

Statement of Teaching Philosophy

I approach teaching political science with one overarching goal: to engage students with the political world. For many students, their time in my classroom may be one of the few times in their adult lives where they will devote any significant amount of time to overt thought about politics. My goal for these students is to help them understand the relevance and presence of politics in their lives and to spark further engagement as citizens. For others, their time in my classroom will be one of many political encounters. My goal for these students is to increase their understanding of politics and to expose them to new ideas and perspectives on politics. By engaging students in the study of contemporary and historical problems in American politics, and by connecting these problems to their own lives, I work to nudge all students towards greater political engagement and awareness of their own capacities as citizens.

I have worked for several years to put these ideas into practice in my own teaching as a discussion leader and in my own courses. I have found that one of my most effective teaching tools is a sense of humor. I emulate past professors who used humor as a means of relating to students and keeping the classroom environment conversational and informal. This allows my personality to come through and helps to create a sense of authenticity with the students. This sense of authenticity and conversational environment in the classroom helps to engage students from a variety of backgrounds in a classroom community. Establishing a sense of comfort with *me* allows many students to then be more at ease with one another. I am then able to invite and include the perspectives of many students in my teaching. I ask all students to seriously consider the connections between the abstract or factual course material and their own backgrounds and knowledge. This provokes serious discussion and thought among them. In a classroom community built on a sense of comfort and respect for each student's knowledge, ideas, and background, democratic learning can flourish. I work hard to provide such an environment.

In the summers of 2014 and 2015, I taught intensive summer courses focusing on politics and fiction. This was an opportunity to help students connect abstract ideas of government and politics to a more intimate aspect of their lives: television. I designed the courses expose students to the intersections of popular culture and political science with a guiding question: what can a study of political drama tell us about our own expectations of government and democracy? We interrogated the shows *The West Wing*, *The Newsroom*, and *House of Cards* through a combination of scholarly and popular readings, episode viewings, and classroom discussions connecting the two. For example, I ask students to read a short piece by Jurgen Habermas about mediated political communication in the middle of viewing *The Newsroom*. I teach *The Newsroom* with a focus on the show's theme of media's responsibility to promote civility. Though the reading is challenging, the reading and subsequent discussion helps students to push against their prior views of the media's democratic function. The feedback for these courses shows that most students find them engaging. Even non-majors report that the format helps them to understand ideas about politics in ways they had not previously. As many of the students taking these intense summer courses were approaching graduation, I was especially pleased to hear that they had taken some small sense of increased political awareness from the course.

A sense of authenticity with my students and the hard work of connecting academic political science with their own backgrounds are the hallmarks of my approach to teaching. I also work to develop students' practical skills. I use a mixture of traditional assessments and classroom activities in order to do so. I often ask students to perform brief writing tasks such as policy memos or case briefs with explicit word limits. These short writing assignments force them to forego superfluous writing and express ideas with brevity. I also incorporate public speaking in the classroom regularly, formally and informally. Formally, I ask students to speak in front of the class – sometimes in the

form of brief conceptual presentations, sometimes in the form of a mock trial activity. Informally, I ask students to engage in discussions about the topic of the day with reference to evidence from the readings and their own backgrounds. The goal of these assignments and activities is both to develop students' practical skills and to emphasize their own capacities as citizens.

The mock trial activity mentioned above is one that has worked well in my discussion sections for introductory American government and is an example of how I synthesize abstract ideas with student involvement in the classroom. In this activity, students are assigned a number of readings providing background on some current political controversy from multiple perspectives. I spend time in the class discussing how lawyers make arguments, usually with reference to constitutional law, and ask for student volunteers to serve as attorneys. I invite students to take this as an opportunity to explore arguments outside of their own belief systems or to articulate their beliefs in legalistic terms, as well as to take the opportunity to speak publicly in a structured format. Many students volunteer for the role after this invitation that are otherwise reserved in the classroom. Attorneys are randomly assigned to argue one of two perspectives but have choice in which arguments they choose to emphasize. "Oral arguments" are held in which each attorney presents a prepared argument on the issue, and a class discussion of the various arguments occurs. This is followed by a short written assignment asking each member of the class who did not serve as an attorney to decide how they would "rule" on the case before them based on attorneys' arguments and readings. This activity encourages student engagement at every step of the way and maximizes participation from every student, through research, writing, speaking, and discussion. Students have consistently reported enjoying this and similar activities that break with a more traditional lecture format.

I formulated my approach to teaching after an international student approached me about her concerns in my first year as a discussion leader for intro American government. She was a successful student whose grades and participation were good. She was concerned not about her grade but about her engagement with the material. She found it difficult because she had little familiarity with or connection to American politics. I suggested that she consider the material from her own background. While the factual content of the course was important, equally important were the broader questions about governance and citizenship the class confronted. I suggested that she had surely given consideration to questions about what government should or should not do, what the proper role of a citizen is, what does or does not work about democracy, or what makes a good leader. These were all questions she had indeed thought about. Over the remainder of the semester, she referred back to her own political experiences and seemed much more engaged.

These are the sorts of questions all of us have thought about at some point, in some context. They can provide the groundwork for a politically aware strength-based alternative to the deficit model of student understanding. Viewed from this perspective, it is almost certain that every student in the classroom, regardless of background, has engaged in at least some political thinking. It is my job is to draw out this political thinking in the classroom; to create a classroom community in which students can engage in a co-production of knowledge and develop their political awareness in the context of their own already formed political opinions, however nascent. I have come to firmly believe that this is a critical insight for teachers of politics to have when trying to bring the political world to life: most students already have prior knowledge of these issues in their own experiences and backgrounds and have some level of political awareness that we should work with them to expand. The most effective way to make the connection – to bring the political world to life – is to tap into this already extant political thinking and help students to join the two together. In this way, they move beyond the foundational elements of teaching into actual learning and, ideally, higher levels of political thinking.