

# Teaching Philosophy

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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, students need to understand how their government functions or ought to function, and what role they play in its functioning. As students of political science, students should develop keen acumen not only in dissecting power dynamics, but in evaluating truth claims and evidence. I believe that, if taught properly, political science enables students to recognize, analyze, and improve power dynamics underlying a wide variety of institutions and relationships that shape their lives. In the process, a political science training can equip students with valuable practical skills ranging from coding to evaluating complex normative claims. Consequently, beyond teaching my students about government and policymaking, I strive to strengthen their ability to think critically about power and its application, about truth claims and their evidence, and how to use 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 the basic application of a concept or theory and think critically about its implications. Challenging students in this fashion is a necessary condition to achieve 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 backgrounds predispose 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, in my experience, has ensured that students rise to the challenges of my curriculum, rather than withdraw under stress.

When I first began teaching, I conducted an informal survey among peers, asking 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?” and so forth. 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 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 and discussion strategy that makes use of relatable examples of those tools in action; then, I 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 Center for Research on Learning and Teaching and Trinity’s Collaborative for Learning and Teaching to encourage discussion on political applications of these concepts. Over the 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.

Beyond aiding in outreach to diverse student populations, I believe these tactics equip me to effectively teach a wide variety of courses in which I am interested, based on my substantive and methodological training and experience. At the introductory level, I have experience teaching Introduction to American Politics, which I have taught multiple times at both Trinity and Michigan, and Undergraduate Research Methods, taught at Trinity. At the upper level, I have taught the U.S. Congress, Public Policymaking and Analysis (both at the undergraduate and graduate levels), Elections and Representation, and Political Persuasion (as a teaching assistant). In coming semesters, I have plans and am very excited to teach the following upper-level courses: Parties and Interest Groups, Advanced Research Methods, Introduction to Game Theory, and Early American Political Thought. Finally, if given the opportunity, I would enthusiastically teach graduate level courses on item response theory and computational measurement models and causal inference econometric, in addition to graduate versions of each of the aforementioned substantive courses. I believe that my teaching philosophy is particularly well-suited to teach courses with associated the highest levels of intimidation among underrepresented populations, such as methods courses.

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. In my Evidence of Teaching Excellence document, 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, but my open-ended evaluations correspond strongly with my stated goals and philosophy.