

My interest in teaching is shaped by the belief that a political science education has the potential to help form not only good political scientists, but also good citizens. In an age in which the formulaic presentation of talking points often passes for good political discourse, political science can help students go beyond these arguments, ideally creating a lifelong propensity toward higher quality argumentation and research. My task is to facilitate this development by encouraging active engagement with both the course material and other students. I do so by employing educational best-practices informed by pedagogical research. As a result, my course development centres around the concept of constructive alignment – that is, a close connection between the intended learning outcomes for a course, the active student learning activities I employ, and the assessment tasks I assign.

From this perspective, I view learning as a student-centred process that entails not only engagement with new material, but also a shift toward 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 goal is to have students apply 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.

I aim to achieve these goals through constructive alignment. My course development process thus begins with me carefully defining intended learning objectives. Doing so helps me to ensure not only consistency across the course and my assessment methods, but also that students are aware of the skills they are meant to develop. I then align these objectives with related, non-assessed teaching/learning activities (e.g. writing an introductory paragraph for a practice essay question), with a particular focus on peer feedback. Through having students help one another, I help them to more critically assess their own work and to develop skills that align with both the learning objectives of the course and the associated assessment tasks they will perform.

While the intended learning objectives of my courses clearly vary, the key skill I ultimately try to help students develop is that of critical analytical thinking – that is, a more rigorous method of analysis and argumentation. In a successful lesson, active engagement with a topic leads students to find their intuitive stances on an issue challenged. My role as a teacher thus involves prompting and facilitating learning and the development of critical thinking skills, while also helping students to convey their knowledge and abilities both orally and in writing.

My approach to lesson planning reflects this perspective. I begin each class by briefly referencing a contemporary political issue, with two goals in mind: first, to connect the course material to current events and controversies; and second, to provide examples of common, often contrasting ways of thinking about an issue, so that they can be deconstructed later in the class. I also reinforce that while there may not necessarily be a correct or straightforward conclusion to reach, we must be careful to take an analytically sophisticated approach in our discussions and reasoning.

Before proceeding to those sorts of considerations, however, I first attempt to ensure that students have understood the assigned material. After providing a roadmap of the questions to be addressed over the course of the lesson, I therefore revisit key concepts through a combination of lecturing and having students, in pairs or small groups, engage with questions of understanding. I do so for two reasons: to ascertain how well students have grasped the argument; and to have students help each other understand the course material. This latter point is central in light of research suggesting the importance of active engagement for learning. It is also useful given that the knowledge gap between instructors and students can make it difficult to predict the difficulties students will have.

Once students have a reasonable grasp of the material, I move on to more advanced learning objectives. This involves: applying the argument to an event or context; analysing the argument through the framework of another theory; and using the Socratic method to push discussions forward. I also employ a variety of group and class activities to ensure comprehension (e.g. small-group simulations, flipped classroom activities where students do the teaching, etc.) and develop critical thinking skills (e.g. “think-pair-share” activities, normative discussions about the assumptions implicit in the readings, etc.). Lastly, at various points in the semester I incorporate review sessions and writing workshops with peer feedback. This helps me 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 classroom, I 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 subject matter. These interactions are particularly valuable with larger classes because they allow for a more tailored approach than is otherwise possible: with students who appear to grasp central arguments well, I can highlight complexities not addressed in the lessons; while with students who are having difficulties with the course material, I can provide individualised assistance in the form of additional background information, explanations, or general aid.

Overall, my work with students reflects my beliefs about the possibilities inherent in teaching political science. In particular, I believe the discipline has the potential to make us better citizens by increasing political literacy and critical reasoning skills. The most challenging aspect of this is to strike the right balance between those two goals given 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, building from student feedback while experimenting with new pedagogical techniques and exploring new ways of engaging students.