

Teaching Philosophy

I believe that the role of a teacher is that of a facilitator to encourage students to engage thoughtfully and meaningfully with a subject and to help students to see the relevance of the subject matter to their academic experience and personal lives. The field of Political Science is diverse, but at its core, it seeks to understand the institutions and environments that influence political behavior. My goal is to help students be more aware of the presence of politics in their daily lives and to develop analytical and systemic thinking that can be used for general problem-solving and critique. I work toward these goals by fostering a collegial learning environment where students have an active role in the learning process, frequently seeking student input during the courses and structuring assessment practices to promote student engagement.

Understanding the different academic backgrounds and subject matter knowledge that students bring to political science courses is key to engaging students in the learning process and helping them to foster a sense of ownership. When I taught the *Introduction to International Relations* course in the Department of Political Science at the University of Chicago, I took time in our first discussion section to have students share their majors and what International Relations meant to them. The purpose of this exercise is to validate perspectives from across disciplines, help the students to understand the diversity of viewpoints in the room, and to set a norm of open engagement. At the beginning of every discussion section, I would outline key terms from the assigned readings and allow students to define them instead of giving the definitions from the text. This exercise allows the student to give their interpretation of the reading and helps me to gauge student understanding.

Involving students in the learning process not only means understanding different academic backgrounds but also creating a classroom culture that embraces the diversity of person and thought. As an African-American male who has educational experiences in both state and private institutions, at an Historically Black Colleges/University (HBCU) and Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs), I am keenly aware of the importance of embracing and encouraging students to engage in an appropriate and respectful manner with myself and with each other. My experiences as an undergraduate student at a single-sex school with a majority African American student body helped me to understand that diversity is not only limited to race, and one must be careful to avoid stereotypes of any group. In my classrooms, I seek to foster a safe-space and view my role as facilitator to ensure that boundaries and a respectful tone are maintained.

To help facilitate classroom discussion, student input is essential to create a relevant and meaningful learning experience. At Chicago State University, I taught a group independent study course and incorporated student perspectives by adjusting the syllabus based upon student input, which I solicited at the beginning of the course and periodically throughout. For example, one week, we added readings on African Americans in United States Politics after students expressed a deeper interest during our week on American Politics. While the course was lecture style, I would leave a few minutes at the end of the class for students to share their thoughts on

what they had learned and additional extensions. To achieve the same purpose in a larger more structured course, I would use a minute paper (asking students to write down in a sentence “What is the most important point you learned today?” and, “What point remains least clear to you?”) to promote engagement in the learning process as well as gauge if changes needed to be made to the syllabus or activities.

The issues explored in my classes, such as ethnic conflict, global markets, and the politics of famine, have tangible implications outside of the classroom, so I use resources beyond the standard text for students to grasp the relevance of the subject matter in their lives. In the independent study course at Chicago State, I had students pick a news source and follow it for a week and bring in articles to discuss topics that were relevant to that week’s readings. Students were able to see how the material could be applied beyond a classroom setting and discussion in class noticeably increased. I also advocate incorporating documentaries and films into the syllabus because they help to give life to the material in a way that a lecture with notes may not be able to achieve by itself not only through actual visuals but also through providing another perspective. For example, use *The Battle for Algiers* in a discussion on decolonization and independence movements.

I approach assessments as ways to help the students periodically reflect on their learning as well as ways for the instructor to gauge comprehension. In the *Introduction to International Relations* course at the University of Chicago, I used the group discussions in sections to encourage independent thought as well as broaden the scope of the class beyond the facts presented in the lectures. I successfully advocated for adjusting several questions prompts for the final exam based upon gauging the student understanding of the material in my discussion section. In the introductory level course *Public Policy Analysis*, students periodically turned in problem sets based upon the material. We crafted the problem sets based upon real-world applications of the material in the students daily lives—for example, one problem set dealt with public transportation in Chicago. In a course where the final project is a term paper, the writing process I follow involves spacing out the various parts of the term paper so that students have time to reflect and adapt their thoughts.