

Teaching Philosophy and Evidence of Effectiveness

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Teaching Philosophy

My primary goal for student learning is for students to gain a deep understanding of substantive course material and to sharpen their analytic thinking and writing skills for future application. As participants in a democracy, it is imperative for students to understand how their government functions or ought to function, and what role they play in its functioning. Moreover, if taught properly, political science enables students to recognize, analyze, and improve power dynamics underlying a wide variety of institutions and relationships in their lives. Consequently, beyond teaching my students about government and policymaking, I strive to strengthen their ability to think critically about power and its application, using analytical tools afforded by modern political science.

To achieve these goals, I set high expectations for my students: I assign readings from difficult primary sources, and I expect each student to participate often in class. In written assignments, I challenge students to move beyond basic application of a concept or theory and think critically about its implications. Challenging students in this fashion is a necessary condition for the achievement of my goals for student learning. Nevertheless, while rigorous expectations may be necessary for student achievement, they are by no means sufficient—particularly for students whose socioeconomic, cultural, educational, or psychological background predisposes them to respond to high expectations with fear and withdrawal, rather than confidence and growth. Consequently, my teaching philosophy hinges on my ability to pair academic and analytic rigor with a classroom presence and well-researched teaching techniques that encourage questioning and normalize “failure.” Doing so has, in my experience, ensured that students have risen to the challenges of my curriculum, rather than withdraw under stress.

When I first began teaching, I conducted an informal survey among peers, asking them what kinds of first impressions students may have of me. One common theme was that, given my gender, race, manner of speaking, and general appearance, I may seem intimidating or unapproachable to some students. In response, I ruminated about how that appearance might impact my efforts in the classroom, and how it might influence students’ willingness to ask questions in class or visit my office in times of difficulty. Eventually, I developed the following approach to address this possibility: strategically use enthusiasm, humor, colorful in-class examples, and informal small-talk, in order to build up my approachability as an instructor.

A typical class will unfold as follows. First, I purposely arrive 10 minutes before the start of class in order to engage in small-talk: “how is your week going?” “did you see the game/concert last weekend?” etc. Students assume that I am simply being friendly (and I am!), but my primary aim is to build trust. Psychological research shows that people trust those they like, and such small-talk enables students to view me as personable, even as they view me as an authority figure. Second, as I introduce subject material, I begin with a light-hearted, humorous remark about the material—particularly when the reading material is challenging. This not only catches students’ attention, but it also offsets some of the intimidation that younger undergraduates

experience with difficult course material, particularly primary sources.

In addition to instilling important knowledge about politics to students, I also strive to demonstrate how political science offers practical skills to students. To help students internalize these analytical tools, I employ a lecture strategy that makes use of relatable examples of those tools in action, then rely upon well-researched tactics to encourage student discussion on political applications of these concepts. For example, to explain the public goods problem, I have posed questions such as, “why does the common room in a dorm suite often grow so dirty, even though no one in the house prefers a dirty dorm?” Such examples seem to develop interest and engagement with course concepts.

With this basic understanding, I draw upon my instructional training with the University of Michigan’s award-winning Center for Research on Learning and Teaching to encourage discussion on political applications of these concepts. Over the past three years, I have attended seven teaching courses and short courses, many of which focused on encouraging productive student discussion, particularly among disadvantaged populations. These courses have equipped me with a variety of tactics that have proven useful in my classroom, as my evaluations and awards attest: students praise not only the passion with which I reach out to students and present course material, but my ability to effectively deploy student discussion as a learning tool. In my experience, these tactics, when coupled with the trust I strive to build at the beginning of class periods, has proven especially beneficial in reaching out to diverse student populations.

In addition to outreach to diverse student populations, I believe these tactics equip me to effectively teach a wide variety of courses, based on my substantive and methodological training at Michigan. Substantively, I have extensive experience teaching Introduction to American Politics, for which I have even served as lead teaching assistant. This experience has improved my ability not only to relate to younger students but also to manage a large class and team of teaching assistants. In addition, given my research focus, training, and experience, I am well-equipped to teach substantive courses on national political institutions such as the U.S. Congress, the policymaking process, and elections and representation (about which I recently designed and taught an upper-level undergraduate course). Methodologically, my training and research experience have prepared me to teach courses on advanced causal inference econometrics or program evaluation, introductory or intermediate game theory, and both undergraduate and graduate introductory courses in quantitative methodology. I believe that my teaching philosophy is particularly well-suited to teach methods courses, as such courses often generate the highest levels of intimidation, particularly among underrepresented populations.

Regardless of subject area, my teaching philosophy ultimately rests on my ability to deliver well-prepared, useful material, with professionalism, passion, and empathy. Insofar as I succeed at embodying those characteristics, my students remain engaged and interested in political science, gaining the substantive and practical knowledge they need to succeed in their careers. Below, I provide a large body of evidence regarding the effectiveness of this approach. As detailed in my cover letter, I have received two awards for my work in the classroom. Beyond this recognition, though, my course evaluations underscore that my philosophy and its effectiveness has been clearly recognized by a large number of my students. Not only do my numerical evaluations outpace the highest available university-wide comparison points (25th percentile for teaching assistant or “GSI” work; median for full instructor), but my open-ended evaluations correspond strongly with my stated goals and philosophy. I compile and organize these comments below.

Evidence of Teaching Effectiveness

Lead Instructor Only Items		
<i>Evaluation Item</i>	<i>Crosson Median</i>	<i>University Median*</i>
This course advanced my understanding of the subject matter	4.9	4.6
My interest in the subject has increased because of this course	4.4	4.2
Overall, this was an excellent course.	4.5	4.4
Students felt comfortable asking questions.	4.9	4.6
The instructor showed a genuine concern for the students.	4.9	4.8
The instructor made the course interesting.	4.8	4.6
The instructor was receptive to discussion outside the course.	4.9	4.8
The instructor presented material clearly in lectures/discussions.	4.9	4.7
Teaching Assistant Only Items		
<i>Evaluation Item</i>	<i>Crosson Total**</i>	<i>University 25th Percentile</i>
One real strength of this course was the classroom discussion.	4.72	4.67
The instructor used class time well.	4.9	4.8
The instructor set high standards for students.	4.81	4.79
Students frequently contributed to class discussions.	4.48	4.42
Universal Evaluations		
<i>Evaluation Item</i>	<i>Crosson Total**</i>	<i>University 25th Percentile</i>
Overall, the instructor was an excellent teacher.	4.9	4.86
The instructor gave clear explanations.	4.85	4.8
The instructor stressed important points in lectures/discussions.	4.87	4.81
The instructor treated students with respect.	4.95	4.91
The instructor was willing to meet and help students outside class	4.89	4.88
The instructor seemed well prepared for each class.	4.94	4.87

* Beginning in Spring 2018, the University changed their evaluation reporting system. Under this new system, only the university median is reported.

**Totals generated by averaging median scores for all courses taught, weighted by number of respondents per course. 25th percentile calculations proceeded similarly.

Passion for Course Material

Jesse was very passionate about the class and that passion allowed him to explain topics to us well. He was great at answering questions and at giving us feedback on our writing.

This was by far my favorite discussion out of all my classes this semester. Not only did the discussion help prepare me for the exams and papers, I also learned a lot from each discussion. I really enjoyed coming to discussion each day.

The instructor is great. He really has a passion for political science which makes him and excellent instructor. He is very nice and approachable while also keeping control of the classroom. He really helped me understand the material of the class.

Jesse is an excellent GSI. His passion for political science shows and makes the course much more interesting. Always willing to answer questions and help students.

Generation of Interest and Engagement with Course Topic

Great teacher, I always knew what was expected of me, and left class thinking further about the course topics. Would recommend this class to a friend.

I enjoyed the subject matter and way that this course was taught. Jesse is a great GSI he knows what he is talking about and always makes discussion interesting and tries to engage all of the students. Also brought us donuts so how could you beat that. Very accessible during office hours and by email and willing to discuss writing assignments, lecture topics, or whatever else interests you. All around great guy and great GSI.

Discussions were fantastic, GSI is very knowledgeable in the field and it was a pleasure coming to class because I learned a lot, but also enjoyed his humor and great personality

Overall, the course was not exactly what I expected but i mean this in a good way in that it was a very interesting class that truly taught me a lot about the American political system.

Care for Students

Jesse was an incredible instructor. He was extremely passionate and knowledgeable about all course topics. Whenever a question or concern arose, he was more than happy to meet outside of class. He led class discussions very well and effectively.

Jesse is a great GSI. Very helpful, encouraging, and clear. He is also very clearly passionate about what he does, which just makes more enjoyable and flow more smoothly. Overall, he is the sort of GSI that I would hope to have for every class.

Discussion really pertained to lecture and I really felt that Jesse had a concern for the students and what they were having issues with.

Jesse is a great teacher, who is very approachable, really knows what he's talking about, and is very willing to work with students to make sure they do the best that they can in this course. He is very accommodating and has a great sense of humor that made class enjoyable and made everyone feel comfortable around him.

Communication of Difficult Concepts

The instruction was incredible. Jesse knew so much information and really knew how to explain tricky concepts so that we could easily understand. I felt so comfortable in discussion and the conversations were so stimulating and interesting. I learned a great deal and even am thinking about political science as my major.

Jesse did an excellent job teaching students. He covered material that students struggled with and gave advice that advanced students' ability to succeed in the course.

Jesse was an excellent GSI. He was eager to help the students and understood the difficulties of the class.

Really enjoyed having Jesse as my professor. He was excellent at explaining certain concepts that I found confusing. If I see another course offering with Jesse I would be sure to take it.

Overall Quality of Instruction

Discussion was such a great part of class. Jesse is AMAZING and so knowledgeable in the field.

He was so helpful, and I think he would make a really good professor. Would definitely suggest this class to anyone who is remotely interesting [sic] in American Politics!

Jesse is a fantastic instructor. He is clearly very intelligent, and his interpretations of texts are fascinating, challenging, and enlightening. He is by far the most helpful GSI I have had. He answers questions in a succinct and direct way, and I always find that his responses clarify my confusion. He makes the messages of the reading much clearer and keeps my attention through the process.

I loved this course. Jesse is a great teacher, very knowledgeable and mature for his age. He is probably the most competent instructor under the age of 40 that I've had class with since I've been at U of M. Class was structured, very focused on discussing the important points of the assigned readings, and really helped students develop a better understanding of the topics. Students were encouraged to speak and debate positions.

Jesse is one of the top instructors I've had at this university because of his engagement with students in the classroom, his very detailed, very structured approach to grading, his acknowledgement of sensitive but very real issues in politics such as race and abortion, and his open manner to meet with students outside of class. He asked fair questions on quizzes and the exam, and even though the quizzes were only worth 3 points (if you get one wrong, it severely penalizes the grade), they were fair questions that, if the student had done the reading assignments, they should be able to get 3/3. He also got students to not only discuss within their tables, but to discuss with other students as well to diversify our ideas and have a more solid understanding of the material, which I thought was helpful.

Overall Quality of Course Design

This course was properly organized. Jesse was explicit in his requirements for the students. His preparation for the course was impressive. Assignments were returned promptly and assessed fairly. His knowledge of the course material and related topics was also impressive. Jesse conveyed the essential features of the course material sufficiently and effectively. Even though I prefer lectures without interruption, Jesse's use of group discussion tasks was helpful.

I enjoyed taking this course. At first I thought a course on public opinion would be boring but I did enjoy relating the concepts to real life situations and I felt as though Jesse was a good instructor.

I'm not sure what Jesse's career goals are after completing PhD, but based on efforts in this course, I think he'd be an excellent professor in political science. He's extremely knowledgeable on a range of topics and is very organized and approachable.