Teaching Philosophy

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I have a great passion for teaching – there is little better than watching understanding grow in a group of students. In general, I view my role as a teacher as a support person for my students – I am there to facilitate their growth and their learning. My primary goals as an instructor are to make students engaged and active and to help them learn skills that they will be able to use outside of the contexts of any particular course and even their field of study. Above all, I strive to make my students better consumers of information. No matter the subject matter, I aim to teach evidence literacy. As recent developments during the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2020 election have made particularly clear, misinformation and a flawed understanding of the world are obstacles for a well-functioning society. As more discerning and aware citizens, I hope that my students can contribute, in their own ways, to helping address the issues facing our planet.

While many of my students come into my Data in Politics I class thinking statistics is an objective discipline, I teach my students that flawed understandings of statistics have been used to oppress others throughout human history. I make it clear that our results can be swayed when the comparisons we make our flawed and have my students do an activity where we compare random assignment to assignment under uncontrolled confounding. I also spend a considerable amount of time at the beginning of my Introduction to Comparative Politics class on the comparative method, explaining that we need to make fair comparisons to draw valid conclusions. I return to this point repeatedly during the semester, asking students to think about how different analytical approaches and definitions can lead to different conclusions. During my lecture on political economy for example, I ask students to look up basic information on the economy of the countries they have chosen for the main paper project in the class, using the World Bank's database. Inevitably, there is more information for some countries than others. I then ask my students to consider why the availability of data may vary between countries and how it can influence our analyses. I also heavily emphasize this point when teaching undergraduate methods.

I also combat superficial understanding of the world by challenging students with the substantive depth of my courses. Excessive surface-level skimming, even in introductory classes, invites generalizations that are often to the detriment of understanding the world's complexities. Therefore, I balance breadth and depth. When I teach introductory methods, I make sure to spend time on causality and the power and perils of randomization. While I cannot cover everything under the wide umbrella of comparative politics in my Introduction to Comparative Politics class, I make sure that I spend enough time on the topics I do cover to give students some of the nuance and debate around them. This is why I try to stay away from textbooks – a benefit of this approach is that it makes learning less expensive for students. Instead, I assign excerpts from monographs or academic articles. While I do not expect introductory students to memorize the ins and out of long-running academic debates, my goal is to give them first-hand exposure to important works in political science, as consuming academic literature is also an important skill.

Providing students with information passively does not go far enough; I do not expect my students to internalize something they have learned just because they read or heard about during lecture. While I do lecture at times, I believe that active participation is essential to

helping students learn. However, I recognize that not all students learn the same way, nor are they all equally comfortable participating in class. Therefore, I structure courses in such a way that there are plenty of ways in which to participate and be active, as I recognize that not all students learn in the same way. When I teach methods classes, I use a variation of the flipped-classroom approach, giving students plenty of hands-on time to practice applying the skills we discuss in class. For example, in Data in Politics I, during the unit on causality, I put students into group and assign each group a recently published academic article. I ask them to identify the research question, the variables of interest, the research design, and to assess internal and external validity. We then come together to discuss what each group determined. I also allow students to participate outside of class. I consider coming to office hours a valid form of class engagement, as some students feel more comfortable talking about class topics in the office setting. In Introduction to Comparative Politics, I have students post and summarize news articles that are related to the course materials to the class website. In my Data in Politics I class, I use Piazza, an online Q&A and forum platform, to give students the opportunity to ask questions about course material and engage outside of the classroom. I also use Poll Everywhere, an educational online quiz platform, throughout the semester to give students the chance to show that they are paying attention and engaging with class materials without always having to vocalize.

When I teach substantive classes, I break up lectures with think-pair-share activities, more in-depth group activities, and class discussions. For example, during my unit on definitions of democracy in Introduction to Comparative Democracy, I first ask students to come up with their own definition of democracy in groups, based on what we have read and based on their own prior understandings of the term. I then ask each group to consider by which definitions we can consider the United States of America a democracy or not.

When it comes to assignments, I think it is important to not overburden students, as this negatively impacts their learning and their academic performance. In Data in Politics I, students complete several problem sets during the semester. I use multiple shorter problem sets so that students do not have too much to do at any one time. The feedback they receive allows them to course correct, and also helps me identify what I need to emphasize and review in class. In addition, students complete a longer research project over the course of the semester. While the broad topic is selected by me, students have significant leeway about how to approach the analysis. To ensure that I am not demanding too much of students at any one time of the semester, I break this project up into two parts. In the first part, students clean and prepare the provided data. In the second, students perform the analysis. For Introduction to Comparative Politics, my students write a ten-page paper about the regime type and political development of a country of their choice. I break up this main paper project into two parts, which students work on during the time in the semester in which we cover the most useful material for each part. I give students extensive feedback on each part and then have students submit the combined, revised paper, at the end of the semester. This makes it so that they do not have to write ten pages while also studying for exams.

I believe strongly that, given all of the challenges today's students face, being flexible, adaptive, and respectful is necessary for a good instructor at any level. When I interact with students, I like to remind myself that I am not at the center of their educational experience; I view my work as being in service to them. It is possible to maintain high standards while

not placing arbitrary obstacles in students' ways and thereby throttling their potential. It is important, however, to be open with students about flexibility – silent flexibility favors those who are accustomed to asking for it. Most importantly, I strive to make all students feel included in the classroom. Too many students, particularly from marginalized backgrounds, fall through the cracks of academia because they feel isolated and othered.

Finally, I recognize that being an instructor means that I am always a work in progress. I have attended trainings on course and syllabus design through the Graduate School at UNC, have received Safe Zone training through UNC's LGBT Center, and plan to pursue more training when the opportunity arises.