Statement of Teaching Philosophy

David O’Connell
Department of Political Science, Columbia University

I once found myself standing in front of my class dressed in a James Madison costume I had purchased over the internet. Vest, knickers, high socks, white wig- the whole deal. We were reviewing the Constitution, and I wanted to make its history vivid for my students. I wanted them to grasp what, precisely, was at stake when 55 men met in the sweltering heat of a Philadelphia summer in order to chart a new course for a new nation. I wanted them to fully inhabit the moment.

But I also wanted them to have fun. Indeed, a costume, as silly as it may seem, is an example of one of my foremost teaching commitments: ensuring that students are engaged. In the course of my work at Columbia, I have had the opportunity to be a teaching assistant for the introductory American politics class for five semesters and for the urban politics class for one. On several occasions I have given guest lectures to the entire group. Still, most of my experience has come in the form of leading 50 minute discussion sections for 20 to 25 students at a time. In these meetings, I would elaborate on the professor’s lectures and facilitate conversations about the week’s readings.

As someone who specializes in American political development, I work hard to ensure that my students understand the evolution of the U.S. political system over time. I try to place politics in a historical perspective, where institutions evolve and past decisions influence current possibilities. However, I want students to understand not just the past, but the present as well. I attempt to familiarize them with important theories of political behavior and help them apply these theories to current issues and events. When you problematize something as simple as the decision to vote (as in, why does anyone vote at all?), it can be truly eye-opening.

I quickly learned that to be effective in these efforts I needed to create an exciting atmosphere that encourages student involvement. To that end, I make extensive use of active learning assignments. For instance, to help students understand the implications of the civil service system, I once had them take a practice postal exam. In a discussion about Mayhew’s Electoral Connection, I had my students analyze Congressional websites. For insight into the current state of civil liberties, I distributed an article on college gossip websites and organized a debate.

Additionally, I make extensive use of media and continue to search for new ways of integrating different content into my lesson plans. I’ve shown campaign ads, played political songs and read in class from different novels. A good example is that when my class discusses the role of public opinion I now show them an interview where Vice President Cheney was asked about American opposition to the Iraq War. He famously answered, “So?” His provocative response can trigger an interesting discussion about how much credence our leaders should give to the polls, especially on questions of national security.

I also script jokes. I cannot tell you how many times I’ve stolen a Lyndon Johnson line and said “This class will be like your grandmother’s nightshirt- it will cover everything.” Humor, I think, serves a practical purpose. It relaxes the atmosphere, ideally allowing students to feel more comfortable.
All of these techniques are ways in which I make my class more engaging. They would not be worth much, though, if they did not help students learn. I believe that by making my class unique and interesting I encourage students to want to come to class and to want to do the necessary work.

A second part of my teaching philosophy involves cultivating the skills of the discipline, including critical analysis and reading and writing abilities. The intro class has typically involved a research paper. I have relished the opportunity to work with students on their individual projects and I support their research in many ways. I distribute a sheet listing my top twelve rules of effective social science writing, I host a paper workshop where students can collaboratively comment on each other’s work, I read drafts and I run training sessions for citation management programs like RefWorks. These skills may underlie political science, but they will be useful to students in their other pursuits, too.

Another essential part of my teaching philosophy is being available. I always try to keep in mind that, to a student, my class may be the most important thing in their life at that given moment. I guarantee my students that I will respond to their emails within twenty four hours and I am willing to meet with any student upon request. I’ve found myself meeting with students at the library at 10 PM on a Friday night after they got out of work and at 9:00 AM on a Sunday morning the day before an exam. Prior to an exam, I typically hold office hours from about 6 PM until midnight, or shortly thereafter. Over the course of that time, about half the students from my sections will stop by. I want them to know that I’m invested in their performance.

Furthermore, I firmly believe that every student is capable of achievement. Every student has the capacity to learn. And one of my goals each semester is to help students produce their best work. So, I try to be a cheerleader, for lack of a better term. I have a standing policy that when a student receives a C or lower I request a meeting so that we can come up with a strategy where they can do better. When I see improvement, I try to go out of my way to acknowledge it, whether by a note written on their paper or an encouraging email.

I also try to be a cheerleader when it comes to class participation. Sometimes students will say things in class that are misguided or even incorrect. I think the worst thing I can do as an instructor is to make them feel stupid, to be condescending. I instead try to guide these students gently towards the point they should be making. I constantly applaud and comment on good ideas.

Ultimately, as much as I might wish it to be true, I don’t know everything about teaching. Like anyone else, I am fallible. Some lesson plans fall flat. Sometimes I don’t handle situations in the classroom as well as I could. Some things you simply cannot prepare for.

The important point is that like my students, I’m always learning. I try to learn from my mistakes. I have three huge binders with every lesson plan I’ve ever used. Every time I teach, I draw up a new plan, including the things that worked in the past, eliminating those that did not. Moreover, I have from time to time attended workshops at the teaching center here at Columbia.

If I link these different goals together there is a common thread: I have high expectations, both for the students and for myself. I want to see them grow over the course of the semester and I want see myself grow, too.
When the class ends, my relationship with my students does not. I embrace the opportunity to be a mentor. I have been lucky enough to stay in touch with a lot of former students who turn to me for advice on occasion. This past year I was on a dissertation fellowship and was not assigned to a class but that did not prevent me from helping several students develop their senior theses. Having the opportunity to shepherd larger research projects, the opportunity to involve undergraduates in my own research, is something I sincerely look forward to. Much of teaching is about constructing relationships. I genuinely value that part of the job.

In the end, the single most important reason I began this journey over five years ago was because I love to teach. The last semester I was a TA, the class had three main assignments, a take-home midterm, a research paper and a final exam. A freshman student of mine received a B- on the take home. She immediately sent me a frantic email, asking if she should drop the class. I counseled her to be patient, to have faith in herself, and I promised I would work closely with her on the next assignments. We met twice about her paper, exchanged many emails and I read two rough drafts. She wound up getting an A. On the final, she got an A-.

That anecdote captures precisely why I love teaching. It has nothing to do with the fact that this student wound up with a higher grade. Rather, I am heartened by the knowledge that I had some part, however small, in helping her accomplish something she did not think possible. I had some part, however small, in teaching her what it would take to be successful in a college class. And that anecdote is why I know that being a college professor is the most fulfilling occupation I ever could have chosen.

For more information about my teaching experience, please consult my website for syllabi and evaluations.