

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. For those students who do not come to us specifically interested in politics, it is our job to find ways to engage them in the class. I have found an effective way of fostering this engagement is to connect politics to other academic interests the students may have. This is particularly useful for students that are not political science majors. In the *Religion & Politics* course I taught last Spring I had a journalism major who created a digital media presentation to supplement her research paper on hijabs and the laws that have been passed to ban them around the world. I have no doubt that she learned more through engaging her interest in journalism and digital media than if she would have only written a research paper.

Class discussion is also essential to engaging students. Leading this discussion requires skill and is something I have focused on as a teacher. Through my years of teaching I have learned to steer classroom conversation to highlight the topic of the day while also drawing out and engaging students who tend to shy away from discussion. My evaluations and student comments have shown that this has become a strength of my teaching style. I learned this lesson early while teaching my first public policy course at American University. I relied too much on PowerPoint during my instruction, and the students were not engaged and ultimately did not learn much from my overly dense presentations. What I quickly realized is that effective teaching is much more than how much information you can cram into a lecture. From that point on, I tried to find ways to develop a more interactive classroom, one where the students felt comfortable speaking and sharing their ideas. At times the lessons the students needed to learn were self-taught or transferred from their peers. In those cases, I recognized, it is my job to provide the context and structure for such learning to take place. I learned another lesson through this experience. In order to be the effective teacher I strive to become, I must make continuous efforts to evaluate and improve my instruction.

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 & Politics* course I brought in Former Philadelphia Mayor John Street and Former Mayoral Candidate and Documentary Film Maker Sam Katz to speak to my class regarding the historical

relationship between religion and Philadelphia politics. Guest speakers provide a great opportunity to create a rich context for 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.

Student Evaluation Summary

Below is a summary of my student evaluations for all courses that I have been the instructor of record. I have also included a few student comments from the *Religion & Politics* course, my most recent teaching experience.

Course	University	Times Taught	Student Evaluation Averages (Out of 7)	
			Instructor Rating	Students Felt Free to Ask Questions
Religion & Politics	Temple University	1	6.2	6.9
Political Power and American Public Policy	American University	5	5.5	6.6
Seminar for Teaching Assistants	American University	2	6.4	6.7

“Good professor, interesting teaching style. Allows students to learn from each other. Very discussion oriented, doesn’t just go over the readings.”

“Dr. Jennings created an atmosphere of open discussion. Personally I felt like I could argue any point in the classroom, but it had to be well supported. Dr. Jennings also took into account differing perspectives throughout our class’s debate. This can sometimes prove difficult in a class about politics and religion, where a large portion of the conversation revolves around majority religion/party topics. Yet, Dr. Jennings continued to make note of minority perspective, which helped me personally learn throughout the semester.”

“His openness to class discussion has been great for individual critical thinking.”

“Dr. Jennings proved sensitive to diversity regarding political viewpoint, race, and religion. Most of the debate in class centered around religion and politics, and Dr. Jennings took the time to appropriately represent minority opinion as well as the central majority opinion in our discussion. Moreover, since many of us in class differed in political opinion, religion, race, and gender (etc.) Dr. Jennings made sure to let each of us speak to our opinion. Hearing these different perspectives helped further what I learned in the class.”

“Classroom environment wasn’t too formal, which made me feel comfortable asking questions, this means a lot as normally I don’t talk at all in classes. I also felt like he was a very fair grader, and he gave me good feedback on all my written assignments.”