Teaching Statement

Carl Müller-Crepon, January 2021

As a teacher, I aim to contribute to my students' ability to understand important socio-political phenomena and evaluate theoretical arguments. Over the past years, I gained experience on how to best reach these goals. At Oxford University, I teach courses for the MPhil in International Relations – Research Design and Methods Practical Sessions, the Thesis Seminar, and parts of the International Relations Core Course – and am an undergraduate tutor for the Introduction to the Practice of Politics and for the International Relations module. Previously, I have held a graduate seminar on the political economy of development and conflict in Africa at ETH Zurich and an undergraduate summer school on ethnic civil wars. I have also assisted graduate quantitative methods and undergraduate political economy courses. Students receive my courses very well, evaluating them with grades between 4.4 and 5.0 (1: worst; 5: best).

At the core of my teaching efforts, I understand the class room as an arena for academic development of my students and myself. I aim to enhance students' understanding of the substantive topic of a course and add to the tool box they use to make proper sense of political processes more generally. Both goals involve developing a conceptual understanding and intuition for abstract models as well as sharpening students' ability to evaluate them in the concrete reality they observe. Pursuing these goals through interactive and oftentimes dialectic teaching methods inevitably leads to students teaching me and improving my academic practice.

My first priority is to engage my students so that they partake in shaping a course from the beginning. I therefore collect every student's expectations, background, and motivations at the start of term. This does not only introduce students to me and each other, but allows me to revise contents, clarify misunderstandings, and draw on their expertise. Repeated feedback rounds throughout the term provide me with information to adjust course and address conflicts. I deploy end-of-term evaluation surveys to elicit anonymous feedback and learn for the future.

Readings offer a first but by no means definitive sketch of the theoretical and empirical terrain I intend to cover. I strive to choose readings that are diverse and complementary in their theoretical and methodological approaches. After recapitulating them, I usually focus the class's attention on the set of processes and their main actors that may explain the phenomenon under investigation. When discussing, for example, the causes of ethnic civil war, these actors are governments, ethnic elites, citizens, and the international community. We then discuss actors' constraints and opportunities that delimit their actions and the material, political, and ideological interests that motivate them. This results in a visual map of mechanisms on a (at times digital) whiteboard, which we then pin back to different theoretical approaches.

The map of mechanisms allows students to gauge readings' theoretical strengths and shortcomings. It also fosters their understanding of qualitative or quantitative evidence needed to test an argument. Moderating the collective reasoning about convincing empirical evidence, I put particular emphasis on theoretically grounded research designs. My MPhil seminar on the practical application of research designs in IR therefore examines studies' research question, conceptualization, measurement strategies, and methods to draw inferences from qualitative or quantitative data. The discussions often point at empirical ambiguities, for example the difficulty of much quantitative macro-level research on ethnic civil wars to cleanly distinguish between psychological, ideological, and material motivations of rebels.

Building on this characterization of the research frontier, I encourage further research where possible, for example through a short workshop or assigning a research paper. This promotes active learning, encourages ownership, and shows that political science can generate policy-relevant knowledge. Open feedback from classmates and myself on research designs is integral to this process, as it improves students' work and fosters a constructive environment. This logic powered the 2020 MPhil Thesis Colloquium I co-taught with Kalypso Nicolaïdis, which sharpened students research designs through joint feedback from students and us.

My moderation of the classroom is inclusive and aims at harnessing the value of the thinking of all students. To avoid a uniform format that suits only a few, I repeatedly change students' role and overall setting of the class. For example, I split the classroom into groups that represent various actors (e.g., "the government"). After preparing their interests, constraints, and strategies, groups ultimately "play" with each other, thereby revealing theoretical mechanisms of interest. To include the voices of students at risk of being dominated by a few, I let students silently reflect on a question and combine all their answers into a mind map. Pre-assigned literature summaries serve a similar purpose and highlight potential misunderstandings. When teaching remotely, I implement these techniques through digital whiteboards and breakout rooms.

My valuation of a constructive discourse and personal engagement also shapes my relation with students outside the classroom, colleagues, and the academic community. I invest in building personal relationships with my students, often leading to conversations on and mentorship of their study progress and future plans. This was particularly relevant in the Covid-crisis and led students to feedback that I "cared deeply about the students, both in terms of their learning and well-being." In my work with research assistants, I promote learning by co-designing challenging items, such as a codebook or database. I regard research seminars as indispensable for a stimulating academic community. I therefore co-organize the Politics Research Colloquium at Oxford, and have co-hosted a political economy series and conflict colloquium at ETH Zurich. Through these engagements as a teacher and scholar, I hope to contribute to the collective ability of all members of the academic community to generate knowledge and fulfill its role in society.