My interest in teaching is shaped by a belief that an education in political science has the potential to help form not only good political scientists, but also good citizens. In an age in which the formulaic (and sometimes formulaically aggressive) presentation of talking points often passes for political discourse, political science can help students move beyond these arguments and build a more nuanced understanding of institutions, events, and issues. Even more importantly, it can help students improve the calibre of their analytical thinking, ideally creating a lifelong propensity toward higher quality discourse and argumentation.

These beliefs about the power of political science shape my approach to teaching within the discipline. I view the learning process as entailing thinking in new ways and applying new analytical frameworks to political issues and events. In a successful learning situation, students come to see how a topic can be understood differently from their initial response (whether or not that affects the conclusions they draw). The ultimate goal here is to develop the ability to simultaneously apply different, contrasting theoretical frameworks to an issue or event – to understand why and how different conclusions could be reached from different perspectives. Implicit in this objective is the need to help students grasp the major theoretical frameworks, as well as the ways in which the findings of political science research can (and cannot) inform our arguments.

In light of these goals, the key skill I attempt to impart on students is that of critical thinking, which is to say a more rigorous method of analysis and argument. In a successful lesson, students find their gut reactions to understanding related controversies challenged and begin to realise that they are missing pieces of the puzzle they had not even known existed. From this perspective, my role as a teacher involves prompting and developing critical thinking skills, while also helping students to convey that analysis both conversationally and in writing.

My approach to lesson planning reflects these goals. I begin each class by briefly referencing several newspaper articles, with two goals in mind: first, to connect the course material to contemporary events and controversies; and second, to provide examples of common, contrasting ways of thinking about an issue, so that they can be deconstructed later in the class (once the students have a stronger grasp of the course material). The articles are chosen expressly to reproduce common arguments that students are likely to make or encounter when discussing a given topic. I reinforce to students that while there may not necessarily be an obviously correct and straightforward conclusion to reach, we must be careful to take an analytically sophisticated approach to our discussions and reasoning.

Before proceeding to those sorts of considerations, however, I first attempt to ensure that students have fully understood the arguments from the readings. To that end, I review an argument through lecturing and then have students, in pairs or small groups, answer questions of understanding. My goal here is both to ascertain how well students have grasped the argument (as I circulate around the class) and to have students help each other understand the course material. This latter element is especially important given that the knowledge gap between instructors and students often makes it difficult to predict the types of difficulties students will have.

Once I feel that the students have a reasonable grasp of the material, I then move onto more advanced tasks. This involves: applying the argument to an event or context; analysing the argument through the framework of another theory we have already discussed; and using the Socratic method to have students reflect on how different ideas fit together, especially with regard to commonly held attitudes. I also employ a variety of group and class activities both to ensure comprehension (e.g. simulations, “stump your partner” games, etc.) and develop critical thinking skills (e.g. “think-pair-share” activities, normative discussions that explore assumptions implicit in the readings, etc.). Lastly, at various points in the semester I replace lectures with writing workshops and exam review sessions to ensure that students are familiar with what is expected of them and are able to effectively communicate their ideas and arguments in writing.

Outside of the lecture hall, I endeavour to make myself as accessible and approachable as possible, as one-on-one interactions with students provide an ideal occasion to encourage greater engagement with the ideas and topics covered in class. These interactions are particularly valuable because they allow for a more tailored approach than is possible in large classroom settings: with students who appear to grasp central arguments well, these exchanges allow me highlight complexities not addressed in the lessons; with students who are having difficulties with the course material, I can provide individualised assistance in the form of additional background information, explication, or general aid.

Finally, my approach to student assessment involves a focus on rewarding critical thinking and a strong grasp of the course material, with only partial use of curving. I begin by constructing a criterion referenced grading scheme, which I circulate to students either before they submit their work (in the case of essays) or after it has been returned to them (in the case of exams). I then apply the rubric to a small sample of answers to determine whether a given question was, for whatever reason, overly difficult or easy; if so, I adjust the grading accordingly. This process allows me to help students better understand why they received their grade, while also ensuring that the class average is not unreasonably high or low. In larger classes I rely on participation, essays, and exams to assess students, but in smaller classes presentations would form a significant component of the coursework as well.

In sum, my desire to work with students reflects my beliefs about the possibilities inherent in teaching political science – in particular the discipline’s potential to form better citizens by increasing comprehension and building critical reasoning skills. The most challenging aspect of this attempt is to strike the right balance between those two goals, in light of variation among students: to create learning environments in which I simultaneously engage students who are excelling in the course while also making sure that those who are having difficulties are not left behind. I look forward to a career in which I continually refine that balance, experimenting with new pedagogical techniques and exploring new ways of engaging students and cultivating critical thinking skills.