Teaching Statement

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Teaching Philosophy

My first goal is to teach students to develop a healthy sense of skepticism and to think critically about the world around them. That is, I want to encourage them to think like scientists. This means pushing students to think creatively, but also analytically. I see this as central to my job as a teacher regardless of the curriculum and hope students take the analytical skills they learn with me outside the classroom. Why do we believe what we do about politics? How can we evaluate the legitimacy of political information? What kind of evidence would it take to make us rethink a political position? Often this means encouraging students to think about the type of hypothesis testing or fact checking that would be necessary to verify a particular opinion or statement. For undergraduate courses, this can stop well short of actually designing or implementing empirical tests, however, at the very least I want students to be cognizant of the difficulties, but also the importance, of challenging political information, rather than accepting it at face-value.

My second and equally important goal, is to teach students the value of asking questions about government and society. Many students, especially at the undergraduate level, see politics as either irrelevant to their daily lives, or an inaccessible, faceless bureaucracy. Breaking down these preconceptions is, of course, no easy task and it is for this reason that I want students to acquire a sense of skeptic inquiry. Part of this process is for students to develop expectations - whatever they may be - about politics by which the performance of governments or politicians can be assessed. Here, I try to stress both conceptual and practical lessons, teaching students about the nuts and bolts of participatory democracy, while also highlighting the types of practices that individuals can use to influence and engage with the political world.

To help achieve these goals, I do three things in the classroom: 1) foster a comfortable learning environment, 2) develop a sense of community and mutual interest, and 3) maintain high academic expectations.

A comfortable learning environment is essential for students to feel intellectually curious and engaged by classroom activities. I believe that mutual respect is the key ingredient to creating such an environment and, for my part, that means accessibility; I always encourage students to email me or come to office hours. This imparts to my students that I take them and their academic pursuits seriously.

I also want students to feel that we - their fellow students and myself, the instructor - are all in a sense taking the course together. To this end, I do not present myself as the one and only keeper of valuable knowledge, rather, we all may have specialized knowledge or information that when shared can forward the aims of the course. I believe this encourages students to take a more active view of the course and their own education. So, while there is an important role for lecturing, I always try to include elements of deliberative discourse in my courses.
Finally, I maintain and clearly communicate high academic expectations. To me, this is simply another way of showing mutual respect; I expect high-level coursework because I believe my students are capable of it. A major goal here is to improve students’ understanding of politics, but also general workplace skills. Communicating ideas clearly in speech and writing is critical to any career path.

Teaching Experience

My teaching philosophy has slowly evolved over years of being both a student and instructor. At UNC-Chapel Hill, I have served as a teaching assistant for six different professors and three courses - Introduction to American Government, State and Local Government, and the Decline of the Death Penalty (a specialized undergraduate seminar). Exposure to such a range of courses and pedagogical styles has been an enormous benefit, allowing me to identify and apply teaching techniques that work best for me. It has also given me the technical skills (and patience) necessary to communicate clearly with classes of students, large and small.

I first had the chance to implement the techniques I learned during the Fall semester of 2012, when I served as the instructor for Introduction to American Government. My students came from diverse majors and academic credentials, so I strove to make the material engaging for the political science students while accessible to students majoring in other fields. I focused heavily on political science topics, introducing students to concepts such as bounded rationality, dynamic representation, and spatial modeling. At the same time, I made a point of prioritizing discussion of contemporary political events and using them to illustrate broader conceptual models. For example, the 2012 national election provided an excellent venue to discuss concepts like the “thermo-static model” of public opinion and trends in presidential approval. I later refined my pedagogical skills by developing and teaching my own State and Local Politics course in the Spring Semester of 2015 (syllabuses for both course are available on my website, http://sites.dartmouth.edu/daepp/.)

Teaching Interests

At the undergraduate level, I am interested in teaching a wide range of general introductory courses such as American Government, State and Local Politics, Elections, Congress, and the Presidency as well as upper level courses such as Police-Citizen Interactions, the Death Penalty, Public Finance, Public Policy, Media and Politics, Race and Politics, Public Opinion, and Political Economy. At the graduate level, I am well-qualified to teach seminars in political behavior, public opinion, macro-politics, public administration, or media dynamics. I would also welcome the opportunity to teach more specialized seminars in agenda setting, information processing (how institutions and mass publics prioritize and respond to political information), policy processes, racial justice, budgeting, and framing.

I am also qualified to teach a variety of methods courses. At both the undergraduate and graduate levels, I would welcome the chance to teach a course on research design - one that would emphasize both the basic principals of scientific inquiry as well as the practical know-how of hypothesis testing and data gathering. I can also teach courses on probability theory, regression analysis, content analysis, and time series. Finally, I would look forward to working with students of all levels on designing and implementing research projects.
Teaching Evaluations Overview

The following table is based on responses to the question: “Overall my teaching associate [teaching instructor] did an excellent job.” Students could respond with a 1 through 5 ranking, with 1 indicating they “strongly disagree” with the statement and 5 indicating they “strongly agree.” Where the data is available, I include the mean department score as a point of comparison.

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Student Comments

Instructor for Introduction to American Politics:

- “The readings help show real world examples and provoke thought about the topics discussed in lecture.”
- “Derek really knew what he was talking about, and was very clear when relating it to us. He was a super awesome guy and great professor, I would definitely take more courses from him if they were offered.”
- “Easy going manner, promotes discussion within class, and clearly explains difficult topics.”

Teaching Assistant for the Decline of the Death Penalty:

- “Easily approachable and very knowledgeable. The subject at hand was very sensitive and Derek did a great job handling every perspective and facilitated the discussions in a very professional manner. Overall, a great TA.”
- “Derek’s performance was top notch! He is the best TA I have ever had. He has a great understanding of all subject matter and is well prepared. His lecture and discussion is always insightful and engaging. His grading was fair and was prompt in returning all assignments...Truly one of UNC’s best!”
- “Derek has been my favorite TA by far in my time at Carolina. He relates to his recitation sections well and every student speaks highly of him. I like that he lets the discussions go wherever the class wants for the most part and he always keeps us interested in the subject and wanting to know more. Would love to take other classes with Derek.”
- “Great balance between expecting a lot but not being intimidating in doing so.”

Derek A. Epp, Teaching Statement