Teaching Philosophy

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As teachers of political science, we have the dual responsibility of imparting academic and professional skills as well as preparing students to become better democratic citizens. Teaching political science is not restricted to political or institutional knowledge. It is important that we teach students how to process and evaluate new information, form and communicate reasoned arguments, and see the value and perspective of other arguments even when – especially when – those viewpoints are opposed to their own. We are lucky to teach a subject many students naturally find stimulating and relevant to their daily life. Our goal is to enhance whatever interests they may have coming into our classroom and use it to impart on them the knowledge and skills that will be useful in their life. To do this it is often helpful to make use of their interest in current events and the philosophies expressed by public figures or popular culture. I do not believe learning in the classroom is at its most efficient when the source of instruction is only coming from the professor. I have learned that effective teaching is much more than how much information you can cram into a lecture. While good lectures are important and necessary, learning can take place without them. At times the expertise they need will best be self-taught or even transferred from their peers. In those cases it is my job to provide the context and structure for such learning to take place.

Let me provide three examples of this teaching philosophy that I have put into practice in my classrooms. In the policy course I taught, one assignment was to prepare a policy briefing for the class. The students could choose their topic, but had to present a summary of a policy area that would be indicative of something a legislative or campaign aid would present to a politician. Primary research was required for the students to understand the stances of various interest groups, politicians, and political parties. The students were instructed to present all sides to the debate surrounding this policy area forcing them to consider viewpoints that may counter to their own. Finally, it gave the students experience in presenting information in a policy brief style – something that is prevalent in the world of politics. The students not only became “experts” in the policy area, but also gained the skills and confidence to research, analyze, and communicate the relevant information.

In the religion and politics course I am preparing to teach this spring, I have contacted former Philadelphia Mayor John Street (who has agreed dependent on scheduling) to speak to my class regarding the role of church groups in Philadelphia politics. Guest speakers provide a great opportunity to provide a rich context to a class. Inviting practitioners into your classroom who have experienced first-hand the concepts being taught allows the students to see the theory in action, as well as providing illustrative antidotes to anchor their learning.

In the state and local politics class I assisted in teaching, we used the Pennsylvania Policy Database for a large portion of the semester to instruct students about the legislative process, state policy trends and qualitative research. Students learned how to read and policy code legislation while also using the large database to track policy trends for their research paper. By using the Pennsylvania Policy Database as a teaching and research tool, the students simultaneously gained experience in an active academic research project while also learning about state policy and politics through the structured reading of the documents it creates.