

Teaching Philosophy Statement

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Political science is a field in which students must learn to differentiate between theory and reality, to defend and critique ideas, and to engage with difficult and controversial topics. These skills extend beyond the university classroom; they are essential for any consumer of information in the modern world. Helping students refine these skills, while building a connection with them, is my primary goal in the classroom.

In discussion and writing based classes, I set ground rules for all discussions which include understanding the difference between attacking ideas and attacking people and prioritizing the voices of students who tend to speak up less in class or feel systematically unwelcomed in the university classroom. I heavily employ the Socratic method to force students to examine the underlying frames that structure – and limit – their opinions. In a recent class on the U.S. federal court system, discussion stalled when all students agreed that recent Trump appointees to the courts seemed threatening in some way. Instead of moving to a new topic, I pushed students to articulate (a) what principles of American democracy were being violated by Trump’s judicial appointment philosophy, (b) what rules have facilitated this breakdown, and (c) what options might exist to reform or reshape those rules. Students were surprised to realize that their opinions about these deeper topics were more nuanced (and different from each other) than had it originally seemed. Ideally, all students leave these types of discussions with a firmer foundation for their own views of the political world and in some cases with changed – and stronger – political philosophies.

Because political topics are often woven into the fabric of our very identities, I also engage with students’ emotions during difficult or controversial discussions and seek to undermine the false dichotomy between the instrumental and the expressive. To help create a space that is open to both the factual and emotional, I utilize activities that encourage students to reflect before speaking. In a recent discussion I led on Black maternal mortality, I had students write a “2 Minute Paper” before opening up the discussion. This gave students more confidence to explain their initial thoughts and feelings on this topic in a more controlled way and without feeling put “on the spot.” We also took several moments during the discussion to pause and allow us all to process the emotions we were experiencing. I received very positive feedback from students regarding this discussion because they felt empowered to express their true feelings regarding this heavy issue and did not feel a need to remain “neutral” in service of myself or others in the classroom feeling more comfortable.

When it comes to assessment, I strive to practice total transparency and take care to frame failure as an important and even sometimes necessary step towards learning. I publish clear directions, example assignments, and rubrics well in advance so that students have models for their work. I also extensively use office hours as an opportunity to discuss students’ work and help them improve. In a recent writing-based class I taught, students were allowed to rewrite one paper

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each semester and have the grade for the rewritten paper totally replace the original grade. This was a refreshing change of pace for everyone, as the importance of editing is often preached but not practiced in university courses. I saw substantial improvement in students' writing over the course of the semester, and students also reported greater confidence in their abilities after meeting with me to work on rewriting an old paper. In another course I taught that required learning the basics of coding in R, I made sure to give partial credit on assignments when students were on the right track but faced an unexpected error message. Encouraging students to try and fail (and then try again) and normalizing this process of trial and error as part of learning how to code resulted in many more coding skills gained by the end of the semester than would have been had I taken off points less discriminately.

In all my interactions with students, I strive to cultivate a dynamic of trust. By practicing flexibility in the classroom, I encourage students to take ownership of their learning goals and create an environment in which students from diverse backgrounds can succeed in spite of the many demands life may place on them. When handling students' requests for accommodation, I apply the principle that an accessible classroom is good for everyone and creatively implement accommodations in an across-the-board manner rather than singling out individual students as "disabled" or "different." I also regularly take time to reflect on my own positionality as an instructor and how it may influence my relationships with students. In a public health class I taught that focused extensively on racism within healthcare, I invited students to anonymously share impressions at the end of every discussion to ensure that my positionality as a white teacher was not negatively impacting the classroom environment.

At this point I have spent nearly ten years teaching in some capacity; six of these years have been in the postsecondary context. I have demonstrated my flexibility, tackling both lower-level courses and upper-level courses, courses that focus on concrete skills and ones that focus on abstract concepts, those that emphasize quantitative methods and those that emphasize qualitative methods, courses that implement innovative new teaching methods and ones that stick to tradition, and navigating the sudden transition to online learning that took place during winter of 2020 at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. Throughout these courses and experiences, I have yet to find a concept that I can't break down in an understandable way or a group of students that I can't create a connection with. These connections are often just as meaningful to me as they are to the students, which is why pedagogy remains one of my top priorities and most significant callings.

N.B.: My most recent teaching evaluations are attached to this application. Additional evaluations are available on request.