

# Michelle Annette Meyer, Ph.D.

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## Teaching Portfolio

Teaching and working with undergraduate and graduate students on research projects is an important part of my role as an Assistant Professor, and an area that I strive for continually improvement. I have immense gratitude for the undergraduate Sociological Society at LSU that honored me as “Sociology Professor of the Year” in 2015, my first year at LSU. As of Fall 2016, I have taught two courses at the graduate level (Sociology of Disaster and Proseminar for first-year students) and four different courses at the undergraduate level (Research Methods, Environmental Sociology, Introduction to Sociology, and Statistics). I have also advised ten students (at CSU, Texas A&M, and LSU) through the National Science Foundation Research Experience for Undergraduates (REU) program. I am currently advising one PhD student, whose research focuses on the use of inmates in disaster response. Below, I discuss my teaching philosophy and my commitment to diversity.

### *Teaching Philosophy*

In working with undergraduate and graduate students, my goal is to develop a collaborative environment that will support their development as students, citizens, and scholars. With this goal in mind, I connect my teaching with my research, research of fellow department faculty members, and other professional opportunities to show students how they can interweave what they are learning into their lives beyond the university. Thus, my teaching practice involves three main components aimed at developing students’ critical thinking skills: 1) the centrality of reading and writing to learning, 2) real world application, and 3) community, participation, and continued engagement.

First, the foundation of my teaching style is that learning requires reading and writing to develop fundamental knowledge of course content. My students, whether in statistics courses or subject matter courses like environmental sociology, spend time reading articles and books and writing about what they read. As a teaching assistant, several senior students expressed that they had never read an entire book throughout their college career. Upon having to do this, they felt they better understood the research and topic in ways that reading textbooks could not offer. Thus, I incorporate more reading of full books, along with articles, into my classes. For example, in the environmental sociology course, I assign a book review of a relevant and current environmental social science book. Students select their own book and then share what they read with the class, allowing us to cover many more books than one class can do in a semester. For many students, these books sparked an idea for the final research project for the class. Students have given positive feedback on the book review assignment, stating that it got them more interested in environmental sociology as a topic. As noted by this example, my writing assignments go hand-in-hand with the reading. I focus on helping students improve their writing skills, as this is one of the most basic and important skills that any student can take away from their college experience. In this manner, students write often in my class and receive notes on writing style along with content. I also assign draft versions of final papers so that they get feedback from me or the teaching assistant on their writing and can edit before receiving the final grade. I also grade progressively harder on writing style throughout each semester, so they get time to adjust to the writing requirements and then get rewarded for improvement in this area.

Second, I work to incorporate real world application into each of my classes and I ask students to assist in this process. Beyond giving examples in lecture, one assignment in my methods and statistics classes is presentation of media articles that discuss social science research. My goal is to get students to recognize how social science is used daily in a variety of manners and then learn how to critique the research that is presented in the media. For example, in statistics class, students find articles that discuss results based on a specific statistical test that is covered in lecture that week (e.g., comparison of means are connected to a headline story on the gender pay gap). Students must identify the different components of the method and how it was calculated. Also, as available, I have students find ways to use their topics of interest or their work in class projects and assignments. For example, during a general research methods course two social work majors brought in a survey instrument used at their internship and the class worked in groups to critique and adjust the survey based on what they learned about writing good survey questions. Also, in one semester of my environmental sociology course, the students worked in groups to code newspaper articles about the West, Texas fertilizer plant explosion. Then, together they produced a paper that was submitted for a student paper competition at the Natural Hazards Workshop. We didn't win, unfortunately, but the students felt that they got to see how research is done in real life and were able to identify how what they learned in class was portrayed in the real life disaster.

Finally, community, participation, and continued engagement are important to me as a teacher and mentor of students. My classes always begin with a round robin of introductions, each student giving their name, year, major, why they took the course, and a song that represents a sociological topic or a fun fact about themselves (such as a childhood experience with the environment in environmental sociology). I encourage students to say the names of their classmates during class discussion and address questions and comments to each other as applicable. I also try to say names aloud when calling on students to help foster connection, which was a tip I learned from my adviser Lori Peek who has won several teaching awards. It is exciting to me when I hear of students continuing to work with each other after having met in my class. Even in statistics class, my students learn each other's names and participate in discussion and classroom activities together including small group assignments. In upper level topical courses, I support my students in leading classroom lecture and base a small amount of their grades on participation. This sense of community extends beyond my semester as I maintain contact with many of my students. I recruit former students for paid hourly REU positions, conducted independent study hours with students, and have assisted students with developing papers for student paper competitions and book reviews for publication.

Each of these three points—reading and writing, real world application, and community, participation, and continued engagement—are the basis of my focus on helping students develop critical thinking skills. I promote dialog, integration of materials with experience, and questioning of theory and methods to encourage students to go deeper into their understanding and hone the skills to ask important questions in our world today. When I see my students question not only what others offer as knowledge but what they themselves know, I feel I have made an impact. I have had three students come see me a semester or two after finishing my research methods course and expressed that they learned more in that course than any other they had taken. Other students have reached out to discuss news events and how it applies to topics

from class. For example, the picture below is a Facebook post from one environmental sociology student during the 2016 Flood. The final project in that class was a content analysis of news media about the West, Texas fertilizer plant explosion, and she connected that to the poor media coverage of the flooding. I think that my drive to support their writing, application of material, and integrate them into a community of learners is key to them remembering what they learn long beyond the end of the semester.

I really love this piece. Especially as a sociologist and as someone who has studied disaster related media. This disaster has made me very thankful I decided to take Environmental Sociology at LSU with [Michelle Meyer](#)



**Picture 1. Facebook Post from Former Undergraduate Student at LSU**

### *Commitment to Diversity*

My hometown is a working class, small town in Southern Illinois where college was not the first option for most young people. As a first generation college student from a working class and farming background, I have some experience with the difficulties of transitioning into the university setting and adjusting to the norms and expectations of academe. Because of this experience, I work hard to ensure all students have access to me, within reason, and feel like they belong in my classroom. I find a way to bring any first-generation, female or minority students who show interest in research or working with me into research projects and assist with their academic development.

This commitment to supporting diverse students succeed is part of the reason I enjoy the REU program through the National Science Foundation. In my first month at Texas A&M University as a postdoc, I wrote and received the REU Supplement for the grant I was managing. This was the first time that that department had received REU Supplement funding and used undergraduates in that manner. The students collected vital data that helped us develop our sampling frame. One of those students has become a star in the PhD program now! During my second year at LSU, I received another REU supplement and have supported five students, including two black females, one black male, one white female, and one white male. Two of those students graduated in May 2016—one is now in graduate school and the other is in law school. Further, I recruited one Hispanic graduate student, two female Asian graduate students, and one African American graduate student to assist on my first NSF Project as a PI. I currently advise one female graduate student at LSU.

My classes also directly discuss issues of race, class, and gender. For example, I lecture on the Black Lives Matter movement and the killings of unarmed black men in research methods to help students understand what science exists on this issue. It was my first semester at LSU when Michael Brown was killed in Ferguson, MO and the grand jury decision occurred during the last week of that semester. We spent the last day of methods class discussing the verdict and varying opinions on the social problem. Then we applied what we learned about research protocols to discuss what data was needed to fully understand the issue. Also, in undergraduate environmental sociology, we spend one third of the class focusing on environmental justice. I use Michigan professor Dorceta Taylor's book *Toxic Communities* in that class. Students love it, even though they feel it is a challenging book, and enjoy talking about environmental justice issues in their own backyard.

In the future, I look forward to developing courses specifically on environmental justice and sophomore-level, environmental sociology courses that can draw students from a variety of majors. I look forward to discussing with you more about teaching and how I can assist the department with this crucial part of academic life.