

Teaching Philosophy

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Teaching Interests

My most important goal as a professor is to provide an innovative experiential learning environment to challenge and empower students, preparing them for graduate school, professional careers, service, and leadership within the community. I have taught several 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 in the areas of:

International Relations: American Foreign Policy, International Relations, Comparative Politics, Globalization and Development (IPE), War & International Security, and International Politics & Cybersecurity.

American Politics and Policy: Introduction to Government and Politics, Introduction to American Politics, American Public Policy, The Policy Process, Mass Media and American Politics, Conspiratorial Thought and Theory, The Living Constitution, and Civil Rights Tour of the South.

Research Methods: Political Science Research Methods, Sociological Research Methods, Graduate Research Methods for Public Administrators, and Honors Research Design and Methodology.

An essential part of my teaching philosophy is the integration of experiential learning. For example, during my time at the University at Buffalo, SUNY, I was the Faculty Advisor to the SUNY Model European Union Organization. In conjunction with the student group, I designed a companion course to prepare students for the EuroSim events. I brought these experiential education opportunities to MSSU. In 2014 I organized a Model European Union Registered Student Organization (RSO) at MSSU. For the last six years, we have taken two delegations to the EuroSim held at Indiana University, Bloomington. During 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 critical aspects of the US Constitution, including its drafting, ratification, evolution, legal processes, and contemporary issues for debate. The capstone of the course was a ten-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 course's capstone was a nine-day trip across the most important Civil Rights historical sites in Arkansas, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, and Tennessee. These courses show how my classes blend course material with hands-on learning experiences for ultimate student engagement.

What follows are the core elements of my pedagogy and teaching philosophy. This integrative approach helped me earn the campus-wide *2012-2013 Excellence in Teaching Award* at the University at Buffalo, SUNY and the campus-wide *2017-2018 Outstanding Teacher Award at Missouri Southern State University*.

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. Three interacting constructs 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. Educators must 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 phenomena. I help them think theoretically in studying politics rather than merely requiring them to memorize facts. My teaching approach 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 adopted a student engagement tool called *TopHat*, which allows students to immerse themselves in the lecture with some fantastic interactive tools. Before *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 essential 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 that was covered in course-work. However, the most crucial aspect of informing 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 process 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 a synergistic learning environment's functional requirements, emphasizing the scientific method, student interaction, and experiential learning.

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 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 is presented in both lecture and seminar formats. Teaching is not synonymous with one-way lecturing. Real-world application and class interaction help students 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 essential portion of the class grade. One useful technique that can inspire student participation is to open up each class to discuss current events pertaining to the week's material. Throughout the class, students often return to current events examples and apply the material in ways that have meaning in their own lives. As a professor, I guide respectful and productive student interaction during every class. The technique I use to achieve this is to

have students give three 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. A short response paper accompanies these presentations. Then I 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 relevant current events.

Engagement in the classroom is indispensable for undergraduate learning because uninterested and disengaged students will not 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, debate, and eventually try to pass their bills in both chambers, always conforming to the US Congress's institutional procedures. I have developed a range of classroom simulations including, a Cyber War Simulation, National Security Council Simulation, 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 lectures and give them practical meaning while keeping students engaged and excited about the material. This addition to the course makes the material relevant and meaningful and helps increase retention and graduation rates in the program.

To achieve student participation and engagement, the instructor should enter each class with high energy and enthusiasm. Each 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..." On an evaluation for my MSSU International Relations course, a student wrote, "Dr. Nicoletti is an amazing professor. He has a true passion for the subject and is an inspiration. I plan on taking every course he offers until I graduate. MSSU is a better university for having Dr. Nicoletti on staff. Until taking his class, I had never had the privilege of having any teacher from Kindergarten on that actually had what Dr. Nicoletti has. I had resigned to the fact that I probably never would get that experience and then the first day of this semester happened, and I knew I finally got my wish." 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 more robust 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 I call "DIRT" quizzes. DIRT 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 straightforward 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 participate in class discussions, ask questions, and share their input. My classes also contain a series of non-cumulative examinations, 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 because students have to incorporate a semester's worth of knowledge into one assessment. For example, in my American Public Policy class, students must 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, the paper requires the student to apply classic and modern theoretical perspectives of the policy process to their given legislation. This assignment forces students 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 five assignments - Literature Review, Theory, Hypotheses, 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 in 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. This choice also creates increased engagement in the research project.

A fundamental goal for each of my classes is to prepare students to conduct research, take more advanced courses, 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. This process 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 before 2009. However, due to faculty changes, the Model EU program was abandoned. Upon learning about this program, I recruited students from several of my classes and took the initiative to reinstate the Model EU for the Spring 2011 semester. For the Fall 2011 semester, I designed an Independent Study based on the European Union's Politics. In January of 2012, I accompanied the University at Buffalo Model EU group to Exeter, UK, to participate in our second simulation. In the Spring of 2013, our delegation 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 Assistant Coach of the Mock Trial Team, and our team is nationally ranked. The Living Constitution trip was such a success that my colleagues and I completed another trip, a Civil Rights course with an accompanying Civil Rights tour of the South. I have also brought Model EU to MSSU and worked with the Midwest Model EU association out of Bloomington, Indiana. MSSU has sent two delegations to the Model EU simulations since 2015. I look forward to embracing these opportunities at my next academic institution.

Diversity and Inclusion

I am devoted to promoting inclusion and awareness of diversity issues inside the classroom. Each student brings unique experiences, strengths, and ideas to the university setting. These differences can include race, gender, sexual orientation, religious, socio-economic, political/ideological beliefs, and more. As educators, professors need to explore and incorporate these differences into an enriching classroom environment. We also have the responsibility to ensure that students are prepared to work with people from diverse backgrounds, with the ability to collaborate with others who bring new perspectives. Professors can create inclusive classrooms by being aware of diversity and fostering open discussion enabling students to share their viewpoints and experiences.

The most important way to foster diversity is to create an open and safe space for class discussion. This space includes ensuring that all students feel comfortable sharing their experiences but also assuring that important and sometimes sensitive topics are included in the curriculum. Also, my teaching has a focus on global issues and

perspectives. Even in classes that focus on American politics, I find ways to integrate material that facilitates understanding global issues. For example, many of my classes include lectures on collective action problems. I often use climate change as an example of a dilemma that can only be solved by the global community and the difficulties with getting unified action. Moreover, I make it a priority to incorporate the experiences of under-represented groups in every class, such as the American Civil Rights Movement; the Japanese-American experience during World War II; the Chinese contribution to the Transcontinental Railroad and the Chinese Exclusion Act; the history of the Native American experience; the experience of emigration, refugees, and diaspora; the Latino Civil Rights Movement; and current issues involving globalization and international populations. Safe Space training is something that I have also pursued at MSSU, and I have been a part of the Safe Space program since 2015.

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 that 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 while preparing them for future opportunities and supporting their graduation.