colleagues and student consultants to continually refine my practice, adjusting assignments, pacing, and classroom structures to meet student needs more effectively.

“Real learning,” Parker Palmer writes, “does not happen until students are brought into relationship with the teacher, with each other, and with a subject.”⁵ That is as true for me as it is for my students. I continue to refine my practice through reflection with peers, student consultants, and mentors, and I look forward to building these pedagogical communities as I move into my next position, sharing what I’ve picked up along the way, and practicing the community of truth with my colleagues and students.

⁵Palmer, p. xvi.