

Teaching Philosophy
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My philosophy of teaching is heavily influenced by my academic focus on political economy. I view education as occurring within a marketplace of ideas; as a result, my role as a teacher is to provide information on the available products and, most importantly, to provide my students with the analytic tools necessary to be informed consumers both inside and outside the classroom. For me, this entails finding a balance between the theoretical and the practical and highlighting the connections between the global and the personal.

To me, learning occurs not when students internalize particular facts or ideas, but when they can apply the insights from one context in a different arena. Coming from the perspective of a political economist, I see the political as permeating every level of human activity, whether it be the coordination problem of a group of friends deciding where to meet for dinner or countries attempting to settle on a common regulatory system for financial markets. By helping my students see the commonalities between such different contexts, I hope they will be able to see the same connections in new situations they encounter in the future.

Having lofty goals, of course, is meaningless if one fails to choose methods and assignments aligned with achieving these goals. Different students, of course, learn things best in different manners; I can maximize my effectiveness by providing a variety of instructional techniques and assignments that cater to different styles of learning, including lectures integrating both quantitative and qualitative data, in-class discussions, video clips from films and documentaries, small group activities, debates on current policy issues, and low-stakes, in-class writing activities.

My main strategy has been to take students through the general thought process and draw the conclusions out of them. I like to begin with general examples focusing on more common, shared experiences to illustrate the intuition before moving on to specific examples drawn from the class. This helps achieve the short-term goal of allowing them first to master the concept at hand, but also serves the long-term goal of helping them apply the concepts outside the classroom by highlighting the connections and similarities across different issue areas. For example, as a teaching assistant for an introduction to research design class at UC San Diego, I used an on-going analogy of a Hollywood mogul thinking about what makes a successful movie. This appealed to their local identity as Southern Californians and allowed them to focus on the issues of quantifying vague concepts like “success,” developing theories, and creating hypotheses with material they already had an intuitive feel for, prior to applying those skills to political science examples.

Similarly, I have integrated technology into my classroom as a means to enhance the learning experience and promote active learning. PowerPoint slides are useful for integrating quantitative data, which is especially important for political economy classes. Not only does it help those students who are more visual learners, but it also helps develop students’ skills in digesting data, whether it be in a regression table or the front page of USA Today. This strategy was particularly important throughout my class on Global Poverty, where I emphasized the importance of analyzing and applying data to identify problems, develop solutions, and evaluate policy success.

An abundance of slides and data can cause some students' eyes to glaze over, so I like to use multimedia clips to balance the quantitative and qualitative and providing impact to otherwise potentially dry material. When I taught the Politics of International Finance, it was one thing, for example, to show graphs of how the Asian financial crisis reduced GDP in Thailand, but another for them to see an interview with a Thai businessman walking through the empty halls of his failed luxury golf and condominium project juxtaposed with his new job of selling chicken from an informal street cart.

Showing brief clips also helps facilitate active learning in the classroom. Even the most engaged student can struggle to maintain attention throughout an entire class session, and showing brief clips helps break up the class period, allowing students to refocus their attention and remain engaged. Moreover, this material provides a jumping off point for discussion, as well as providing concrete examples as reference points during the course of that discussion. For example, in my introduction to international relations class, I showed a brief clip of NGOs participating in a UN conference on HIV/AIDS and had the students discuss how the situation showed the strategies of transnational advocacy groups trying to influence policymaking that had been developed in the assigned readings.

Not all students, however, are equally comfortable participating in class; thus, I like to periodically break my classes up into smaller groups to focus on particular activities. This makes it easier for the more reticent students to feel comfortable contributing, while precluding the more forward students from dominating the whole class discussion. When leading discussion sections for an introduction to comparative politics course, I broke my sections up into small groups and assigned each group the task of deciding a particular aspect of a new constitution (e.g. federal vs. unitary, parliamentary vs. presidential) for a fictitious developing country. Using demographic, economic, and cultural characteristics of the fake country, the groups had to discuss which institutional choice would best suit their country and then present these decisions to the entire section. Students also found this activity a useful learning tool, since several favorably mentioned it in their course evaluations. Students responded similarly to small-group, peer evaluations during the process of writing research papers in my introductory IR class.

Finally, I believe students need to be able to express themselves effectively, both orally and in writing. To this end, I like to have students participate in debates over contemporary policy issues, as I did in the Global Poverty class, where I had students debate the pros and cons of free trade and participation in the World Trade Organization for developing countries. Debates such as this allow the students to engage the issues in a more spontaneous and interactive manner. Debates are also useful for moving students out of the comfort zone of their preexisting notions and beliefs by forcing them not only to consider opposing viewpoints, but to defend those viewpoints actively. In assigning a research paper in my intro class, I broke up the assignment across the entire semester to help instill the process of research, argument construction, organization, and effective writing, all while developing a deeper understanding of a particular aspect of international relations. Similarly, the final project in my poverty class was a country-specific, poverty-reduction policy proposal that built upon the previous assignments throughout the semester. These strategies help students internalize the concepts from class, but also helps

them be active consumers and participants of politics, formally and informally, in the long term.

After a course ends, it is often hard to discern what the longterm impact of my teaching has been; as teachers, it is often difficult to know if we truly make a difference in the lives of our students. At the end of this past semester, one of my World Poverty students, who had spent the previous summer volunteering at an elementary school in rural Tanzania, told me that one of the things she liked best about the class was that she was no longer intimidated by the wealth of information available from organizations like the World Bank. In doing her final project, she was able to “download their dense, 90-page PDF documents, know how the papers were organized, find and apply the information she needed.” Hearing this, I was pleased that I had accomplished my goal of going beyond merely imparting particular information on the subject of poverty and had helped her develop long-lasting skills that will serve her well in future academic and professional endeavors. In the end, replicating this experience is the goal of my teaching philosophy.