

Teaching Philosophy

Classroom Objectives

When I teach Political Science, I keep two objectives in mind:

- Problems, debates, and discussions in class are opportunities for students to refine their critical thinking skills.
- Lessons learned inside the classroom must have an application in understanding politics as practiced outside the classroom.

If I can develop class lessons that address these objectives, my students can come away from class not just with a basic understanding of the concepts in the study of politics, but the ability to understand how these concepts help explain the world we live in today. If my class does not push students to become critical thinkers, or help them understand the world around them, the course risks becoming irrelevant.

Student performance and lasting lessons

Because I emphasize critical thinking in my courses, I test student performance in my classes through class discussion, essay exams and written homework assignments. Class discussion of readings and supplementary course material can constitute as much as half of the course for some classes. Class discussions help refine critical thinking skills, as students must be sure that they can explain to others the positions they hold across different subjects. Critical thinking skills improve when students complete essay tests. Studying for the exam reinforces the material moreso in the essay format than for other test methods. In order to write an essay, students must consider how the concepts introduced class by class constitute the whole of the course. I emphasize relating the course back to current events in the choice of homework assignments I give to most of my classes. During the semester, students follow the international news and write summaries of a political event, identifying the concepts from the course that are relevant to the event described in a news article. This exercise keeps them relating the concepts from class back to current events, constantly reinforcing that the ideas learned in the classroom can help us to understand the world around us.

Coursework may generate a letter grade marking student performance, but learning accumulates in classroom practices as well, and cannot be measured on a test. Many students have commented to me that when watching the evening news, they have been able understand current events on a new level for the first time, owing to the lessons learned in our classroom. This type of new interaction with the world from the student's perspective is the kind of lesson that they will carry with them long after the class is over and I have assigned the grades. If my students come away from our classes with a newfound understanding of the political world, then that course has been a success for me.

Classrooms are safe spaces for the exchange of ideas

None of the work I do in the classroom to promote critical thinking is effective unless discussion in the classroom is free and open. In my classes, we consider all student comments, but the discussion of issues is fundamentally based on mutual respect between students, and between student and teacher. Because students come from varied social

backgrounds and will enter the university at different levels of preparation, we respect differences in age, school year, or prior exposure to political science as a discipline, in addition to those differences in race, class and gender already protected under the university's mission. By respecting the diversity of students as I promote open discussion, I am committed to creating a learning environment where no student feels silenced.

Responsibilities to Students

Instructors have responsibilities to their students. First among these is the obligation to respect students' time. Coming to class prepared and organized, ready to answer questions and promote discussions are key responsibilities for instructors. Students participate more often and are more engaged in class when they see that the instructor takes class time seriously. Second, instructors should make themselves available to students. Students will take from class what is offered to them, and making time to meet students that request it insures that all have an equal opportunity to learn the course material. Finally, instructors should commit to present all facets of arguments, and refrain from promoting one's own viewpoint. It is inevitable that my own beliefs will come into the classroom through the selection of course topics, presentation of the material, and the choice of readings. Yet, unless I let students decide which arguments most resonate in class, by teaching them how to think rather than what to think, I am failing to meet the major objectives of my classroom.