

Yury V. BOSIN | Teaching Philosophy

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There is an anecdote that I usually tell my students at the first meeting of any class. It is about a professor who decided to free some time from teaching by playing his audiotaped lectures to the students. So, he put the tape recorder on the desk in front of the class, turned it on and, to the surprise of the students, left. Next day it was his turn to be surprised. When he came back to change tapes, he found no students in the classroom but only little audio recorders on each desk. Although funny, this story is not that far from reality. With the technological developments that we have seen over the last couple of decades, teaching can eventually become an unmanned process. There are some signs of it already such as Internet courses, televised lectures, on-line tests and assignments, etc. But the fundamental question that remains is how to replace the invaluable element of live interaction between a professor and students, which I consider necessary to inspire students' interest, imagination, and thirst for knowledge. I am a lifelong learner myself. I earned my first degree in 1993 from Russian Academy of Sciences and decided to continue my professional development as a scholar and teacher by seeking a matching degree at UNM. From my personal experience, I strongly believe that a professor's job is not only to deliver some amount of information to students but to make learning a creative and enjoyable experience. My philosophy of teaching stems from this belief.

I follow several principles to achieve this goal. First, I am a strong supporter of active learning. When students interact with a professor and with one another they better develop critical thinking and argumentation skills than if they just listen to a long lecture or read a textbook. I always structure my courses to emphasize the importance of in-class group discussions, peer reviews, experiments, and team presentations. For example, in my *International Relations* class, I have students play the prisoners' dilemma game with each other to illustrate how difficult it is to build cooperation under anarchy and mutual distrust. It is a sobering experience for students when even their best friends whom they have known for a long time prefer not to cooperate because they put their self-interest over friendship. After doing this simple exercise, the students have a better understanding of why, for example, in recent years the U.S. and Russia have had a hard time overcoming Cold War suspicion and prejudice.

Second, in international studies and in comparative politics it is very important to go beyond theoretical knowledge and to make students familiar with a broader picture of world geography, history, economy and demography. I usually start my lectures with a curious fact, unexpected analogy, or a funny quote and then develop it into a serious discussion. For example, in my *Insurgency* class, I would ask students why a lodge in the Taos ski area in Northern New Mexico has the name of Kandahar, a city in southern Afghanistan located many thousands miles away. Of course, this puzzles the class. Then, I explain that the lodge was named after the Kandahar ski club, which united the first enthusiasts of downhill ski racing in Great Britain at the beginning of the 20th century. The club itself received its name from its main sponsor – Sir Frederic Roberts, a British field marshal who was awarded the title of Lord of Kandahar for his combat operations during the second Anglo-Afghan war in 1878-1882. Then, I give my students a brief history of foreign invasions of Afghanistan over the last 150 years and explain why great powers have failed to conquer this country. Finally, I make a transition to the challenges facing U.S. counter-insurgency operations in Afghanistan and connect it to a broader debate on civil wars, terrorism and international peacekeeping. I noticed that having a jeopardy-style element in my lectures is a great way to engage students and to create a classroom environment in which they feel comfortable and have fun but also maintain high productivity in mastering the course material.

Third, I teach that there is no rigid dividing between theory and practice in social sciences. I show how political concepts and ideas can make a powerful practical impact on many vital processes at a global, regional, national and even personal level. For example, I explain how the 1973 Suez crisis in a remote region which many Americans could hardly find on the map, overnight drove gas prices from 30 cents a gallon to \$1.20, caused massive carpooling and a ban on gasoline sales on Sundays. I am glad to see my students realize that a routine shopping visit to Walmart is related to such pressing international issues as U.S. debt, the labor environment in China, and the growing impact of global warming due to accelerated economic development in Asia.

Fourth, I believe that finding an individual approach to every student is essential for being a successful teacher. Even in the large-size introductory courses I have made a point to learn the name of every student in the classroom. I believe that my accessibility as a professor and willingness to meet outside the classroom is very important to help students, especially freshmen, feel the adequate level of attention, which sometimes is hard to find at a larger public university. Many of my students are the first generation in their families to attend an institution of higher education. Some work part-time and even full-time jobs while seeking their degree at UNM. My commitment to offering my students personalized experience means that I take into account students' circumstances and learning styles. I realize that there is no blueprint for the best teaching strategy as people process information differently based on their cognitive abilities and personal tastes. I allow students some flexibility in creating activities and homework assignments but also encourage them to work in formats outside their comfort zone. If, for example, someone does not feel confident in public speaking I may assign this student to be a part of a group presentation thus making the challenge easier.

Finally, my every lecture, activity, and assignment is designed to fulfill a dual mission. While I teach students theoretical frameworks and their practical applications I always keep in mind that the ultimate goal is for them to have the necessary skills – both analytical and methodological – to apply to areas of inquiry in the future whether that be in the classroom or not. I believe it is extremely important to encourage students to move from being passive absorbers of knowledge to becoming independent thinkers.

I hope that anyone who reads this statement can see not only my ideas on how to succeed in teaching but also my true love for this profession. Part of the reason that makes it so appealing to me is that I learn just as much from my students as they learn from me. I am happy to have had an opportunity to teach at UNM, a flagship state university that serves a large Hispanic and Native American student population. Working with such a diverse body of students of various cultural and social backgrounds has helped me to discover new perspectives on issues that seemed quite clear before. Multiculturalism, immigration, nationalism, minority rights, are seen somewhat differently here than for example in Russia, Germany or even New York, Boston and San Francisco. Teaching in such environment has been an enriching and eye-opening experience that enhanced tremendously my expertise and qualification as an instructor and a scholar.

Allow me to conclude by stating that I see teaching as my way to make a difference. I would like to think that the knowledge I pass to students will help them to succeed in their life endeavors. I am proud to say that many of my students keep coming to me for advice and guidance years after they completed my course. It is a great privilege and satisfaction to be able to make a long-lasting impact like this.