**JOSPEH E. USCINKI – TEACHING STATEMENT**

I have four primary teaching goals: (1) fostering valuable skills, (2) providing a baseline of knowledge, (3) improving critical thinking skills, and (4) introducing research design. The application of these goals varies in proportion depending on the content of the course and needs of each particular group of students. For example, in my 500 level courses (seniors and graduate students), research design is highlighted. Conversely, in my 300 level courses (sophomores and juniors), the development of writing skills, reading comprehension, and knowledge predominate. I employ diverse techniques to reach these four goals ranging from in class writing exercises, to multi-media presentations and group exercises. Because of my work in the classroom, I have earned exemplary teaching evaluations at University of Miami and, prior to that, at University of Arizona. Here, I briefly discuss how I reach my four goals in the classroom.

**Fostering Valuable Skills**

To prepare students for graduate school or the job market, I foster students’ writing abilities. This is a daunting task given that many students, even juniors and seniors, are poorly trained writers and have had little feedback on their writing mechanics. First, I must persuade students to become more critical of their work, and then to develop new methods of writing. In doing this, students perform three types of writing in my courses: low-stakes, medium-stakes, and high-stakes.

At the beginning of class sessions, I give students an open-ended question and five minutes to freely organize their thoughts on paper; this is low-stakes writing. I do not read these responses; instead, these allow students to engage the course material and immediately contribute to class discussions.

For medium-stakes writing, students in my 500 level courses write one page single-spaced essays 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 lectures. I grade both of these exercises on the ability of students to critically engage the material. Form is less important for these exercises, with emphasis placed on the students’ critical thought processes.

High stakes writing is the focus in my 300 level courses. Students read three journal articles or book chapters every week and write a five to seven sentence summary of each. These summaries force students to digest the material and distil large amounts of information. 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 with word choice, sentence structure, proofreading, and revision. Second, because 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.

In addition to the investment in writing, I also seek to improve students’ reading comprehension. Rather than rely on textbooks, I mostly assign journal articles. These provide students with challenging reading material above their current reading level. Most students initially find this a challenge, but by mid-semester most students can grasp the material with little difficulty.

**Baseline of Knowledge**

My classes do not ask students to memorize details for tests; instead my courses focus on big ideas. For example, in POL 313 The Constitution, my initial lectures focus on ideas such as the nature of mankind, justice, and democracy. As the course progresses into the finer details of the Constitution, my lectures connect minor provisions to larger ideas. In this way, students begin to connect smaller empirical facts to theoretical concepts. Course assignments ask students to focus on large take-away points. For example, weekly summary assignments ask students to distill down large amounts of information. In my Content Analysis course, students learn research design and content analysis.

**Critical Thinking**

I strive to get students to step outside of ideologies and consider a broader array of alternatives with reasoned argument and evidence. Most students, if called upon, can provide a solution to any problem. However, few can support their preferences with more than normative claims and anecdote. This is magnified in political science courses, where students usually have very strong views. My goal is to get students to consider their own views as one of a set of alternatives, and then weigh evidence and argument. Students soon find that there are no easy answers. I often begin class asking students to write answers to broad questions about the week’s readings or current problems. In my Constitution course, one question asks students to argue for 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 and share their thoughts, students can think through the benefits, costs, and risks associated with their position. Many students find that what they once thought was so simple, is not.

**Research Design**

While few of my students will move on to become political scientists, I want to give students the tools to answer political questions. 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 rely on case studies. These readings give students an understanding of how a political scientist comes across a question and takes steps to answer it. In many of my courses, students develop their own question, theory, hypotheses, and data. In the 300 level courses, students might design and implement surveys or content analyses. In my 500 level courses, students develop and carry out content analysis projects.

**Summary**

I have found that some approaches work better than others and I discard failing modes in favor of more promising ones. I pay attention to student evaluations and continually revise my approach. Students respond positively. 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 life, 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).