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Teaching Philosophy

I teach with two levels of goals in mind. An overarching goal is to promote a passion for learning because if students learn to be curious and love education, they will teach themselves far more over their lifetimes than any college or university could provide in four years. Students need at least five tools to allow "the mind to take charge of its own thought."[1] These include the ability to criticize, make an argument, imagine, empathize, and write and speak clearly. In order to be as effective as possible, I draw on the science of learning in order to ensure my teaching is as useful as possible. I elaborate on these goals while providing examples of how I incorporate them into my teaching.

As J.S. Mill puts it, "a cultivated mind – I do not mean that of a philosopher, but any mind to which the fountains of knowledge have been opened, and which has been taught, in any tolerable degree, to exercise its faculties – finds sources of inexhaustible interest in all that surrounds it."[2] A desire for such a cultivated mind is my first goal, and often the most difficult. Setting an eager tone encourages students to be motivated, take the course seriously, and participate.[3] Alfred North Whitehead's suggestion that "theoretical ideas should always find important applications" because "the central problem of all education" is "keeping knowledge alive, of preventing it from becoming inert" is a crucial way I encourage curiosity.[4] I ask students to use and apply theories and concepts, to creatively draw connections, and to think about how what they learn affects theirs and others' lives. I pepper courses with film and radio clips, memoirs, guest speakers, and other ways to foster students' interest in learning.

Being able to criticize is one of the most important educational abilities that any individual can possess because it allows someone to evaluate a claim or argument. Professors can introduce critical thinking by differentiating four types of claims: factual, normative, causal, and interpretive.[5] Assessing each requires different skills, information, and evidence. I encourage students to assess arguments for logical validity and consistency, whether evidence supports an argument, and to consider counterarguments. I use small and large group discussion to help students defend or reassess their own views and learn how to respectfully criticize others' arguments. Additionally, I assist students to cultivate their critical thinking by having them prepare a daily writing assignment (which I discuss further below).

Second, learning how to make a convincing argument is a vital skill for every student of political science because persuasion is an indispensible aspect of democracy and personal choice, in addition to how the discipline builds knowledge. Students should understand how to construct logical inductive and deductive arguments, and use these techniques to make factual, normative, causal, or interpretative arguments when appropriate. Undergraduates should comprehend the building blocks of these various types of arguments, and what sort of information they must provide to bolster their argument. By finding examples of different kinds of arguments, exposing problems in others' arguments, and considering the consequences of arguments for individuals' lives, students discover how to argue effectively and demonstrate why arguments matter.

Third, imagination is as necessary for developing new ideas (creative imagination) as it is for understanding empirical information (empirical imagination). I challenge students to foster their creative imaginations by asking them to draw connections among ideas, and experiment with ideas in journals, class discussions, and seminar papers. By empirical imagination I mean what Philip

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[1] Martha C. Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* (Harvard University Press, 1998), 29.
[2] John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism* (New York: Everyman's Library, 1861), Chapter 2, §13, p. 125.
[3] Angela Lee Duckworth et al., "Role of Test Motivation in Intelligence Testing," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 108, no. 19 (2011): 7716–20, doi:10.1073/pnas.1018601108.
[4] Alfred North Whitehead, *The Aims of Education and Other Essays*, Reissue edition (Princeton, N.J.: Free Press, 1967), 5.
[5] Jennifer Fitzgerald and Vanessa A. Baird, "Taking a Step Back: Teaching Critical Thinking by Distinguishing Appropriate Types of Evidence," *PS: Political Science & Politics* 44, no. 03 (2011): 619–24, doi:10.1017/S1049096511000710.

Gourevitch has in mind when he writes in a book about the Rwandan genocide that what fascinates him is "the peculiar necessity of imagining what is, in fact, real."[6] Because we experience only a fraction of reality, we must imagine the rest. In her book on genocide, Samantha Power shows why this type of imagination is important: "despite graphic media coverage, American policymakers, journalists, and citizens are extremely slow to muster the imagination needed to reckon with evil."[7] She blames inadequate responses to genocide in part on this failure of imagination. I teach empirical imagination by introducing the concept and then encouraging students to use their understanding of history, human nature, incentives, and empathy to deeply absorb the meaning and implications of the subject of study. I provide case studies, such as those Samantha Power mentions, to show the consequences of individual failures of empirical imagination.

Fourth, empathizing with others is imperative for understanding today's globalized – and locally diverse – world. I teach empathy in a number of ways. Some of my assigned readings aim at provoking empathy. For instance, when I teach my upper division course on human rights, I assign Primo Levi's holocaust memoir in order to give students a feeling of what it is like to have one's human rights violated.[8] I show clips of films, too, such as from *The Fog of War*, so that students can empathize with human rights violators in order to better understand why human rights violations occur.[9]

Fifth, writing well requires guidance, practice, and feedback. I use several tools to help students improve their writing. I teach George Orwell's "Politics and the English Language" in order to brief students on what good and bad writing entails, and then periodically assign them to assess their own and their fellow students' writing according to Orwell's criteria.[10] Another assignment that I use is a short, focused, "free writing" exercise that requires a student explore a specific topic, idea, passage, question, or class discussion. In upper division seminars, students write one of these five days a week. As a safe space to try out ideas, explore many sides to one debate, argue against one's intuitions, raise possible objections to what appears to be an airtight argument, this assignment fosters critical thinking and invites students to develop a habit writing regularly. While allowing students to draw connections between the other four skills discussed above, it engages students with the substantive course material as well. Over years of teaching, I developed guidelines to help students write well argued, logically sound, creative papers that charitably consider and undermine alternative arguments.

I draw on the science of learning to try to maximize the effectiveness of my teaching. Scholars studying how people learn find that effortful recall spaced over a period of weeks and months is one of the most important means to being able to recall the information as well as use it creatively.[11] I therefore use quizzes worth a small percentage of the overall grade spaced over the semester as a means to help students learn. Scholars also find that after making mistakes through effortful recall and correcting one's own mistakes is more useful than looking up what one could not remember. Therefore, I have students look up and discuss in small groups in class any mistakes they made on the in class quizzes. I also encourage creative and critical exploration of concepts through writing assignments, such as the journals that I discuss above. In sum, in the process of teaching the substantive material of courses that should remain with them for a prolonged period, I aim to help students grow to love learning, teach them the tools to contribute to ongoing debates, and critically assess others' arguments.

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[6] Philip Gourevitch, *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed With Our Families: Stories from Rwanda* (Picador, 1998), 7.
[7] Samantha Power, *"A Problem From Hell": America and the Age of Genocide* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), xvii.
[8] Primo Levi, *If This Is a Man / The Truce*, trans. Stuart Woolf (Everyman's Library, 2000).
[9] Errol Morris, *The Fog of War* (Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2004).
[10] George Orwell, "Politics and the English Language," in *Essays* (Everyman's Library, 1945), 954–67.
[11] Peter C. Brown, Henry L. Roediger III, and Mark A. McDaniel, *Make It Stick: The Science of Successful Learning* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press, 2014).