

Teaching Responsibilities

Instructor of Record University of Calgary, Department of Sociology (2025-Present)

| Course Code & Title | # of Sections | Average Enrollment | Total # of Students |
|----------------------------------|---------------|--------------------|---------------------|
| SOCI 201: Introductory Sociology | 1 | 400 | 400 |

Graduate Teaching Assistant University of Calgary, Dept. of Sociology (2021-Present)

| Course Code & Title | # of Sections | Average Enrollment | Total # of Students |
|------------------------------------------------|---------------|--------------------|---------------------|
| SOCI 303: Sociology of Gender | 2 | 170 | 340 |
| SOCI 313: Introductory Social Research Methods | 6 | 55 | 332 |
| SOCI 333: Contemporary Sociological Theory | 1 | 52 | 52 |
| LWSO 201: Introduction to Legal Studies | 1 | 200 | 200 |
| LWSO 313: Research Methods in Law and Society | 1 | 152 | 152 |

Guest Lectures University of Calgary, Department of Sociology (2022-Present)

| Year | Course Code & Title | Guest Lecture Title |
|------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------|
| 2024 | SOCI 421: Topics in Deviance and Criminology (Youth & Cyber-Risk) | Introduction & Critical Discussion of Gamergate |
| | LWSO 201: Introduction to Legal Studies | Introduction to Feminist and Queer Theory* |
| 2023 | LWSO 201: Introduction to Legal Studies | Introduction to Feminist and Queer Theory |
| | SOCI 403: Topics in Gender Relations (Gender & Media) | Queering Traditional Sociological Research Methods |
| 2022 | LWSO 201: Introduction to Legal Studies | Conducting Socio Legal Research in Everyday Lives |
| | SOCI 333: Contemporary Sociological Theory | Incorporating Contemporary Feminist Theorizing into Research |

*After giving the guest lecture, the professor [redacted] wrote a review of my work (see an excerpt below). In it she highlights how my passion for inclusivity and accessibility in the classroom consistently remain a priority for me. From my work as a teaching assistant to guest lecture to now course instructor—that drive always remains. You'll see these themes of inclusivity reflected and expanded on throughout the following sections.

"I invited J to give a guest lecture... J Overholser was exceptional in front of my 300 students – J was skillfully persuasive and used humor effectively. Students noted J's dedication to creating an inclusive classroom... In their lecture materials and conversations with students, J demonstrated their strong commitment to DEIA (equity, diversity, inclusivity, and accessibility). Many essays submitted by the students showed how J's work influenced their time in this course."
 -Teaching Review Letter, [redacted] University of Calgary)

Teaching Philosophy as a Graduate Teaching Assistant

Over the course of my undergraduate education, I saw just how much influence university instructors have over their students' experiences. A supportive and skilled professor, teaching assistant, or advisor can leave a lasting impact on a student's desire to learn, their belief in their abilities, they can inspire them to question the world around them, and so much more. I unfortunately had several negative experiences that almost kept me

from pursuing my graduate degrees, and they did result in me leaving my original field completely. As a graduate student, I thankfully also got to experience many positive moments with truly supportive and passionate professors and mentors. My experiences as a student, as well as the experiences of my closest friends and colleagues, have fueled my desire to create a more inclusive and accessible environment for learning in universities. As a sociology graduate teaching assistant—and now as a new sessional instructor as well—I am continuously learning how to better foster a love of learning within my students. Through this ongoing process I have developed three core beliefs that have formed the foundations of how I approach teaching. First, I believe that students learn best when **encouraged to identify and work with their own unique strengths** rather than being pushed to conform to a certain mold of the “ideal student.” Second, I believe that students are more likely to succeed in **a learning environment that both challenges and supports students** in their growth. Finally, I believe that students thrive best when they have **an instructor who actively seeks out and responds to feedback to improve their teaching.**

Working to their strengths: Traditional educational approaches are often guilty of pushing students to fit a certain mold (Capp 2017). Yet, I find that learning is noticeably more successful and *enjoyable* when you help students identify and work with their unique strengths, interests, and perspectives. When we encourage such diversity in perspectives and approaches to problem solving, we benefit from a wealth of knowledge becoming accessible within our classrooms that would not otherwise be (hooks 1994). Furthermore, for students whose way of thinking is divergent or noticeably different from the standard, attempting to force them to fit the mold only serves to create significant hurdles in their educational journey (Capp 2017; Hitchcock et al. 2002). By working with students to learn the material in ways that works best for them, I am able to create a classroom environment that is, as Gannon describes in *Radical Hope: A Teaching Manifesto*, “a place of radical welcome and maximum inclusion” (2020:58). Furthermore, this work also helps to encourage empathy in students for their fellow classmates—as they learn to identify their own unique perspective, they also learn to consider what unique skills and perspectives their classmates hold.

Challenging and supporting students: A vital part of making a classroom more accessible and inclusive requires creating an environment that both supports and encourages students to try, regardless of what they think the outcome will be (Feigenbaum 2021). In his book, Eyster (2018) highlights how a fear of failure acts to hold students back, and how without being willing to tackle challenging new material, their growth as both students and individuals is inhibited. I have experienced this firsthand as a student. While academically I often received good grades, I struggled for a long time to truly *thrive* in university, and I experienced little joy in learning because I did not have professors or educators who treated failure as anything other than negative. Yet, especially in education, failure can and should be celebrated. We can only learn a finite amount from success; yet there is so much more we can learn from each and every failure. Furthermore, especially in institutions such as academia, the systemic exclusion of people of color, 2SLGBTQ+ and women/femme identifying individuals, first generation college students, and so many more (Ahmed 2012; Bonilla-Silva and Peoples 2022; London, Anderson, and Downey 2012), have resulted in

many marginalized students internalizing deep feelings of inadequacy or of being an imposter. This can significantly increase fears of failing, especially in front of others. All of which can make university education even more inaccessible and harder to thrive in for these students.

Responsive instructors: Finally, in addition to working with students' unique strengths and perspectives, and creating a supportively challenging classroom environment, I believe that my responsiveness to feedback is just as important as my students'. As a teaching assistant, throughout the term I make a point to consistently engage with students around what they need to succeed in my classes. Echoing the transformative pedagogical approaches outlined by hooks (1994) and Gannon (2020), I cannot stress enough the importance of having an instructor/teaching assistant who is willing to listen to their students, is open to constructive student feedback, and able to adapt during the term to address problems as they arise. I strongly believe that engaging with students this way creates a more collaborative learning environment. Aligning with several different aspects of Universal Design for Learning principles (CAST 2024), this allows me to 1) tailor class sessions around what that cohort of students need, 2) identify and address different barriers to success that I would not otherwise be aware of, and 3) helps to convey the message to my students that I genuinely have their best interests and wellbeing in mind. Not only do I seek out feedback from the students in my classes, as a graduate teaching assistant I regularly solicit feedback on how I can further refine my teaching skills from faculty in my department and other teaching experts.

In the next section I will outline specific teaching and learning strategies that I employ which support these core pedagogical philosophies.

Teaching & Learning Strategies

"While it can become tricky with group work, especially when you are working alongside strangers... for someone like me who is introverted, it was nice to build closer relationships with people going through the same things. As a group, we understand one another and help in any way we can."

-Class Evaluation (SOC1

Working to their strengths: During my time as a teaching assistant for the University of Calgary's SOCI 313 course (Introductory Sociology Research Methods) I was responsible for leading the weekly lab sessions and I work closely with the professor to develop each lab assignment. From day 1 of these labs, I work to **familiarize myself with each of the students** and to **establish an inclusive classroom environment**. Because the work they do in that course is based in collaborative groupwork, I spend significant time in the beginning of the term **teaching them how to identify their style of work and communication, their strengths and limitations**—all things that once they have identified about themselves, they are able to bring to coordinating their groupwork to take advantage of what each person in the group brings to the table. The results from this are that I can visibly see that students are often more confident in who they are and thus feel more secure working with others.

Throughout the course I also **model the same behaviors and thought processes that I want the students to be engaging in**. I speak candidly about my own personal strengths and weaknesses as a TA and as a researcher. Each week, as the students are learning a new step in research design, I show them examples of what my process at that stage looked like for my master's and my ongoing PhD thesis. As a neurodivergent scholar myself, these examples

frequently highlight how different my approach can be from the examples they have been shown in previous courses. They also provide an excellent starting point for conversations around using your differences to excel. I have had several students approach me after I started sharing these examples to talk more about alternative approaches and I can see them improve in subsequent class sessions.

Challenging students, encouraging them to try, and supporting them afterwards:

There are several ways in which I work to encourage and support students as a teaching assistant, and I'll highlight several examples from my time as a TA for SOCI 313. It is incredibly common for this course to be one of the first times that students are engaging with the research design process and that can result in students frequently experiencing intense stress and anxiety. To encourage students, I focus on **establishing a learning environment that is more relaxed in tone and supportive**—a place where students can feel comfortable trying something new without needing it to be perfect on the first try. A major strategy for this is centered around how I approach student feedback. During the labs, I consistently and proactively check in with each group, **providing informal feedback and helping to guide students** through the process when they get stuck. After each lab I also **provide formal written feedback on their work** that is both **encouraging and constructive**. Following the suggestions of Walvoord and Anderson (2010) around effective grading, I make sure that that feedback focuses on three main components: 1) highlighting skills that students applied well, 2) identifying components that they missed or that need improvements and what exactly needs to be improved upon, and 3) posing additional questions that prompt students to consider aspects of the research process that they did not yet engage with. Especially with that last component, **phrasing the feedback in this question format** (rather than directly telling students what they need to do) can gently challenge and prod students to use reflective thought processes that they need to develop in the course.

Another example of how I create a classroom environment that combats students' fear of failure is by **frequently giving examples of my own experiences with failure** and/or times when I did not flawlessly succeed. I often find that undergraduate students put faculty and graduate students on pedestals—where they believe to reach that level of skill one must be perfect. After I give such examples in class, I consistently see a noticeable increase in the number of students coming to me during my office hours or after class to ask questions or seek assistance.

“I liked how J was always involved and always on their feet walking around answering people’s questions. J was super helpful and understanding, and overall just an awesome TA!!!”

--Midterm Course Evaluation, (SOCI 313, F22)
*See Appendix A

In an anonymous midterm feedback survey (SOCI 313, Winter, 2024), **85%** of students responded that they found my feedback on the lab assignments helpful *See Appendix C

“J has been the best lab TA I’ve had throughout my entire experience at U of C. They’ve been consistently accommodating to students. All the feedback on work has been very helpful, it has been consistently constructive without being condescending. It is evident that J is very knowledgeable about what they are teaching”

-Formal TA Evaluation (SOCI 313, W23) *See Appendix B

Responsive instructors: Looking again at my time as a teaching assistant for the University of Calgary's SOCI 313 course, there are several different examples of how I implement a pedagogical approach that is receptive to feedback. First, I prioritize collecting **anonymous feedback from students at several different points in the term and in different ways**, including via quick weekly check-ins on Menti.com (which the class can see in real time) and a longer survey around potential missing support in the lab shared a third of the way through the term (see Appendices A & B). This ensures that I am able to **adjust my teaching to match the needs of each unique cohort of students**. I also circulate an optional end of term anonymous survey focusing on the assignments, how supported students felt by my work, what aspects of the labs they appreciated the most/found the most helpful, and more. After each collection of feedback, I made sure to **engage in open and honest conversations with the class** about some of the common responses/concerns and how I can best address them.

"I trust that I can ask J questions and be welcomed! Thank you!"

- Midterm Course Student Evaluation, (SOCI 313, W24)

"From chatting about graduate programs to helping with STATS homework, J always finds time for their students, a quality that is hard to come by given the strenuous nature of academia."

- Student Letter *see appendix D

We also discuss any concerns or problems that students have that are outside my control—this helps students understand that I am not just ignoring them. For example, I often adjust how I structure the beginning instruction period of the lab each term based on what level of support that cohort of students find most beneficial. For this course, the professor and I also worked closely together to adjust the workload of the assignments based on how students reported their workload across classes over the term. During one term, leading up to midterms most students reported being incredibly overworked and exhausted. In response, the professor and I adjusted the assignments to have a shorter one due before midterms to lighten their load and prevent early burnout. Not only did the students appreciate this, but it also helped to keep students engaged in the course throughout the term rather than being checked out midway through.

To increase the accessibility of this component of my teaching approach, I also make sure to **offer multiple ways that students can get in contact with me**. Some of these ways include in-person office hours where I am wearing a N95 mask, online office hours, email, and I stay after class for students to talk to me if needed. For both in-person

and online office hours, I moved to make them **by-appointment rather than at a set time** so that I could **be more flexible for students with other commitments** such as work or childcare. These factors go a long way towards showing students that I am committed to not only listening to them but also working *with* them to make our classroom environment as supportive as possible.

In addition to engaging with feedback from the students, as a graduate teaching assistant, I **regularly meet with the course instructor** to discuss how each class went, and I **frequently**

"The amount of employable and practical skills acquired from working under J, is something that should be recognized, not only from me, but from the department. TA-instructed labs are always a hit or miss for students, and the apprehension that comes with taking a dense course such as research methods cannot be dismissed. I say with full confidence that any student should consider themselves lucky to have been instructed by a TA like J"

-Student Letter, SOCI 313 *see appendix D

solicit their feedback and suggestions on how I could improve upon my teaching and learning skills. Not only has this helped me to improve my teaching by leaps and bounds from when I first started as a TA, but I have also learned value skills on how to effectively mentor others outside of the classroom—skills that I have relied heavily on in following terms as a TA, working with other graduate teaching assistants and undergraduate peer mentors.

Professional Learning and Development

I recognize that my teaching and learning skills are something that will always require further growth and development. There will never be a time that I can say “I’ve learned all there is to know,” as there are always new perspectives to consider and skills to refine. As such, I am constantly reflecting on my teaching practices, proactively seeking out advice and suggestions from those with different experiences, engaging with the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) literature, and pursuing diverse professional learning opportunities. Just as I value student feedback as a source of guidance on how I can improve, since starting at the University of Calgary I have also completed many different courses, workshops, and training modules through the Taylor Institute for Teaching and Learning (TITL)—including earning multiple graduate student micro credentials through the TITL. These learning opportunities have helped me reflect on my practices, strengthen my pedagogical approach, and challenged me to reconsider what is possible in teaching and learning. I have also pursued outside training through Alberta Health Services’ “Community Helper Mental Health & Suicide Prevention Program” to ensure that I am supporting both students’ educational and emotional needs. What follows is a list of some of the professional development opportunities that have *particularly* impacted me.

| Year | Type | Completed Professional Learning Opportunity | *Selected List* |
|------|---------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------|
| 2024 | Certification | Learning Spaces and Digital Pedagogy (TITL - Ucalgary) | |
| | Certification | Course Design (TITL - Ucalgary) | |
| | Certification | Community Helper Mental Health & Suicide Prevention Program (Alberta Health Services) | |
| | Workshop | Engaging Discussions with Learning Technology (TITL - Ucalgary) | |
| | Workshop | UDL and Inclusive D2L Course Design (TITL - Ucalgary) | |
| | Workshop | Fostering a Positive Learning Environment in Your Class (TITL - Ucalgary) | |
| 2022 | Course | ARTS 601: Theory & Practice of Teaching and Learning (Ucalgary) | |

Awards and Recognition

| Year | Award/Recognition | *Selected List* |
|---------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------|
| 2024 | Awarded: University of Calgary Sociology Department Graduate Teaching Award | |
| | Awarded: University of Calgary Teaching and Learning Grant with an Emerging Scholar Supplement (co-applicant: Dr. Annette Tézli, University of Calgary) | |
| | Awarded: University of Calgary Sociology Department Special Recognition Award | |
| | Awarded: University of Calgary Eyes High International Doctoral Scholarship | |
| 2022-23 | Awarded: Alberta Graduate Excellence Scholarship (AGES) - International | |

Teaching and Learning Research/Scholarship

My overarching passion with teaching and learning has long been about working to make university education more accessible and inclusive. Thus, much of my work engaging with and contributing to the Scholarship for Teaching and Learning (SoTL) research has largely focused on practical applications of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Accessibility (EDIA) principles. Presently, I am currently completing a SoTL research project as the co-Principal Investigator with Dr. Annette Tézli (Sociology Department, University of Calgary). This research—which is funded by the TITL—is focused on applying UDL and EDIA principle to online teaching and learning when teaching social research methods. My work in this area has also recently been featured in the article [“Reframing the Narrative Around Online Learning.”](#) Through this work I have presented at multiple Teaching and Learning conferences including the 2024 Symposium for Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (Banff, Alberta) and at the 2025 University of Calgary Teaching Days (Calgary, Alberta). I’ve also co-organized and chaired a session at the 2025 Canadian Sociological Association’s Annual Conference titled “Schools, Stakeholders, and the Production of Gender and Sexuality.”

Over the course of this SoTL research project, I have also had the chance to mentor an undergraduate research assistant. This student also took SOCI 313 with me as a TA and later returned to this course to work with me as an Undergraduate Peer Mentor. Throughout my time working with this student, I had the chance to mentor them in the areas of teaching and learning in multiple contexts (*to see their letter of support, see Appendix D*). These moments of personal connection and mentorship mean just as much to me as the more formal academic scholarship when it comes to teaching and learning.

Looking Forward: Teaching Goals

A common thread throughout this document is that I am continuously reflecting on and seeking out different ways to improve my teaching practices. In previous sections I have highlighted different professional development learning opportunities that I have engaged in, as well as my ongoing work in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning. As I look back on the work that I have done, I am reminded of just how much I have grown from my experiences—both inside and out of the classroom—and how much the students that I have worked with have directly contributed to that growth. As I look to the future and reflect on my teaching goals, I find my passion for inclusivity and accessibility in the classroom only growing and I am genuinely excited to continue to develop my teaching and learning practices to better support my students.

Short-term Goals: As I begin the final years of my doctoral program at the University of Calgary, I have several short-term teaching goals that I am aiming to tackle. First, I have already completed several of the courses for the Postdoctoral Scholar and Graduate Certificates in University Teaching and Learning through the Taylor Institute and I plan on completing at least two more (thus earning the full certificate). As I begin teaching my own courses as a sessional instructor, I look forward to applying my knowledge around teaching and learning to these courses. I also know that these courses will bring with them new challenges—as I take on the role of instructors rather than TA, as I tackle larger course

enrollment sizes, as I teach an array of new (to me) topics—and I plan on enrolling in further learning opportunities through the Taylor Institute to help me continue to improve my practices. I also aim to take a more active role in collaborative producing teaching and learning resources—a goal I am already working towards as I start a graduate internship with the Taylor Institute.

Long-term Goals: Looking ahead to consider my longer-term goals, I do not see my passion for creating a more accessible and inclusive university learning environment waning anytime soon. As I approach the end of my doctoral program, my goal is to continue in academia and to pursue a university faculty position. Especially given the current sociopolitical climate and the increase in anti-intellectualism that we are seeing, I think it is even more important that university instructors work to foster that love of learning in our students. Overall, my future goal as a professor will be to encourage critical thinking skills and actively work to promote inclusion and support in university classrooms.

References

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Appendices

Appendix A - Lab Evaluation Question & Unedited Responses (SOCI 313, Fall 2022)

Informal, Anonymous Midterm Lab Evaluation, *SOCI 313: Intro. to Social Research Methods*

University of Calgary Teaching Awards 2025 - Award for Graduate Assistants (Teaching)
J Overholser, Department of Sociology, Faculty of Arts

Semester: Fall 2022

Enrollment: 50, returned surveys: 7

Q: A large part of teaching is being open to improvement. With this in mind, do you have any additional feedback for the TA specifically? (This can be positive and/or constructive)

- I liked how J was always involved and always on their feet walking around answering peoples questions. I would say to definitely have the labs due the day after, starting from the beginning of the semester. If I could not finish the lab during class hours (which only happened 2 or 3 times) it was really tricky trying to get it done before midnight if I had a closing shift. That is it though! J was super helpful and understanding, and overall just an awesome TA!!!
- I think J has been a very good TA who's very open to answering questions to the best of their ability. The only feedback I would provide is to add some of the questions asked by students in lab to their lab slides and or the assignments so that there's less confusion for future lab classes.
- that the TA is doing a good job helping everyone when they needed help
- Thank you so much J for being so courteous, relatable, and overall helpful to our group in our pursuit to be the best we could be in lab!
- Thank you for being receptive to group project issues. I don't know if this lab has completely won me over on group work, but it helped that you understood and were willing to help.

Appendix B - Lab Evaluation Question & Unedited Responses (SOC1 313, Winter 2023)

Faculty of Arts Teaching Assistant Class Evaluation, *SOCI 313: Intro. to Social Research Methods*

Semester: Winter 2024

Enrollment: 55, Returned surveys: 18

Q: Please write any comments you wish to make about the teaching assistant in relation to those aspects of the course over which the teaching assistant had responsibility.

- J has been the best lab TA I've had throughout my entire experience at U of C. It has been a complete pleasure to have them direct us through the lab portion of this course. They've been consistently accommodating to students. All the feedback on work has been very helpful, it has been consistently constructive without being condescending. It is evident that J is very knowledgeable about what they are teaching.
- Very easy to talk to, great at pointing us in the right direction when stuck on a question.
- Always explained the material well, and if we had any questions or concerns about the labs, they always gave insightful and helpful info.
- I think J was a great TA. It always felt comfortable when I asked questions and they provided detailed answers.
- They did a great job explaining the labs and were very friendly. I enjoyed the lab with J and I hope their graduate studies go well!
- They are very helpful and nice. We had hard questions, so sometimes we stumped them. [laughing emoji]
- Very nice TA, very happy with the grading as it was fast. Comments were concise and helpful.
- The TA was awesome and nice. Very informed on labs and clear with instruction.
- The first few graded comments were not as comprehensive, but this seemed to improve with the progression of the semester.

Appendix C - Lab Evaluation Questions & Unedited Responses (SOC1 313, Winter 2024)

Informal, Anonymous Midterm Lab Evaluation, *SOCI 313: Intro. to Social Research Methods*

Semester: Winter 2024

Enrollment: 55, Returned surveys: 51

Q: Did you find the feedback from lab assignments helpful?

Strongly Disagree: 1, Disagree: 2, Neutral: 4, Agree: 29, Strongly Agree: 15