As a student, I believe a successful learning situation is one in which I am inspired to challenge my previous thinking about the world. I also value being held accountable for my own learning but feeling that the teacher is available to assist me in the learning process. Learning occurs when you are required to stretch your mind and make room for foreign ideas, some that may even be offensive to your personal sensitivities and preconceptions, but which enrich your understanding of the world around you.

As a teacher, I hope to encourage cultural competency, transformational learning, critical thinking, a life-long commitment to understanding disadvantaged groups, and a desire to ease the plights of others. A perfect teaching situation for me would be one in which I could intellectually and emotionally engage students in the coursework and inspire their interest in the topic under discussion, whether they initially had that interest or I was able to help them develop it through effective teaching. I want to teach because I want to inspire students to care about the world around them and, in particular, to care about disadvantaged groups and older adults in those groups. I aspire to be approachable and to maintain high standards of performance for my students; they should feel that I am available to them outside of the classroom for individualized assistance. I also aspire to be teachable, as well as to be an effective teacher. I will know I have been effective as a teacher when I see my students’ eyes light up with understanding of challenging concepts in the classroom and when I hear from them that they want to make a difference in the lives of others.

My favorite classroom moments are when students are able to see beyond their own personal history and recognize the validity of other people’s experiences as worthy of further exploration. Those moments of enlightenment can lead to inspiration and a commitment to helping others. Introductory courses in gerontology, sociology or social work have the potential to open students’ eyes to information about the world around them to which they may not have previously been exposed. Enlightenment can come to students from a variety of sources, and teaching methods should include myriad approaches appropriate to the topic, to ensure that all students have the same opportunities. My preferred teaching methods can include:

- Interactive lectures and class discussion, to encourage active learning and hold students accountable for class preparation
- Case studies, and debates of ethics and theories involved in each case, to encourage critical thinking;
- Documentary or dramatic videos, to bring abstractions to life and make them more emotionally real for students and introduce them to different life experiences;
- Classroom presentations of course materials by students, to encourage in-depth consideration of concepts being taught;
- Service learning, to encourage transformational learning and cultural awareness;
- Writing assignments, to allow students to practice research and incorporate materials additional to those included in the syllabus;
- Role-playing and in-class simulations, to make theories and concepts explored in the classroom more relevant to the students’ own lived experiences; and
- Group work, to expose students to the importance of working with others and facilitate their ability to hold themselves and others accountable for legitimate contributions.
Because different students demonstrate successful learning in different ways, I think student grades should be a composite of class participation, written assignments, traditional tests, term projects (individual or group), and service or experiential learning. I have learned that providing grading criteria for written assignments, particularly for undergraduate students, better enables them to meet the objectives set forth in those assignments. I believe students benefit from pre-test question and answer periods including specific guidelines about what to study for a test, but struggle to balance that assistance against holding students responsible for all course readings.

As a teacher, it is my job to coach students through the learning process, to provide adequate information and resources for them to achieve the objectives of the course, and also to place the onus of that learning squarely on their shoulders. I think there is a fine balance between hand-holding students through the learning process, which I think happens too often in some academic settings, and providing students with adequate instructions and examples to enable them to perform well and meet my standards as their teacher. As a new teacher, I struggle to balance my idealism and the real limitations of life in the classroom, as well as to ensure that I incorporate all of the methods and attitudes that I have discussed here. My commitment is to excellence in myself and for my students, but as a graduate student that commitment has meant a struggle between stringent standards and openness to student abilities and limitations. As an example, one of my favorite moments as a teaching assistant came when a student expressed great dismay over a grade I had given her on her first paper of the semester. She had received a lower grade than she expected because she had failed to follow the guidelines for the paper. While she had the highest grade in the class (many of her peers had failed), it was not the A that she usually got. Her reaction seemed to be about more than the one grade. The professor and I were able to offer her empathy and draw out the underlying stressors that were exacerbating her reaction, without being apologetic about the grade. In the end, we had a plan for the next project that allowed for feedback prior to her handing in the assignment, yet still holding her accountable to the standards set for the assignment. We also revised the format for the remaining assignments for that class, providing clearer objectives and grading criteria, and making that pre-deadline feedback available to everyone in the class. Not everyone took advantage of the additional feedback, but the original student did, and with our modifications to the assignment format her next paper was of much higher quality than the first.

I would like to be more relaxed in the classroom than I have been as a graduate student, and I think that will come with practice. I think that student evaluations can play an important role in helping me achieve balance in the classroom and can be importance sources of information about the effectiveness of my teaching and of whether or not I have effectively enabled students to meet objectives outlined in the syllabus. To build teaching skills, I plan on taking advantage of teaching workshops at annual meetings of professional associations, like the Council on Social Work Education or the Association for Gerontology in Higher Education, and to seek advice and mentorship from senior faculty.