

Teaching Statement
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I believe teaching is an invitation for students to engage with material. The classroom should center around getting students engaged and excited about learning and helping them draw connections between the material and their lives. I want to spark new interests and show them just how much fun learning can be. I want my students to question the world around them. I want them to question what they know and how it came to be. Instead of seeing politics as black and white, I want them to recognize that there are many institutional and societal factors that influence everything, even down to the very opinions we hold. The ultimate goal of teaching is not simply the transmission of information, but to help students grow as learners and as individuals. My goal for my students is to create long-term learning. When designing each course, I ask myself what do I want students to remember after six months? After a year? Five years? And I use this to construct each lesson around the most important takeaways. After we finish a diagram or section, I ask the students “Why is this important? Why did we just spend 30 minutes outlining this?” and we discuss how it fits into the broader themes of the course. If students know why the content matters it will keep them motivated and make studying more rewarding.

When building a class environment, I ask myself: How can I set my students up to succeed? Where are they most confused and how can I make it easier for them? I start by fostering an environment where students feel comfortable talking and taking risks. I start lessons with simpler questions rooted in students’ personal experiences and then build up to more complex concepts. In most of my smaller classes every student will volunteer to speak at least once each session. I also keep in mind that students are approaching the material with limited prior knowledge. The terms we are learning are essentially a foreign language to all of the students. These are terms that need to be memorized before we can discuss the significance of the abstract concepts they represent. To counteract this, I switched from power point slides to writing on the board. This keeps students more engaged and gives them more time to take notes or formulate questions. Students aren’t frantically trying to write down content before it disappears off the slide, but instead we are writing it down together. It also means relevant information stays up longer, so if students are confused or if they lose focus briefly they can quickly catch up and rejoin the conversation. I remember as a student I would often be distracted in class and having those notes on the board were vital to guiding my attention back to the topic at hand and helping me piece together what I had missed.

I believe learning is deepest when students are making connections. Whether it’s connections between concepts within the course material or between course material and their lives, learning takes place when students digest material and categorize it according to their existing framework of knowledge. Part of my job as an educator is to expand their mental frameworks and part is to make connections to what they already know. One way I try to promote these connections is by creating diagrams together as a class. Visuals can be very useful when conceptualizing abstract concepts like power and governance, but simply showing a diagram on a slide does not invite students into the learning process, it simply has them watch. Instead we construct these same diagrams together piece by piece. Instead of showing a slide with the checks and balances between the three branches of U.S. government, I have students explain the role of each branch and we come up with symbols together, then we work together as a class until we have filled in and explained all the components.

I like to use charts or diagrams for each unit to give students a physical sense of connecting concepts together and seeing how units build on each other. I know that even though I am a very visual learner, not all students feel that way, so I try to add in some auditory assignments through podcasts and include humorous videos as much as possible, especially if they could tie an aspect of the homework to their lives—such as with campaign ads. It’s one thing to abstractly discuss candidate strategies to win

over voters and it's another to actually analyze campaign ads you saw in an election you participated in. Here again, I don't ask students "how do the concepts we've learned apply to this video?" I ask them "How does this make you feel?" "What does this make you think of?" Questions like these make participation accessible for students even if they haven't done the reading or mastered the concepts. It also shows them how the abstract concepts connect back to their initial reactions.

I believe that students do some of their deepest learning when they link the materials back to their own lives. Whenever possible I try to encourage this in my teaching by making learning personal. Instead of starting class by defining terms, I start with questions about their lives and show them how this connects back to abstract course concepts. Together we are grounding these otherwise intangible ideas in their concrete life experiences. When we studied voter behavior, instead of asking them "how do voters make decisions?" I asked "What would be your ideal candidate?" or "What do you think about when you decide which candidate to support?" Then I show them how they can link their answers back to the concepts in the textbook. The first student volunteered that he would look at a candidate's tax policies to see how voting would influence his salary. This was a clear example of economic voting. Later a student said she wanted someone that was "honest and trustworthy" and we discussed that these traits were called valence issues and are important because regardless of party or affiliation those are things that all voters agree they want in a candidate. When I asked "who do you want representing you?" one student responded they wanted someone that understood what they've been through. We used this to talk about how important descriptive representation can be, especially to youth. Through this exercise we were able to hit on all the concepts outlined in the textbook.

One way to encourage and evaluate these connections is through student writing assignments. My summer course had two paper assignments, one where students analyze a news event with concepts learned in class and another where students design their own government institutions. In the first students find an interesting news article and describe the role our government institutions played in the outcome of the story. In the second students need to really think about how the rules of government shape and structure behavior in both intentional and unintentional ways and use that to design their ideal society. This gave students freedom to be creative and encouraged them to imagine a world different from the one they know.

I want my students to walk away from my class with both a deeper understanding of the topic at hand and new skills they can apply to future classes and their careers. I want to know them as people and help them through whatever problems come their way. That means I need to stay aware of the challenges my students face and how their needs shift over time. My teaching methods need to be flexible to keep up with changes in technology and I need to stay aware of how receptive my students are to my methods and the material. I tell my students that every question they ask me gives me a little more information about what they know and what they need, and ultimately helps me understand how to be a better teacher.