

## Statement of teaching philosophy – Fiona Gedeon Achi

As a teacher, my overarching goal is to endow students with a set of lifelong commitments that they develop themselves through engagement with the course material. I aim to equip students with the necessary skillsets and the far-reaching curiosity to address key social questions which hold simultaneously significant intellectual, ethical, and practical importance.

When I have taught undergraduate and graduate students about the anthropology of development, I have started the lecture with the following questions: “what is poverty?”, “what is its opposite?”, “what is development?”. Prompting this discussion gives students the opportunity to engage with these issues through multiple standpoints. Some have answered by providing their own personal understandings or experience with the condition of poverty. Others made reference to how poverty and development have been examined as analytical categories by scholars and practitioners. In the course I taught about the Anthropology of Infrastructure at Istanbul Şehir University, the students’ diverse contributions—together with my guidance to connect their answers—led the classroom toward an organic debate about what the good life should involve and to propose pathways to enact these lasting objectives.

When teaching, I want to foster learning environments that allow for a diversity of perspectives, while demonstrating to students the importance of empirical accuracy and conceptual sensitivity. At the beginning of the course, I often ask students if they can provide examples of policies and programs that target welfare issues. When a student cites cash-transfers programs and simultaneously states these are not a sustainable development solution but instead a form of charity, I encourage them to expand their vision by bringing other possible perspectives so they can form a well-informed assessment. I tell students about the recent history of cash-transfer programs going back to the 1990s in Mexico. I also point to recent proposals for Universal Basic Income schemes in Europe. I show them how cash-transfers compare to alternative forms of social protection such as microcredit. Finally, I suggest a range of scholarly work on the topic such as anthropologist James Ferguson’s book *Give a Man a Fish*. In this way, I increase students’ knowledge of the field under study at the same time that I teach them about the necessity to look at a given issue in nuanced and holistic fashion.

Among undergraduate students, this means teaching the difference between primary reactions and analytical thinking, so that students can later use these transferable skills for academic essays but also crucially in their future careers when devising policy proposals, research plans or business presentations. As a teaching assistant for an Anthropology of Religion class, I realized that a major first step was explaining the distinction between an opinion and a conceptual argument. In collaboration with the instructor and fellow teaching assistants, we designed a module about how to develop an ethnographic argument, which we taught through specific group exercises that asked students to combine their own fieldwork material and the course readings. At stake in this form of learning is also to demonstrate students that the value of knowledge does not reside in the mastery of theoretical bodies to achieve definitive answers, but in producing creative analyses of empirical realities.

Because I aim to empower students to mobilize social science concepts in order to understand contemporary issues, I adapt my course topics to the settings in which I teach and live. At Istanbul Şehir University, I chose to teach a course on the Anthropology of Infrastructure given that Istanbul has in recent years witnessed the building of large number of new infrastructural projects with varied social consequences. Relying on thematic entry points which are close to students’ daily lives is an effective way to make students think about questions central to social theory, such as inequality, capitalist production, the politics of technology, or the governance of health. This past summer, when teaching online at Özyeğin University, I introduced students to the range of questions examined by the social sciences through an interactive activity which asked them to reflect on the many social, economic, and political consequences of the covid19 pandemic and its management, especially on the livelihoods of vulnerable groups. I however equally want to sensitize students to global issues, which affect people and things in faraway places. In this endeavor, my extensive fieldwork in the global South is a pedagogical asset to stimulate students’ curiosity through concrete case-studies. To illustrate the idea that common infrastructural services (running water for instance) cannot be taken for granted, I showed students my own videos from a sanitation program in rural Kenya.

As a professor told me many times in my undergraduate years, the key is never to take scholarly concepts as given (even the ones upon which our disciplines are founded, such as “context”) but to constantly put them to

test. What I discovered myself is that this is essential if one wishes students to be active learners and successful practitioners who can disrupt the status-quo and work to make the world a better place. During my course, I emphasized that the objective was not to define *infrastructure* once and for all but instead to explore together the history of infrastructure as a concept used by various scholars, how infrastructure is changing today in an increasingly wireless world riddled with inequalities, and what this means for how to sustain the Earth's future. Otherwise, the risk is that students learn theories by heart, merely because their authors are renowned figures of political thought, but without a real awareness of why these theories are crucial to grasp very actual realities.

One of the greatest challenges for a teacher is to create an inclusive classroom where everybody can progress and is eager to engage with stimulating material. Having both studied and taught in culturally diverse contexts such as Quebec has made me sensitive to the variety of challenges students may face when evolving in universities where multiple languages are spoken. This is why I aim to create a learning environment where students feel encouraged to express uncertainties about their comprehension of the course material. I start the first lecture of the semester, or a one-to-one meeting with a graduate student, by telling them that I will gladly explain again by reformulating the same ideas under various forms. I use all kinds of pedagogical material to achieve this, such as newspapers, movies, and artwork. In my course on infrastructure, I paired the reading of academic articles with excerpts from Orhan Pamuk's *Kafamda Bir Tuhaflik* because the novel speaks eloquently to widespread urban change. Students loved reading the book: they felt that this close-to-home portrayal of Istanbul really helped them better appreciate the thrust of theoretical arguments tackled in class.

I strive for students to become concurrently inquisitive, collaborative, and respectful thinkers. This manifests first in leading by my own example as an attentive teacher, for instance when asking students to regularly assess my own teaching. I require anonymous feedback from my students after a few weeks and then adjust the course material accordingly. Importantly, I am willing to show students the limits of my own knowledge while turning this into an opportunity for further learning together. When I led laboratory sessions about prehistoric archaeology as a teaching assistant, I would tell students when I did not know the answer to their question and I would search the information and report back to the class the following week. I also aim to motivate students to learn from each other. One way I did this is through my office hours: instead of always receiving students one by one, we put in place group meetings where students could debate ideas about controversial archaeological hypotheses.

Inspiring students to produce high-quality work is at the core of my teaching. For this reason, I ask them to consider themselves to be as capable as the eminent scholars they admire. When requesting students to write weekly response on the readings, I underscore that published articles should not be taken as ultimate truths. While I tell students that they can of course disagree with the text, I recommend that they pay particular attention to the new ideas, questions, and feelings the text generates for them. Approaching the text from the perspective of judgement is an inclination I have seen many students take on during my years as a teacher. In my view however, solid critical thinking requires first and foremost a careful appraisal of the value and novelty of an author's ideas. Finally, I set up demanding assignments but I devise them with very clear expectations. I believe that assignments should enable students to develop their own findings through independent research and serve as an opportunity to receive constructive feedback. In my course on the Anthropology of Infrastructure, students carried out an ethnographic project from start to end, including data collection, analysis, and reporting. To make it actionable for students, I segmented this project into smaller steps throughout the semester. I also use assignments to help students improve their English and communication skills, which is why my evaluation schemes always combine a mixture of written and oral components.

I certainly hope that my love for teaching and my dedication for scrutinizing contemporary social issues will convince some of my students to become researchers, in academia or beyond. But most of all, I will feel that I have succeeded as a teacher if my students continue to inhabit the queries, discussions, and debates we have ignited together in my courses throughout their professional and personal lives. For instance, one of my students has designed a four-week workshop organized around readings of Orhan Pamuk's *Kafamda Bir Tuhaflik* and targeted city-tours led by scholars as a way to bring Turkish and foreign students in conversation around their diverse lives in Istanbul. My ultimate goal is to provide students with the knowledge, tools, and motivation to carry out projects and career paths that are meaningful and unique to them.