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TEACHING STATEMENT

I have four primary goals for students in my classrooms. These include (1) fostering a set of valuable skills, (2) providing a baseline of knowledge from which students can build, (3) improving critical thinking skills, and (4) initiating students into the world of academic research design. I work toward each of these four goals in every class I teach, but their application varies in proportion to the others depending on the content of the course and needs of each particular group of students. For example, in my 500 level (seniors and graduate students) Media Content Analysis course, the honing of skills such as writing take a slight backseat to the development of research design skills. Conversely, in my 300 level courses (sophomores and juniors), the development of rudimentary writing techniques and reading comprehension drive much of the course, with less emphasis placed on research design.

Given that students learn in a variety of ways, I employ diverse techniques to reach my four goals. These range from in class writing exercises, to multi-media presentations, to experiential learning. Let me discuss each of these four goals.

Fostering Valuable Skills

In preparing students for graduate school and /or for the job market, I place a strong degree of emphasis on writing skills. My goal is that students will leave my courses with an improved ability to communicate ideas; in short, I want students to express more meanings in fewer words. This is a daunting task given that many students have had little feedback on their writing, or have been poorly trained to communicate with the written word. To combat their educational deficiencies, I must first persuade students to become more critical of their former modes of writing, and then to develop new methods. To accomplish this, students perform three types of writing in my courses: low-stakes, medium-stakes, and high-stakes.

At the beginning of class sessions, I write open-ended questions on marker board and give the students five minutes to freely organize their thoughts on paper; this represents low-stakes writing. I do not grade or even read these answers; instead, these answers allow students to immediately engage the course material and have answers ready to communicate in class discussions.

I employ medium-stakes writing in my 500 and 300 level courses differently. In the 500 level courses, students write a one page single-spaced essay responding to each week's readings. In my 300 level courses, students write one page single-spaced essays as responses to in-class films and guest speakers. I grade both of these exercises on the ability of students to critically engage the material pointing out both its strengths and weaknesses. Form is less important for these exercises, with emphasis placed mainly on the substance of student's critical thought processes.

In my 300 level courses, high-stakes writing frames the majority of the course. Students read the assigned material each week, and write a five to seven sentence summary of each assigned reading. The weekly reading load is generally three journal articles or book chapters; therefore students turn in three summaries each week. These summaries force students to read and digest

the material, but more importantly, this exercise gives students practice communicating a large amount of information in a small amount of space. I work with students in two different ways to help them improve their summaries throughout the course of the semester. First, I provide in-class writing exercises that help students (1) eliminate passive voice and use strong verbs in their sentences, (2) eliminate use of unnecessary words, and (3) eliminate run-on sentences. Beyond providing practice with particular writing mechanics, these exercises also emphasize the need for proofreading and revision. Unfortunately, students enter and proceed through college having received little practical feedback on their writing. Even worse, many college students do not see the need for or value in proofreading and revision. My courses provide not only a wake-up call for underperforming students, but also methods and practice for wholesale improvement which students carry with them long after leaving my courses. Second, I work with students to help them focus their attention on the “big” ideas contained in the readings. Many students have difficulty differentiating between minute details and important ideas. In class discussions ask students to identify and agree on the main ideas presented in the readings. I also work with students individually to provide strategies for better focusing their reading efforts.

In addition to the investment I ask students to make in their writing ability, I also seek to foster improved reading comprehension. Rather than rely on textbooks in my courses, I assign only journal articles. These provide students with reading material that is above their current reading comprehension levels, and thus challenge students to grasp more technical and dense writing. Most students initially find this a challenge, but by mid-semester students generally grasp the material with little difficulty and become more efficient readers.

Baseline of Knowledge

I spend little time asking students to memorize pedantic details; instead my courses focus on big ideas. As such, my lectures provide a broad platform of understanding for students to apply questions emanating not only in my courses, but also questions that will arise throughout their post-collegiate lives. For example, in POL 313 The Constitution, my initial lectures focus on broad ideas about the nature of mankind, theoretical ideas about justice and democracy, and major philosophical approaches (Aquinas, Machiavelli, Locke). As we progress into the finer details of the Constitution itself, my lectures connect minor provisions to the much larger ideas that form the basis of the course. In this way, students begin to connect smaller empirical facts to theoretical concepts.

The assignments in my courses ask students to focus on larger take-away points. For example, the weekly summary assignments in my 300 level courses ask students to focus on and distill broad points. In my 500 level Media Content Analysis course, students learn the basics of research design and content analysis, and then apply these to a broad set of specific cases. My goal in the 500 level class is to give students the framework which they can apply in their lives long after they leave class.

Critical Thinking

Critical thinking is a cornerstone of college education. In my courses, I strive to get students to step outside of ideologies and consider a broader array of alternatives using reasoned argument and evidence. There is nothing easy about teaching critical thinking – students often come to

class hoping to be fed readymade answers which can then be regurgitated onto a scantron exam. As students find out, I do not give scantron exams or provide readymade answers.

As my lectures point out, all alternatives provide potential benefits, costs, and risks. Most college age students already have well-formed political ideologies, and as such, they have can, if called upon, provide their preferred solution to any societal problem. With this said, few students can support their preferences with little more than normative statements or anecdotes. This problem is magnified in political science courses, where students often have strong views on political issues, and this makes it a challenge to bring scientific inquiry into the classroom. My goal is to get students to consider their own views as one of set of alternatives, and then weigh evidence and argument in favor of and against their positions. My hope is that students will walk away from my courses understanding that there are no easy answers or clear-cut cases of black and white in politics or broader society.

To impart critical thinking skills in class sessions, I often begin class asking students to write answers to broad questions. Some of these questions ask about specifics from the week's readings, others ask students to apply broad ideas from the readings to a current problem. For example, in my Constitution course, one question asks students to make arguments in favor and against the Electoral College. Most students in my courses are against the Electoral College, but few have thought through the reasons why. By allowing students to organize their thoughts and share them with the class, students can think through the benefits, costs, and risks associated with their preferred position. Many students find that what they once thought was so simple and so correct, is not so simple or beneficial.

Research Design

I want students to leave my courses not only with the curiosity to ask questions, but also with strategies for answering those questions. While few of my students will move on to become professional political scientists, most will be asked at some point to develop methods for answering questions, either in business, law, or in their personal lives. To give students the tools to answer questions, I do two main things. First, the course readings are mostly peer-reviewed scientific research. Some of the readings are technical, involving a great deal data collection and analysis; other readings are more qualitative relying more on case studies. These readings give students an understanding of how a political scientist answers a question. All of my syllabi include several of my own papers – this allows students to ask questions of the study's author so that they can gain personal insight into how one comes across a question and the steps one takes to answer it.

Second, in my 500 level and my 300 level Public Opinion and 300 level Mass Media courses, I ask students to develop their own question, theory, hypotheses, and data. In the 300 level courses, students might do survey research or content analysis. In my 500 level course, students will work as a group to develop a large content analysis project and carry it out. In addition to these projects, my 500 level students receive a weekly assignment asking them to develop a finely tuned research design answering a specific question. For example, I recently asked my 500 level Media Content Analysis course to develop a research design and coding rubric addressing Occupy Wall Street protest signs.

Summary

In summation, I structure my courses to impart a set of valuable skills and a strong baseline of knowledge. I have put considerable effort into designing my courses to achieve my above stated goals. I have been teaching at the college level since 2004 and have made frequent adjustment to my courses. I pay attention to student evaluations, and revise my approach every semester. . Still relatively new in my career, I find that some approaches work better than others and I discard failing modes of teaching in favor of more promising ones. For example, I use much more multi-media forms of presentation than I did in the past; students have responded very well to it.

Students have responded well to my “skills-based” approach. As one student commented “I learned a lot about the Constitution, more so than anybody I’ve known. But most importantly, I’ve practiced my writing skills” (Spring 2011 POL 313UX). Another commented, “The course is very challenging and interesting. I became a better writer and student by being in this course (Spring 2009 POL 332E). Students have also responded positively to opportunities for critical thinking in my courses, “I was really challenged to think in this course, and for the first time in my live, I did not find myself worrying about my grade in the course, rather how I progressed as a student, learning more each time I attended class (Fall 2010 POL 351S).