

ABIGAIL S. POST

Teaching Philosophy

In politics, some adopt (or reject) the attitudes of their parents; others find convincing narratives in media; still others construct their views through diverse travel and work experiences. Everyone is made up of different beliefs, formed through different experiences. This understanding forms the basis of my teaching philosophy. My fundamental goal as a teacher is for students to realize the diversity of opinions and beliefs, partly through the re-evaluation of their own knowledge. My teaching philosophy entails three components/objectives to achieve this goal: guiding students to fairly evaluate opposing ideas, teaching critical thinking skills, and providing a foundation of knowledge that allows them to make sense of complex ideas in both domestic and international politics.

At the start, politics and “reasoned exchange” generally do not go hand in hand. While one student believes that we have a moral responsibility to intervene in genocide, another believes each country should mind its own business. How does one teach students to evaluate the relative “correctness” of different positions and potentially reconcile completely opposed worldviews? For one, I always make it a point to assign readings that present different perspectives. Additionally, I have students argue both sides during any class debate. In a debate over nuclear proliferation, for example, I require that students defend their position *and* their opponents’, confronting the relative strength of competing arguments. While class discussion does not (and cannot) resolve differences, students by the end of each class are much more likely to discuss world events from multiple angles rather than promote their personal opinions. The overarching purpose of such activities is for students to evaluate their own position through considering others, moving past their intuitions. The secondary benefit of this process is class participation. Students from all backgrounds are more likely to express their viewpoints, no matter how undeveloped they may be, if their peers are more likely to build upon than tear down these thoughts.

Since many political science students hope to practice policy someday, they need to understand the biases that go into political decision making. To this end, I tailor each weekly task to help students evaluate the material. One class activity I use is to introduce a current policy issue and then ask students to propose policy recommendations based on small group discussion. They must then evaluate their policy recommendation in light of the week’s theoretical readings. I find that students are more likely to challenge an author/idea as they move from the abstract or theoretical concept to the concrete or applied situation. As the discussion leader, I probe assumptions with “why” questions, gently correct wrong answers, and make necessary connections between comments and course material. To consolidate the lessons learned from such an exercise, students type up their policy analyses after class discussion, and I provide written comments to improve their analysis for written assignments. Since implementing this exercise, students in my classes have begun to incorporate a more appropriate balance of theory, policy advice, and historical context to tackle class assignments.

Students also need a foundation of knowledge on politics and world affairs in order to succeed in non-class contexts. As such, I design activities in my political science classes to

highlight the challenges of political decisionmaking through a deep knowledge of history and political theory. By drawing historical parallels, students better understand the frequent tension between things such as moral responsibility and strategic imperatives in international politics. For example, I use discussions surrounding modern ethical dilemmas like humanitarian intervention in Syria to emphasize that we should carefully assess (in)action in similar scenarios. Policymakers faced similar moral quandaries and strategic challenges in past humanitarian crises such as Rwanda and Bosnia. Using scholarly readings as evidence, students must analyze multiple sides of the issue—that we have a moral responsibility to intervene and a strategic incentive to stay out—and come away more aware of how difficult (and how important) it is to lead effectively during times of crisis.

Finally, students must understand political science research methodology in order to evaluate political science research. I firmly believe that methods and substantive expertise go hand-in-hand, and that students need one to appreciate the other. To this end, I introduce students in all my classes to basic research methodology so that they can evaluate academic articles utilizing historical case studies, advanced quantitative analysis, and game theoretic models. I often focus class discussions on qualitative papers in my introductory classes, insisting that the students look for the theoretical predictions before evaluating the evidence provided in the case study. For more advanced undergraduate students, I provide assignments that have students identify both empirical and theoretical puzzles in the literature in order to build their own research agenda. This process helps students develop a foundation of knowledge regarding important political phenomena.

To achieve all three learning outcomes—fair evaluation of diverse ideas, critical thinking, and a deep knowledge of political phenomena—my classes often include collaborative semester-long projects with a substantive focus (dependent on student interests) that teach students a range of research methodologies. This approach prepares students to conduct independent research, succeed in future social science classes, and develop skills that will benefit them whether they eventually enter the business and policy worlds or go into academia. As part of this effort, I often include students in my own research or collaborate with them on their research ideas. For example, eight undergraduate students and I spent a summer developing and implementing experimental designs to explore the impact of military casualties on public opinion toward military conflict. I trained them in research design, and we met every week to workshop ideas. This process helps students move from being consumers to producers of research. Indeed, one of my students from this project recently completed his own survey experiment and has plans to enter a PhD program in the next few years.

The exchange of information during discussion is an ideal learning environment that benefits instructor and students alike. I arrange each class around a contentious policy dilemma, like air strikes against ISIS, with an associated learning outcome. In this way, my classes inspire in my students a lifelong passion for the study of politics. Through a challenging yet welcoming environment, students emerge from my classes more receptive to diverse opinions and cognizant of the challenges decisionmakers face. Each class is designed to provide a foundation of skills for students as they continue on to their careers. These skills include, at a minimum, the ability to deliberate in a reasoned, considerate manner; critical thinking; and a better understanding of the world.