

TEACHING PHILOSOPHY — MARTY P. JORDAN —

My first job “teaching” was in Central America. Directly out of college, I moved to El Salvador intent upon instructing impoverished *campesinos* about micro-scale development projects that might ameliorate their economic deprivation. Needless to say, I was the one that got schooled. I learned far more from my “students” during those two years than I ever taught them, not least of which was humility and respect for the awesome privilege it is to be a facilitator of learning.

That experience stuck with me. I no longer see teaching as a stale recitation of information for students to copy down. Rather my role as an instructor is to help translate complex concepts into interpretable ideas, encourage curiosity and discussion, allow students space to make and correct mistakes, and transfer useful skills that students can use beyond the classroom. As such, I have five general goals for all my political science courses. First, I want my students to understand why government and politics affect our daily lives. Second, I hope students will learn and appreciate the *scientific* study of politics. Third, I desire to develop and exercise students’ critical and analytical thinking skills. Fourth, I aim to connect theories and concepts with the real world. Finally, I try to meet students where they are and challenge them to learn beyond their comfort zone.

Government and Politics Matter: I want students to finish my courses with a greater appreciation of why government and politics matter. I want them to know how citizens think about politics, and how political institutions condition decisionmaking and outcomes. I pursue this goal on the first day of class. For example, I ask students in my Intro to American Politics course to name one way in which government had an impact on their lives. Prolonged silence usually follows, and then answers start to trickle in (e.g., paid sales taxes, subsidized education loans, etc.). Soon, students offer a laundry-list of ways government impacts their lives. From the dialog that follows, I can tell students gain a new appreciation for the concepts they will spend the rest of the semester engaging.

To convey the concept of civil rights in several of my courses, I ask students to take an actual Jim Crow literacy test. I disguise it as a “pop-quiz,” giving them only 5 minutes to complete the test. Oftentimes, students complain as they are turning in the “quiz” that it was unfair, too challenging, that I didn’t give them enough time, or that I “violated” their rights. I then reveal that it wasn’t a real quiz, but rather a literacy test that African Americans were often forced to complete in the South in order to vote. The lesson is impactful as students reference it frequently throughout the semester.

For several of my courses, I also incorporate simulations at various times throughout a semester to help reinforce how government and politics matter. For instance, I use WW Norton’s interest-groups simulation, where students decide on lobbying activities to secure the passage of a bill. I rely on the Redistricting Game to teach students about gerrymandering and the importance of electoral institutions. And I ask students to work in small groups, mimicking Congress, and complete the New York Times’ Budget Fix exercise, where students negotiate with their peers to decide which federal programs should be cut to balance the budget. Ultimately, I hope students gain a deeper grasp of the forces that shape government and politics, and how to become engaged citizens.

Applying Science to Politics: Regardless of students’ appetite for or antipathy toward politics, they usually see political science as synonymous with the punditry they are accustomed to in the media. I strive to upend this misperception of our discipline by conveying the scientific principles by which political scientists try to understand, explain, and predict political phenomena. To accomplish this goal, I employ a host of activities and assignments designed to help students become aware of their own cognitive biases, learn the scientific standards and methods that mitigate these biases, provide students with lots of practice to cement these concepts, and even identify shortcomings of science.

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For example, in my introductory Research Methods course, I show a video about the ancient astronaut theory. I ask students to document and later discuss the differences they find between this pseudo-science and the scientific standards they have already learned. I also provide students many opportunities to gain hands-on experience in the research process. Working with datasets from different subfields, students learn about theories, how to develop hypotheses, key aspects of measurement, how to carry out basic empirical analyses and make inferences. And the end-of-semester project involves students carrying out their own research proposal, offering them an opportunity to directly apply what they have learned.

In discussing the power and limitations of experimental and observational designs, I walk students through my own quasi-experimental research examining the effects of whether convenience voting reforms following Hurricane Sandy increased turnout in the 2012 presidential election. In covering sampling and public opinion polling, I have students carry out a survey of their peers on a particular question, following different sampling techniques. Conjointly, I also try to improve students' numeric literacy of basic probability, descriptive statistics, absolute versus relative comparisons, regression tables, and visual and graphical representations of data.

Critical and Analytical Thinking: Beyond stimulating an appreciation for the subject matter and applying science to political phenomena, I want students to develop and apply critical and analytical thinking skills. I believe one of the best ways to do this is through shared experience. For instance, in several of my courses, to convey why government helps resolve collective action problems, I offer students extra credit points that they can “keep” or “donate.” I inform them that if more than half of the class decides to donate their extra credit points, they will all gain an additional point. But if less than half decides to donate, all those who decided to donate will lose their points while those deciding to keep their points will retain their extra credit. This simple exercise mirrors common collective action problems and communicates the natural tendency of free-riding. As the semester progresses and we discuss different policy and political debates and the complexity of government, I mention this experience giving students a shared point of reference and reinforcing the principle.

For a course on Urban Politics, I helped organize a day-long field trip to Detroit, Michigan, where students were exposed to the economic, social, racial, political, and institutional challenges facing residents and elected officials. Despite the fact that an overwhelming majority of the students were from Michigan, few had ever toured various neighborhoods and cultural sites across the Motor City. Students were asked to write a reflection paper on their experience. They were also asked to use the experience to research and defend an issue position (e.g., on globalization, flexibilization of labor, race relations, jurisdictional footprints, etc.) in a mock debate with classmates.

In my introductory Research Methods course, to help students begin to describe and analyze data, I rely on the Titanic Dataset, which contains information on the fate of passengers on the fatal maiden voyage of the Titanic ocean liner. This not only provides an easy, accessible opportunity for students to learn the fundamentals of data description and analysis, but also presents an opportunity to show a clip of the acclaimed 1997 movie and belt out “My Heart Will Go On.” Ultimately, all of these shared experiences are helpful in developing critical and analytical thinking because they serve as reference points in future activities that tackle related, but more challenging material.

Real-World Applications: I am under no illusion that most of my students will become political scientists. Nonetheless, the skills they acquire from a political science degree can be directly applicable to the professional arena. As such, I design assignments and activities to apply the

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concepts they have learned in a real-world format. For example, in an American Legislative Process course, I asked students to draft a piece of model legislation and defend it before their peers. They applied their knowledge of the legislative process, public opinion, and other political dynamics, while also honing their verbal and written communication skills. In my Campaigns and Elections course, I ask students to select a competitive House or Senate race, following the campaign throughout the semester, and then write a business memo advising the candidate how to win the election. Again, students integrate what they have learned about American politicking throughout the semester, condensing their knowledge into a synthesized format typical in the professional arena.

In addition to these applications, I also bring in outside speakers to demonstrate the link between theoretical concepts and the outside world. For instance, in the Urban Politics course, I invited a Vice President from JP Morgan Chase to discuss its \$100 million redevelopment investment in Detroit. In my Campaigns and Elections course, I invited a candidate running for a Michigan state-House seat to discuss campaign strategies. Moreover, I frequently weave in my own research or experiences in international development, advocacy work in D.C., and tenure in the private sector to tie what we do in the classroom to vocations beyond college. And I regularly mentor students about attending graduate or law school, potential career paths, and vocations outside of academia.

Meet Students Where They Are and Challenge Them: Pedagogical research suggests that effective teaching involves understanding where students start from and then scaffolding them to gain a stronger understanding and greater independence in the learning process. I set high expectations for students, but guide them along in the process, allowing them space to make mistakes but still rise to the challenge. In practice, this means that I assign readings from a variety of sources, including text books, news articles, and scholarly work. The reading material starts out as accessible and progressively gets more advanced. It also means that we practice sample questions in class (designed to apply varying degrees of Bloom's taxonomy) so students know what to expect on formal evaluations. Students are more successful when they have first practiced together, then practiced on their own, and then can apply their knowledge on an exam.

Still, meeting students where they are and challenging them also means that I structure class time in a way that engages students and reaches diverse learning styles, varying time spent lecturing, asking tough questions, doing group work, using visual aids, and allowing for spontaneous learning opportunities that deviate from my initial plan. I especially try to aid struggling and underrepresented students. For example, I held study sessions in Spanish for one of my students because she felt more comfortable learning about research design in her native language. Finally, I proactively reach out to students. If a student misses more than two classes in a row, I contact them to check in.

Despite my best efforts and with the experience in El Salvador seared in my mind, I know I am an imperfect teacher. And I know I can learn as much from my students as I can teach them. Learning is a two-way highway. So I rely on pre- and post-test surveys and mid-semester and end-of-semester evaluations to determine if and how effectively students learned the material and whether I achieved my five goals. I also regularly ask students at the end of a lecture to write down one thing they learned, one thing they still don't understand, and a suggestion on how to improve content delivery. I am also committed to staying abreast of the latest pedagogical research to adjust and improve my teaching approach. In the long run, I hope my passion for political science is contagious in the classroom, and that students leave with a better appreciation for and understanding of our complex political world, renewed curiosity and commitment to civic engagement, and relevant skills that will be applicable in their careers ahead.