

Statement of Teaching Philosophy

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I believe that many of my students become political science majors or take electives in political science because they share a foundational desire to understand and improve upon social issues. I aspire to provide these students with the formative knowledge and scientific tools to become critical analysts and creative solvers of political problems. Although my six years of teaching experience span across many courses, including Quantitative Techniques (Statistics), Comparative Politics, Globalization, and International Relations, I set three primary goals across every subject: 1.) to introduce students to the relevancy of politics in their daily lives; 2.) help students find their own voices within the substantive debates in the field; and 3.) encourage scientific thinking and independent analysis. As the winner of the Northeastern University Outstanding Teaching Award, nominated by both faculty and students, I am thrilled to see that my teaching strategies are proving beneficial.

Political science departments serve as a nexus for the interaction of a diverse set of majors, methodological approaches, and student backgrounds. Consequently, instructors must cater to audiences that vary in their level of interest and expertise. As most political science courses tend to be reading-intensive, I first introduce my students to the art of reading for key themes, arguments, and supporting evidence, even guiding them in how to take notes on the excerpts of esoteric theorists in the field. Most students are weary of theory-heavy courses. Therefore, in my classroom, I always pair abstract ideas, such as theories of international relations or statistical significance, with concrete policy examples. In my international relations courses, for instance, I introduce every theoretical concept with a contemporary case study of a political event, coupled with recent media analysis of the event. I incorporate frequent student debates into the course, requiring that students become experts in a country of their choice and formulate arguments for one “hot topic” policy issue, using different theoretical camps to justify their solutions. This exercise culminates in a rigorous Model UN/EU simulation – focused on a practical issue, yet guided by theoretical assumptions on sovereignty, interests, and norms.

Currently, as a postdoctoral fellow leading the Military Intervention Project (MIP) and a mentor for over 15 undergraduate and graduate students, I promote a balance between theory and practice. I use my own research as a venue for students to learn methods, data analysis and visualization programs, and policy-oriented writing skills in a safe, lab-like environment, while encouraging them to explore substantive and regional interests within the themes of my project. My students learn to draft country case studies from primary sources, clean and code variables, and derive research questions and hypotheses from raw data and trends. In fact, several of the students are working with me to integrate the MIP research within their own capstone projects.

Related to my first and second goals, I rely on class debates to direct students toward their own perspectives amidst a range of theoretical angles, encouraging them to take intellectual risks and challenge long-held assumptions. To engage the shyest of students in larger classes, I’ve implemented regular online group forums – where students are split into smaller groups of 4-6 and given two days to contribute to a specific discussion prompt, supporting their points with theoretical and empirical evidence. These discussions serve as a platform for customized learning, inducing students to seek additional sources of information outside of class. I make supplementary materials available on Blackboard—from handouts on difficult concepts for struggling students to challenging extra articles for those who wish to expand their knowledge.

My third goal is to challenge the misconception that political science only involves discussion of political opinions, trends, and facts – rather than the formation, testing, and critique of hypotheses. A strong grounding in research practices and tools of analysis, both qualitative and quantitative, not only empowers students to engage with the discipline, but transforms them into better-informed citizens, able to make stronger assessments of political information.

To encourage analytical thinking, I introduce students to existing academic research with the intent of finding limitations and potential biases. In my statistics courses, I begin with a lecture entitled “Lying with Numbers” and persuade students to bring in their own examples of statistical manipulation, whether in casual conversation, the media, NGO reports, or in scholarly pieces. I repeat this theme in more detail and with concrete examples at the end of each newly-learned statistical technique. Complementing these classroom lectures, I direct my students to critique several academic articles of their choosing, paying attention to article assumptions, theories, analysis, and conclusions. The final assignment for my course on quantitative techniques asks students to pose a refined research question, formulate hypotheses, gather their own data to test their hypotheses, and then analyze the data to reach a conclusion to a degree of certainty. Students are driven to define complex concepts for measurement, create surveys, check the validity of scholarly datasets, and utilize statistical software, such as SPSS and STATA, for their own independent research. Some of my students have expanded this class project into a conference paper with my guidance, while others have realized that working knowledge of statistical software make them ideal job candidates. Given that I stress the importance of applying statistical software to social phenomena, I also offer students optional, outside-of-class computer lab sessions, where they learn advanced techniques catered to individual interests.

Aside from imbuing students with analytical and critical thinking skills, these independent research projects emphasize the need to write effectively about one’s conclusions. All of my classes include a research paper as a significant component of the final grade. In preparing students to write this paper, we examine examples of excellent writing, evaluate the elements of what makes analytical writing persuasive and accessible (introducing a problem, developing a thesis, effectively gathering and analyzing evidence), and then I work with students in “drafting sessions” to refine their written arguments and evidence.

The promotion of diverse perspectives is also a priority in my classrooms. Thus, it is my duty to expose students to a wide understanding of what it means to be a scholar and a scientist in the field. I pursue this goal by assigning readings that go beyond the standard theories and Western foundations of the discipline. I incorporate non-Western research and scholars throughout my lectures, as well as provide supplementary readings on feminist scholars and authors originating outside of the US, Europe, and other developed countries. In my statistics courses, I dedicate a lecture to the contributions of women as quantitative social scientists, to dismiss disadvantageous gender stereotypes related to mathematical talent.

As my career progresses, I will craft new courses that are compatible with my research interests and teaching philosophy, such as Military Interventions in the 21st Century, European Security, Political Economy of Security Crises, Politics of the Balkan Powder Keg, The EU and the Balkans, Quantitative International Relations, and International Relations beyond the West. In this way, I can offer my students more channels of research collaboration and expanded curriculum options. Yet whether I am teaching an introductory course on international relations or an upper-level statistical analysis course, my goals remain the same – to hone students’ political knowledge, analytical skills, and research aspirations.