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Teaching Philosophy

Teaching Mission Statement: To prepare students for advanced educational attainment, current and future careers, and a lifetime of service to others by creating an enjoyable and engaging classroom environment that places emphases on the development of critical thinking, the refining of serviceable skills, and the practice of inclusivity.

Political science is a discipline that does much more for students than teaching them to *do* something. Granted, doing is important. Just as an architecture major learns to *design* a house, or a petroleum geology major learns to *find* crude oil in rocks, many political science majors go on to *do*. They *prosecute* criminals or *defend* them in courts. They *conduct* research and policy analyses. They *lobby* for the passage of legislation. Yes, political science prepares students to be doers. But, again, we do much more for them. In my view, a political science education is about imparting to students three fundamental attributes that will serve them well regardless of what kind of work they ultimately do. Those three attributes are critical thinking, serviceable skills, and inclusivity. I approach the craft of teaching with a philosophy that seeks to develop, build, and secure those three important traits in my students. That philosophy is manifest in how I teach, that is, how I *do*.

The baseline strategy I employ in my classrooms is called Team-Based Learning (TBL). An extensive literature on TBL has demonstrated its utility in classrooms across a host of disciplines from engineering to medical school. Students instructed in a team-based learning environment are regularly more engaged in the classroom and exhibit better retention of material. In TBL classrooms, students get multiple shots at course material. They are exposed to course content before coming to class through reading textbooks or research, watching relevant videos, or ingesting other media that is assigned by the instructor. That is their first crack at the content. Their second and third exposure to the material comes in the form of short quizzes that assess their comprehension of the material. Each quiz is taken twice—once individually (as an assessment of knowledge and an accountability mechanism) and once again as a team, in which students collaborate to answer the quiz questions, learning from their peers why one answer may not be correct while another one is. The team quiz is taken on a form that provides immediate feedback, meaning students walk away from the quiz knowing the right answer rather than having committed a wrong answer to memory. Finally, students are exposed yet again to the material through real-world application activities. These activities prompt students to solve a real-world problem using course material. They are provided a set of plausible solutions and must, as a team, discuss the options, reach a consensus, and ultimately articulate their justification for their choice. It is through this team-based learning approach that I create an environment where students learn critical thinking, serviceable skills, and inclusivity. I will address each of these in turn.

First, critical thinking is a skill that forces students to step out of a black-and-white world and consider all the various shades of gray. Through TBL, my first goal is to help students see the gray. For example, when teaching about theories of judicial behavior, students often enter the

module with the standard believe that judicial decisions are rigidly legalistic, that is, that judges rule based on the law and the facts of a case. Any other understanding of judicial behavior, in their minds, is wrong. It's black or white. However, when they are exposed to other theories of judicial behavior, such as the strategic or attitudinal models, they start to see the gray areas in how judges rule. Then, when they are required to develop an appellate strategy for a case using the popular Netflix documentary *Making a Murderer*, students see that a jurisprudential approach is not necessarily the only way to go. They must ultimately decide whether to approach the arguments using a legal model, or with a strategy that relies on the attitudinal model or the strategic one, and they must justify that choice using the course material. Regardless of which model they choose, students must think critically about the content of the course and justify their decision based on that content.

In addition to thinking about the material critically, my teaching approach using team-based learning allows me to help students develop a number of skills that will serve them well in the classroom, in their future careers, and in life generally. The first skill is the ability to work in teams. Many instructors recognize the importance of teamwork and attempt to implement group projects into their course design. These projects frequently do not benefit all students because traditional group-work is riddled with temporality, free-riding, dominant actors, scheduling conflicts, and scores of other problems. In TBL classrooms, these problems are ameliorated by design. Students work in permanent teams throughout the semester allowing them to build a rapport with teammates and practice a skill that is much more similar to the workplace than ad hoc teams. Because team members hold one another accountable through peer assessments (that they themselves develop), free-riding and dominant actors are held at bay. And because all teamwork takes place during class time, scheduling conflicts are avoided. Working on teams like those designed in TBL allow students to develop and practice a skill that is highly desired by employers.

Second, students learn to problem solve. Life is about choices and making a choice ultimately means excluding other options. When I present my students with a problem, I also provide them a set of options from which they must choose only one. Judges usually do not have the luxury of ruling in favor of both litigants; it is a zero-sum problem, and the judge has to choose which argument is most compelling (or most in line with the law or the judge's own worldview, etc.) and make a decision. My students must make these same kinds of choices by using their critical thinking skills and solving a problem. But the problem I present them with is not the only one. They also have the problem of team dynamics. As I discuss later, I create teams in my classes to ensure conflict, and students must work through that intra-team conflict to reach a solution to the problem I present them with. Surely, they do so because they have built a rapport with their permanent team, but they must also employ their third serviceable skill—effective communication.

Teams begin building rapport and learning to collaborate after just a few weeks of working together. This kind of symbiotic relationship allows them to communicate with one another to resolve conflict and ultimately reach the goal of making a decision on the problem presented to them. Beyond that, however, they must communicate that decision to me and to the rest of the class, and they must be prepared to justify their response in the face of criticism and dissention. I am always fascinated when I witness a team, which only 15 minutes prior had been heatedly and vehemently disagreeing over whether A or B was the better option, join in a proud chorus of defending A when another team challenged them by saying B was the best choice. Students who had only moments early believed B and B alone now defend A articulately and accurately and along with A, their team's honor. Whether or not they are fully sold on A over B, they communicate the case for A effectively.

Finally, TBL classrooms give me the opportunity to demonstrate and enforce the positive power of diversity and inclusivity. Depending on the nature of the course, there are different ways to assign teams, but the assignments are always made with diversity in mind, particularly political diversity given the recent deepening polarization between the political parties and their adherents. However, there are other dimensions that can be relevant. For example, in a recent section of Politics of Law and Courts, I assigned teams in order to create political diversity but also varied them on another important dimension: residence. Because I have an entire module of my course devoted to state courts, I ensured that each team had a teammate from out-of-state. This allowed students to bring knowledge of other parts of the country and allowed me to make course assignments that reflected the diversity of residence. (On an interesting note, one of my favorite team names also grew out of this diversity. One team had a teammate from New Jersey, where traffic circles, or roundabouts, are common and uniquely called jughandles. Not only did the New Jersey student teach her classmates about this, Jughandles became an awesome team name for them!) Political diversity on the teams creates an environment where Democrats and Republicans can work together to solve problems and hopefully learn that not every Democrat is a baby-killing atheist, and not all Republicans are woman-hating bigots. Students learn to work across the political aisle and will hopefully carry that skill on for a lifetime. In future courses, certainly other sources of diversity need to be incorporated that are relevant to the course material and the political culture, and I look forward to using this teaching style to continue to build teams that force diversity and allow students to learn from it.

Critical thinking, serviceable skills, and inclusivity are important characteristics that I am proud to teach in my classroom—above and beyond the awesome and exciting material in the subject of political science. These attributes will enable students to not only do well in my class, but also to excel in their future careers, and to be problem-solvers and community leaders who make an impact on the world around them. Yes, I want to impart knowledge, but beyond that, I want to develop good citizens, and political science is the discipline that allows me to do that.