Getting Started Exercise

1. Your concept of learning: Ask yourself such questions as "What do I mean by learning?" and "What happens in a successful learning situation?" Make sure to note what constitutes "learning" or "mastery" in your “Learning” involves starting to think differently, i.e. applying a new analytical framework to political issues and events. In a successful learning situation, students come to see how an issue/event can be understood differently from their initial response. “Mastery” involves the ability to apply different theoretical frameworks to an issue/event – to understand why and how different conclusions could be reached. Implicit in all of this is a solid grasp of the major theoretical frameworks in political science.. “Learning” involves starting to think differently, i.e. applying a new analytical framework to political issues and events. In a successful learning situation, students come to see how an issue/event can be understood differently from their initial response. “Mastery” involves the ability to apply different theoretical frameworks to an issue/event – to understand why and how different conclusions could be reached. Implicit in all of this is a solid grasp of the major theoretical frameworks in political science.
2. Your concept of teaching: Note your values, beliefs, and aspirations as a teacher. (For example, do you wish to encourage mastery, competency, transformational learning, life-long learning, general transference of skills, critical thinking, etc.) What does a perfect teaching situation look like to you? Why do you consider this "perfect"? What is your role as a teacher? Are you a coach, a general, an evangelist, an entertainer? The most important skill I’d want to impart is that of critical thinking – by which I mean a more rigid method of analysis and argument. In a perfect teaching situation, students would find their initial gut reactions to understanding an issue/event challenged. They would begin to realize that they are missing pieces of the puzzle they didn’t even know existed. This is my ideal because I want to help students who are interested in politics to come to terms with complexity, with the goal of both creating better political scientists and better citizens. My role as a teacher is to prompt critical thinking.
3. Your goals for students: What skills should students obtain as the result of your teaching? You may think about your ideal student and what the outcomes of your teaching would be in terms of this student's knowledge or behavior. You may address the goals you have for specific classes or curricula and the rationale behind them (i.e., critical thinking, writing, or problem solving). Students should come to employ more rigid analytical thinking, involving both the application of various theories and theoretical frameworks, as well as a higher standard of logic. They should then be able to convey that analysis both conversationally and through essay writing.
4. What methods will you consider to reach these goals and objectives? What are your beliefs regarding learning theory and specific strategies you would use such as case studies, group work, simulations, interactive lectures, etc.? You might also include any new ideas or strategies you have used or want to try. In class, I begin by trying to ensure comprehension. I go over the relevant argument and then break up the class into pairs or small groups to see how well they can answer questions of understanding. My goal here is both to ascertain how well students have grasped the argument (through circulating) and to have students help each other understand what’s going on, since I think the knowledge gap between myself and the students sometimes makes it difficult for me to envision in advance the types of difficulties students will have. Once I feel that the students have a reasonable grasp of the argument, I then move on to more advanced tasks, including: applying the argument to an event or contest; discussing the argument through using another theory we have already discussed; and using the Socratic method to lead students to reflect on how different ideas fit together, especially with regard to commonly held attitudes. I also hold an essay workshop to help students convey their arguments more clearly and logically.
5. Your interaction with students: What are your attitudes toward advising and mentoring students? How would an observer see you interact with students? Why do you want to work with students? For me, interactions with students provide an occasion to encourage greater engagement with the ideas and topics covered in class. When a student appears to grasp the central concepts fairly well, interactions provide an occasion to more deeply explore complexity. When a student is having difficulties with the course material, I do my best to have students better understand a topic through pointed questions that prompt recollection and force students to reflect on how the various points they remember from class hold the key to understanding. On the whole, my desire to work with students reflects my beliefs about the possibilities inherent in teaching political science – in particular its ability to help create better citizens.
6. Specific examples: How are the values and beliefs noted above realized in classroom activities? You may discuss course materials, lesson plans, activities, assignments, assessment instruments, etc. I begin each lesson by referencing two newspaper articles. My goal is twofold: to connect the course material to contemporary events and controversies; and to provide examples of common or contrasting ways of thinking about an issue, so that we can deconstruct them after the students later in the class, after the students have a stronger grasp of the course material. The articles are taken from major North American newspapers, chosen expressly to reproduce common arguments that students are likely to hold or encounter when discussing a given topic. This then facilitates an attempt to dispassionately analyse these arguments, without having to tie them expressly to any particular student. I try to suggest to students that while there isn’t necessarily a correct and straightforward conclusion or solution to come to, we should all attempt to think more analytically about these sorts of issues.
7. How will you assess student understanding? What are your beliefs about grading? Do you grade students on a percentage scale (criterion referenced) or on a curve (norm referenced)? What different types of assessment will you use: traditional tests, projects, portfolios, or presentations? I assess students using a criterion referenced grading scheme, which I then circulate to students when I hand back their assignments/exams. At the same time, my grading scheme is not entirely uncurved, since I do look at a sample of student work each time to assess whether student work suggests that a question was, for what ever reason, overly difficult or easy. As such, I am able to help students better understand why they received the grade they did, while at the same time ensuring that the class average is not unreasonably high or low. In larger classes I rely on tests and essays to assess students, but in smaller classes presentations would form a significant component of the coursework.

Professional growth: How will you continue growing as a teacher? What goals do you have for yourself and how will you reach them? How have your attitudes toward teaching and learning changed over time? How will you use your student evaluations to improve your teaching? How might you learn new skills? How do you know when you have taught effectively? Over time I want to develop my ability to create a learning environment in which I simultaneously engage students who are excelling in the course while also ensuring that students who are having difficulties do not feel completely lost. I have been pursuing this goal through fine-tuning the balance in each class between time spent ensuring comprehension and time spent developing the types of critical reasoning skills I’d like my course to impart. I have wavered back and forth on this over time, as I adjust to both looks of confusion and boredom, and use both the looks on student faces and course evaluations as a sort of barometer on this question. I have researched and experimented with a number of classroom activities in the past, as I attempt to strike the right balance, and will continue to do so in the future.