

Teaching Statement

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I love teaching, and I take great pride in the ways that I challenge, support, and engage my students. Course evaluations, students' post-college trajectories, and former students' letters of reference show that students hold extremely positive opinions of my teaching and mentoring. Several of my advisees have earned placement in top professional and graduate programs. Equally importantly, those who go directly to jobs after college often say that my teaching, particularly in research methods, has contributed to their success. Below, I outline my work as a classroom teacher generally, before turning to more in-depth discussions of teaching philosophy, course development, student evaluations, and mentorship.

I teach general comparative politics courses, qualitative and quantitative research methods, and advanced courses on the comparative politics of human rights and/in armed conflict. I am prepared also to teach courses on political violence more generally, and on other comparative politics issues such as the comparative politics of race, gender, or social movements. Across courses, my approach to planning and presenting course material mirrors my expectations of students: I expect development to be research-informed, critical, creative, and iterative.

My approach to teaching rests on three basic commitments: problem-based learning, teaching as craft, and inclusive teaching. Problem-based learning (PBL) was introduced in the context of medical education. I use it in political science because our students—like physicians—must learn to approach complex, interlocking, poorly understood systems, which test their ability to ask the right question, synthesize appropriate information, and consider competing hypotheses.¹ For example, a favorite exercise in my introductory comparative politics course involves nominating, discussing, and voting on a topic for the final week of class, using several different electoral systems. Moving from dozens of individual ideas to a single topic (often no one's first preference) in a single class period is an exercise in somewhat-controlled chaos; it also illustrates the mechanical and strategic effects of electoral systems, and comparative party system development, in a way that students find fascinating and memorable.

Similarly, an early exercise in my advanced course on armed conflict illustrates the complexity of civil war onset by considering a viral illustrated essay called "Syria's Climate Conflict,"² then asking whether—according either to the comic itself or to the relevant political science research—the Syrian civil war should actually be called a "climate conflict." I encourage students to attack the problem from multiple angles, from the epistemological (what does "cause" mean in this circumstance?) to the empirical (what factors are associated with conflict onset in the literature?). An introduction to electoral systems and an advanced discussion of the causes of war are very different lessons. But both are problem-based in that they begin from a real-world situation and push students to both determine what information is necessary and find that information (often waiting in the required reading).

¹ Compared to traditional methods, education researchers find that PBL produces similar gains in substance knowledge but is associated with significantly improved general learning skills. See, e.g., Dochy, Filip, et al. 2003. "Effects of problem-based learning: a meta-analysis." *Learning and instruction* 13:5; Hmelo-Silver, Cindy. 2004. "Problem-based learning: What and how do students learn?" *Educational psychology review* 16:3.

² <http://yearsoflivingdangerously.tumblr.com/post/86898140738/this-comic-was-produced-in-partnership-by-years-of>

My commitment to teaching as a craft reflects my awareness that subject expertise is necessary, but far from sufficient, for effective political science teaching. Effectiveness requires both appropriate levels of challenge and considerable tactical flexibility. Thus, I regularly prepare multiple illustrations, examples, and framings of course concepts, and provide multiple opportunities for students to demonstrate mastery. For example, a key concept in quantitative methods for political scientists is selection bias. In my experience, students find it relatively easy to memorize the textbook definition of selection bias, but quite difficult to apply it to real data analysis problems. My tactical solution is to frame good data analysis as an imaginative enterprise. Students read narrative accounts of the creation and coding of data, then discuss their implications. They use brief periods of free-writing to imagine the processes that led to the data in front of them. Later, they write simple software to simulate bias. And, they work in teams at the whiteboard to redraw plots, histograms and probability distribution functions to reflect different hypothetical biases “on the fly.”

In addition to providing multiple approaches to course material, I rely on a considerable toolkit to increase and improve student participation. I begin by setting expectations: my syllabi clearly inform students that participation (including nonverbal participation/engagement) is important to their grades and to their learning. I also give clear, observable guidelines about what I look for in grading participation, and how students should get help with participation. Particularly in introductory courses, I give low-stakes opportunities that normalize participation—ice-breakers, for example—and move toward more challenging participation goals. In both small- and large-group discussions, I frequently assign roles via random lottery (“Rephrase,” “Ask Clarifying Questions,” “Synthesize Other Comments,” etc.). I might also demand exactly two interventions from every student in a given class period, rearrange the physical configuration of the classroom, or do a “pair and share.” Outside of class, I work closely with students who struggle with participation to scaffold increasingly substantive in-class contributions, ensuring that students have the best opportunity to feel successful.

Strategies to increase and improve participation are closely connected with my most important goal as a teacher: inclusive teaching. While this phrase can mean many things, I define it as teaching that creates opportunities for substantive participation from all students, including those with extremely different backgrounds, intellectual styles, and levels of academic preparation. My courses typically begin with conversations about students’ previous classroom experiences—a useful springboard to discussing educational privilege and the assumptions that we bring to college classrooms. Understanding that political science courses touch on some tense topics, I ask that students consider how privilege, entitlement, and marginalization lead to what I (ever the empiricist) frame as “data loss” in classroom discussions. And I draw attention to classroom inequities, such as racialized and gendered patterns of interruption. Issues of equity and inclusion are particularly salient in the context of quantitative methods courses. Following a large body of empirical research on interventions to reduce race and gender disparities in STEM fields, I emphasize the importance of repeated failures, practice, and grit.³

³ See the review in Rattan et al., 2015, “Leveraging Mindsets to Promote Academic Achievement: Policy Recommendations,” *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 10(6): 721-726.