

Teaching Statement

At the beginning of every semester, I remind myself of the same moment. As a college freshman, I walk into an auditorium and take a seat. Then, I proceed to listen carefully to the professor who is behind a podium, giving a three-hour lecture about the idea of equality in the aftermath of the French Revolution. I take copious notes for about twenty minutes, and jot down a few questions. As time progresses, it becomes increasingly difficult to take notes and to pay attention. The professor never pauses for questions, and at the end of the three hours, he packs up his notes and leaves. My questions are never asked, never answered.

I decided to specialize in modern political thought despite this tedious class and many like it. I remind myself of this moment at the beginning of every semester because I never want to replicate it as an instructor of history of political thought and feminist political theory. As an international scholar and teacher, I believe that students should encounter as many different perspectives on politics as possible and learn to critically engage with their own assumptions about politics in order to develop an awareness of the (often unequal) power dynamics that shape our everyday experiences. This belief informs my approach to teaching in two ways. First and foremost, it guides my primary aspirations as a teacher, which are to cultivate my students' critical, creative, and autonomous thinking capabilities, and to give them the opportunity to engage with different perspectives on topics integral to the field of political theory, such as citizenship, sovereignty, equality and justice. Second, it leads me to think of my courses as an opportunity to help students move beyond their struggles with the abstract, and often unfamiliar, language of political-theoretical texts so that they can comfortably articulate the connections between their experiences as individuals, students, and citizens and the theoretical frameworks and instruments used to study politics.

In my classrooms, this approach primarily take shape through an interactive learning environment that encourages student participation. Group discussions are a major component of my courses. I also use collaborative, low-stakes activities that allow students to connect the readings to contemporary events and popular cultural productions. I find that adding an element of friendly competition to such exercises also helps students, especially freshmen, think more creatively about how to connect readings from the course to their daily lives. For example, in *Introduction to Political Theory* courses, when we discuss Hobbes' "state of nature," I have students work in small groups to pick a movie that they thought best illustrated this concept, and prepare a presentation. The following week, each group showcases their presentation, other groups ask them questions, and they vote for the best presentation. The group that gets the most votes wins a small prize. Students also fill out peer evaluation forms at the end of their collaboration, which means that members of the groups remain accountable to one another throughout this process. I use assignments like this one earlier on in the semester because it creates a lively discussion environment that usually carries through the end of the semester.

I strike a balance between encouraging student participation and structuring student learning in two ways. First, I emphasize the importance of understanding the main argument(s) of any assigned material on its own terms. Since students come into the classroom with different backgrounds, I find it productive to offer a detailed contextual gloss at the beginning of each class, particularly when teaching texts like Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* that explicitly deal with violence. Second, I start every semester with community-building exercises that aim to structure the classroom as a space in which students can feel free to voice their disagreements with arguments they read or hear. When there is assigned material that can be particularly provocative or violent, I prime students on what to expect and I give them guiding questions to think about as they work through these materials.

In my syllabi, I combine canonical and non-canonical readings to expose students to perspectives on politics and political life that are often neglected in social scientific and humanistic inquiry. I also explicitly state that students will read and hear arguments they do not agree with many times over the course of the semester, and that they will be expected to engage with these arguments respectfully. I emphasize that disagreement can be a productive force only when it is expressed with care and consideration for others' viewpoints and experiences. One of the activities I always use on the first day is to have students brainstorm a set of discussion guidelines. Depending on the size of the class, and student backgrounds, we either have a large group discussion or they have small group discussions followed by a debrief session. I also prompt them to tell me what kinds of interventions they would want me to make as their instructor in cases of strong disagreement among students. Every classroom has its own dynamic that shifts over time, and I get student feedback through conversations in office hours and informal midterm evaluation surveys to figure out ways to help students learn more effectively and efficiently.

In order to assess how students' critical and autonomous thinking skills develop over the course of the semester, I make writing assignments the primary method of assessment and evaluation. I structure my courses so that students have the opportunity to practice low-stakes writing as much as possible, and to work across a number of genres (research-based essays, blog posts, scripts, multimedia projects etc.) to complete course requirements. This way, students develop a better sense of what a "good argument" looks like across genres and styles. Even if they are not writing academic essays, the more students practice writing, the easier it becomes for them to engage with the materials deeply and creatively. I also dedicate one or two class sessions to peer-review workshops. During these workshops, students first type up their feedback and then talk to each other about the feedback they had written. When students give this kind of structured feedback to one another on their first drafts, they also learn about their own writing. The revision process also gives students an opportunity to reflect on their progress as writers. Students benefit immensely from such workshops, and from an explicit emphasis on writing as a process in all social science and humanities courses precisely because they allow students to see the merits of analytic, argument-based writing.

My belief that a rigorous training in political science should give students the necessary theoretical, analytical, and conceptual tools to understand the complex ways in which power works informs my teaching practice. Likewise, my pedagogical approach is guided by an equally strong belief that higher education should prepare students to encounter different identities, perspectives, and arguments to develop strategies to use such encounters creatively and productively. My own experiences as an international scholar and teacher help me understand how challenging this encounter can be for college students who find themselves outside their comfort zone, and in many cases away from home for the first time. More importantly, I am acutely aware of the different ways in which gender, race, and ethnicity can amplify this challenge. In my classes, I strive to cultivate a sense of community without overlooking the different identities students bring into the room, and to help students acquire the instruments that are necessary to become critical thinkers and global citizens.