**Teaching Philosophy**

*The important thing is not to stop questioning. Curiosity has its own reason for existing. One cannot help but be in awe when he contemplates the mysteries of eternity, of life, of the marvelous structure of reality. —Albert Einstein*

When I first began my graduate career, I did not expect to want to obtain a position at a teaching-focused college. My mother is a high school teacher and my conception of teaching focused on classroom control. Even though I liked my professors through undergrad and loved my smaller classrooms that really enabled students to interact with the professor, I did not see it as something I was meant for. It was not until I was a TA for a class where I lead my own sections one day a week that I discovered I actually liked *teaching*. I decided to take a minor in college teaching through which I have developed a greater appreciation for pedagogy and the institution of higher education. If I can convince even one student to become a political science major or if I receive some version of “I didn’t like politics, but I love this class!” I consider that a job well done. Being someone who helps enable a student to find relevance of international relations to their daily life or even to simply be a mentor to them in an often new and tumultuous time of their lives inspires me every day.

As a professor, my main goal is to instill a genuine curiosity about the subject matter. In particular, I aim to avoid the traditional banking model of education in favor of a critical pedagogy that focuses on critical thinking skills, critical reflection, and ultimately teaches students to question the way things are done, and perhaps most importantly, how things might be done differently. This is also connected to inquiry-guided learning, defined by Hudspith and Jenkins (2001) as “a self-directed, question-driven search for understanding.” This fosters innovation, creativity, and practical application that can in turn be put to use as students enter the workforce, public affairs, or a home life. A life of educated questioning empowers students and encourages them to be active not only as students, but as citizens, too; this is of particular interest in international relations where students often struggle to relate foreign affairs to their daily lives. Through my classes, I focus on creating global citizens – key in today’s globalized and networked world.

Following from this adherence to a critical pedagogy based on analytical questioning, teaching the scientific method is a crucial aspect of education. Broadly speaking, the scientific method is neither strictly quantitative nor quantitative, nor deductive or inductive exclusively. Instead, it emphasizes an understanding of the process of *how things work*. To emphasize this, I frequently utilize empirical research in my lectures. In that same vein, instilling an appreciation for the context of the texts read during a course is another emphasis of mine, as this provides a deeper understanding of the material and what role it plays in academia and society. This also ties into my desire to be a facilitator of undergraduate student research. As a professor, I encourage students to pursue research driven by the scientific method and participate in student conferences. I personally was encouraged to do this by an undergraduate political science professor and that experience helped lead me to pursuing graduate education.

First and foremost, I attempt to encourage these skills through my own practice of them – that is, keeping up to date on the newest research and world events that are relevant to the course material. As well, I articulate a learning goal orientation over a performance goal orientation, emphasizing intrinsic motivation over extrinsic, though recognizing that both are important for different types of students, who all want to succeed. I do not attempt to hide my own enthusiasm for the material; if I am excited and interested, I believe students will be more curious and excited about it. Finally, maintaining realistic performance goals and providing feedback in a timely manner will help students along in the process of understanding the material and the tasks they need to accomplish during a given semester. This includes grading and commenting on positive aspects of the work that students submit, as well as outlining potential problems in an effort to aid improvement.

One specific way that I seek to set a critical thinking environment is through creating a safe space. I perceive and insist that my classroom be a safe space for all, where students are free from judgment – regarding them personally and their opinion – and thus able to speak freely, allowing the expression of creativity and new ideas to flow. I adopt this safe space by a) verbally informing the students of my classroom having this safe status, b) including it in my syllabi explicitly, and c) by making sure that I include ethnic, racial, and gender-based diversity within the coursework and interpretation of the material. In my role as mentor and professor, I intend to help my students develop a knowledge base of cultural diversity, while avoiding cultural relativity. This is part of my goal to engage and work with millennial students who are noted as the most diverse group of students to attend higher education institutions (Howe and Strauss 2000). Diversity is part of my research agenda, but also a fundamental aspect of how I approach education at large – in mentoring students and in educating them in the classroom.

Ultimately, I aim to be a “democratic” teacher who puts the class first, fostering a student-focused atmosphere. I include several different mechanisms of teaching, including the standard lecture format, discussion-based classes, edutainment, problem-based learning, case studies, and even experiments and games (for example, I often conduct a day of structured prisoner’s dilemma activities). I also believe that learning can take place outside the classroom and in the future I intend to add field work and field trips into my curricula – this would include things like bringing students to the university archives, the university library, and projects that involve local museums, all in an effort to supplement traditional learning with a more hands-on and primary source-based experience. This is in an effort to meet the needs of all who may learn better in different formats, as well as to keep all students engaged.

Finally – and connected to my teaching philosophy that follows a critical pedagogy – I believe in the persistence of the liberal arts and liberal arts higher education institutions. I take an interdisciplinary approach to my own research and I follow that through in the classroom. I myself come from a liberal arts background and I believe it has helped me greatly. An education which involves not only classes from the major but encompassing many areas and thus instilling general knowledge, helps to create global citizens who can truly participate in all aspects of modern life. A liberal arts education is especially important in a world where people are not only changing jobs but also even careers several times in their life. Providing a broad base of knowledge is fundamental to flexibility in the diverse and changing world.

**References**

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