

Teaching Philosophy

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Teaching Interests

I have taught a number of courses at Missouri Southern State University, the University at Buffalo, SUNY, and Buffalo State, SUNY. These have included updated preparations of introductory and upper level undergraduate courses as *American Foreign Policy*, *International Relations*, *Introduction to Government and Politics*, *Comparative Politics*, *Globalization and Development*, *Introduction to American Politics*, *American Public Policy*, *The Policy Process*, *Mass Media and American Politics*, *Conspiratorial Thought and Theory*, *Civil Rights Tour of the South*, and *Research Methods*. In addition to these face-to-face classes I have taught several on-line classes such as *Introduction to Government and Politics* and *American Public Policy*.

In the Fall of 2011, I conducted an independent study entitled *The Politics of European Union* for 12 advanced undergraduates. As the Faculty Advisor of the SUNY Model European Union Club, I designed the course to prepare students for the upcoming simulation which took place in January 2012 in Exeter, UK. For the Spring 2014 semester at MSSU I designed a course entitled *The Living Constitution* which was co-taught with a colleague. We covered the most important aspects of the U.S. Constitution, including its drafting, ratification, evolution, legal processes, and modern issues for debate. The capstone of the course was a 10 day trip to Washington, D.C., Boston, MA, and Philadelphia, PA; students were able to experience the material first hand at a plethora of historical sites. In the Spring of 2015 I designed a course entitled *The Civil Rights Tour of the South*, where we covered the most important aspects of the Southern Civil Rights movement. The capstone of the trip was a 9 day trip across the most important Civil Rights historical sites in Arkansas, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, and Tennessee. These courses are examples of how my classes blend course material with hands-on learning experiences for ultimate student engagement.

In addition to the above classes I am prepared to teach courses on the following topics: international relations theory, war and international security, international political economy, American public opinion and voting, campaign and elections, state politics, legislative politics, the effect of domestic politics on international relations, politics and information technology/new media, formal/game theory, and research methods for the social sciences (including research design, introductory, intermediate, and advanced statistics).

Teaching Philosophy

Being an effective teacher is my most important goal. I prepare my readings, lectures, assignments, and course activities to be collectively focused on engaging and challenging my students. The most influential professors in my life have been synergistic educators. I define *Synergy* as the interaction or cooperation of two or more agents to produce a combined effect greater than the sum of their separate forces. There are three interacting constructs which create a synergistic learning environment: (1) Professor Enthusiasm, (2) Student Engagement, and (3) Directed Assessment.

Great professors are excited to introduce and teach course material. It is imperative that educators enjoy not only presenting scientific knowledge but also adding to its accumulation. Enthusiasm can inspire students and activate student engagement. I push my students to think analytically about political phenomenon. I help them to

think theoretically in the study of politics rather than simply requiring them to memorize facts. My approach to teaching focuses on the “why” rather than the “what”. Specifically, my classes build upward from the underlying theories and dynamics that explain political phenomenon so that students can explain how theoretical models can be applied to real world events. I find this approach to be rewarding for both students and instructor. Part of this process is choosing course materials and assignments that keep students interested in the topic.

Student engagement is vital for an interactive classroom. Engaged students are highly motivated to learn, interested in the material, and think critically about important concepts. Therefore, class materials, such as textbooks, must be vetted well. Effective instructors are always looking to improve class materials, especially when innovative new options are available. For example, I have recently adopted a student engagement tool called *TopHat*, which allows students to immerse themselves in the lecture with some really fantastic interactive tools. Prior to *TopHat* I used *Clickers in the Classroom* to achieve better student engagement. As a dedicated instructor I am continually reorganizing my classes, keeping what works and replacing under-producing elements. I take student feedback seriously and I strive to be the best educator possible.

One of the most important elements of any teaching philosophy is assessment. Each assessment instrument must be both challenging and germane. A challenging instrument adequately separates high-performing students, average students, and those needing improvement. A germane instrument is tailored so that the material being tested is the material which was covered in course-work. However, the most important aspect used to inform future instruction is what a professor does once outcomes are calculated. Outstanding professors continually learn what works and what doesn't, making it a point to evolve classroom designs to improve student performance. This helps me to be a self-reflective practitioner.

A highly enthusiastic professor, engaged students, and adequate assessments combine to produce optimal learning. I have designed my classes to meet the functional requirements of a synergistic learning environment with an emphasis on the scientific method and student interaction.

Course Design

The “science” component of Political Science is often absent at the undergraduate level. In many instances complex material is reduced to vocabulary words or short paragraphs in textbooks. It is important to demonstrate to students the process of creating scientific knowledge. Each of my classes incorporates an element of research methods and design by requiring students to read, interpret, and understand scholarly material. This material includes (but is not limited to) the presentation of formal/game theory; descriptive statistics; collecting and using data sets; hypothesis testing; and multiple regression. The foundation of my courses are presented in both lecture and seminar formats. Teaching is not synonymous with one-way lecturing. Real world application and class interaction helps students to internalize the material and apply it to their own lives.

A primary component of all my classes is student participation. Discussion and student interaction are an important portion of the class grade. One effective technique which can inspire student participation is to open up each class with a discussion of current events which pertain to the week's material. Throughout class, students often return to current events examples and apply the material in ways that have meaning in their own lives. As the professor I guide respectful and productive student interaction during every class. The technique I use to achieve this is to have students give 3 short article presentations throughout the semester. The students open up the class with a 2-3 minute presentation on a current article and relate that to something we have learned in class. These presentations are accompanied with a short response paper. I then guide a brief discussion of the events in the articles. These short presentations have injected my courses with a greater level of understanding by linking course material with actual events.

Engagement in the classroom is indispensable for undergraduate learning because uninterested and disengaged

students will not have the desire to take an active part in learning. I have designed a series of classroom simulations that bring the material to life and engage students far beyond the reading. For example, I have developed a Congressional simulation for my American politics classes which places students in the roles of Representative, Senator, Conference Committee member, and additional capacities. Students write bills, have debate, and eventually try to pass their bills in both chambers, always conforming to the institutional procedures in the U.S. Congress. I have developed a range of classroom simulations including Moot Court, Model World Trade Organization, Model United Nations, Model European Union, and a state of nature game for Comparative Politics. These activities take what students learn in lecture and given them practical meaning, while keeping students engaged and excited about the material.

In order to achieve student participation and engagement the instructor should enter each class with high energy and enthusiasm. Semester after semester the most common comment on my course reviews is how enthusiastic and excited the professor is about the course material. For example, on a recent course evaluation for my *Public Policy* class a student writes, "He's a phenomenal teacher. He's knowledgeable, fair, and obviously passionate about the course material. I would highly recommend him to any student who wants to learn a ton from a solid educator..." Each and every class I notice that my energy and ebullience becomes contagious and inspires students to interact and engage in the material. Keeping up with current events and research also helps to keep the material meaningful and relevant. Combining professor enthusiasm with student engagement tools - such as *TopHat* - have enhanced my courses greatly and produced better outcomes and stronger grade performance.

Another important part of any course is adequate assessment instruments. First, several different instruments should be designed, each with a specific purpose. For instance, a portion of each student's grade is derived from what are called "D.I.R.T." quizzes. D.I.R.T. stands for "Did I Read Today". These assessments are designed to make reading the material assigned for each class incentive compatible. Each quiz consists of one to three multiple choice or short answer questions which are reasonably simple for students who have read. Incentive compatibility is a fundamental part of directed assessment. Another example of incentive compatibility is that students must earn participation points throughout the semester; this gives students a clear incentive to take part in class discussions, ask questions, and give their input. My classes also contain non-cumulative examinations. Exams are designed to gauge students' knowledge and *application* of the material. Application of the material is combined with basic understanding.

The final, and most important, assessment in each of my classes is the Final Paper/Project. Its importance rests on the fact that it is a culminating project in the sense that students have to incorporate a semester's worth of knowledge into one assessment. For example, for my American Public Policy class students are required to research a piece of legislation of their choice and track its evolution through different policy stages such as problem definition, policy formulation, implementation, evaluation, and termination. However, a requirement of the paper is to apply classic and modern theoretical perspectives of the policy process to their given piece of legislation. This forces them to think outside the limited *stages heuristic* and apply different theories learned throughout the semester (i.e. pluralism, multiple streams, institutional rational choice, punctuated equilibrium, etc.). In my research methods course students complete 5 assignments - Literature Review, Theory, Hypotheses, and Research Design/Methods, and Data Collection - and then take my feedback and combine them into a single research paper. Culminating assessments allow students to think of the material in the aggregate and connect different avenues of thought into a subject matter of which they are interested. Students find these projects to be both challenging and relevant. Challenging in the sense that they require substantial mastery of the material and relevant because they often have some discretion in what they are allowed to research.

A fundamental goal for each of my classes is to prepare students to conduct their own research, take more advanced classes, and move on to graduate school. I endeavor to set a positive example for my students. I require dedication, hard work, and respect from them and give as much in return.

The Importance of Learning Beyond the Classroom

I believe that teaching and research should be highly integrated. Great teachers are at the forefront of the research in their field and make it a point to demonstrate to students how research has evolved over time. This calls for the integration of the scientific method and modern research into the classroom. Political science is a field that is always changing, as some puzzles come closer to being solved while others are newly uncovered. The nature of political science lends to the fact that valuable learning occurs outside of the classroom.

I welcome the opportunity to conduct independent studies, advise honor students, advise student clubs and activities, and mentor students in the aggregate. For instance, the University at Buffalo was a member of the SUNY Model European Union for several years prior to 2009. However, due to faculty changes the Model EU program was abandoned. Upon learning about this program, I recruited a set of students from several of my classes and took the initiative to reinstate the Model EU for the Spring 2011 semester. As stated above, for the 2011 Fall semester I designed an Independent Study based on the Politics of the European Union. In January of 2012 I accompanied the University at Buffalo Model EU group to Exeter, UK to take part in our second simulation. In the Spring of 2013 our took part in our third simulation held in New York City at the SUNY Global Center. I find that these opportunities are worthwhile learning experiences for both participating students and myself.

At MSSU I am the co-adviser for the Mock Trial Team and our team is nationally ranked. The Living Constitution trip was such a success that my colleague and completed another trip, this time a Civil Rights course with an accompanying Civil Rights tour of the South. This year I am bringing the Model EU to MSSU and working with the Midwest Model EU association our of Bloomington, Indiana. I look forward to embracing these opportunities at my next academic institution.

Conclusion

Teaching and research are fundamental parts of any academic position. A great teacher creates a synergistic learning environment where the sum of professor-to-student and student-to-student interactions are greater than their parts. Professor enthusiasm, student engagement, and directed assessment make up a teaching philosophy which is highly effective at creating the desired outcomes. My classes are designed to produce incentive compatibility, the idea that assignments will act as incentives for students to behave in ways that maximize learning objectives. I bring the same enthusiasm to opportunities for teaching outside of the classroom. The ultimate goal is to bring political *science* to life so that students internalize the material in a meaningful way, all the while preparing them for future opportunities.