

Teaching Statement

Milos Popovic

Effective teachers are those who offer themselves as ships to which they invite their students aboard; then, having assisted their river-crossing, gladly sink, inspiring them to build their own. There are two ideas that I would like my students to acquire when they walk out of that ship: 1) knowledge of methodological tools, and 2) research skills. Acquiring knowledge of various methods and techniques will help them succeed in future courses by allowing them to separate the wheat from the chaff in academic literature. Even though I am aware that most of my students will not become political scientists, grasping research skills, such as interviewing or proposal writing, will give them a cutting edge in today's competitive job market. I use three strategies to achieve these two goals. First, I encourage my students to study methods through examples by analyzing strengths and weaknesses of published work and offering suggestions how to improve the argument. This prepares them to think critically and embrace constructive critique in their future intellectual interactions. Second, I train my students in skills that are relevant across fields. Interviewing assignments and interactive workshops train them for various career paths. Third, acknowledging their diverse backgrounds I work with each student to get the most from his or her education. During consultations, I challenge my students to think about the relevance and feasibility of their topics, focusing on how their proposals can be improved and putting them in touch with the faculty or PhD students who work on similar topics.

During two decades of education, I have largely been exposed to learning by memorizing; there were only a handful courses where I was learning by doing. The former quickly faded from my memory, while the latter profoundly affected my own attitude toward teaching. Even though the methods course is one of the least thrilling courses in social science, I encourage my students to study through examples. I try to always keep the number of required readings as low as possible and concentrate on knowledge application. To this end, I designed a workshop in which students were placed in groups of four to five and given a homework to analyze a reading from IR — the strengths and weaknesses of its research design, including the argument, case-study selection and fit between empirics and theory. Then they were asked to present their findings to the class in less than seven minutes, after which I provided them with my feedback. In an anonymous doodle poll following the workshop, students were less enthusiastic about the group size, but many acknowledged the usefulness of this exercise for better understanding often abstract tools as process-tracing, causal mechanism and case selection.

In addition, I train my students in skills that are relevant across fields. One such skill is interviewing. I asked my students to conduct a semi-structured interview, individually or in a pair, with a researcher, activist, policy-maker or other individuals on a topic from IR. I wanted them to step into the shoes of researchers who encounter various obstacles doing fieldwork, so I also asked them to submit a written transcript of the interview and a write-up analysis. In their individual reactions, many students emphasized that they learned how time-consuming is to prepare, conduct and analyze an interview, and that they would think carefully before embarking on interviewing for their theses. Another skill is proposal writing — it goes without saying how important proposals are for securing external funding in various industries. I organized a conference-like workshop where each student was asked to serve as a presenter of their research proposal and as a discussant.

I wanted the students to use their acquired knowledge to come up with coherent and creative proposals, be able to defend their proposal and engage in constructive critique of their colleagues' proposals. The dominant student response following the workshop was that they received important feedback to improve their research proposals. I provided each student with a page of comments identifying strengths and weaknesses of their proposals in terms of research question, structure, and methodology. Such a feedback helps students clarify their research design and build a stepping stone for their future theses.

With a background in non-Anglo-Saxon undergraduate program, I recognize the importance of consultations. Many of my graduate students come from non-IR fields or speak English as a second language. I am available to my students throughout the week, and dedicated to spending as much time as needed with them until we brainstorm solutions to their problems. Focusing on how we can together improve a topic, these consultations take a form of discussions based on asking and answering questions to inspire creativity and critical thinking. Graduate students at different levels will have different needs. First year graduate students usually struggle to simply adapt to the demands of graduate school, and for those students, I focus on helping them navigate the expectations of the program, its requirements, and basic academic reading and writing skills. Advanced students who are involved in establishing their thesis projects will need assistance in formulating an original research question, and then acquiring a command of the theories and the various methodologies necessary to conduct it. My general experience has been that every student is different and that I should adjust my mentoring style depending on the student's background. I usually provide a range of potential thesis topics that correspond to a student's overall interest, usually 2–4 general topics. Over a period of time these are narrowed down to 1–2 questions. I am also happy to entertain projects that the student might suggest, so long as they are feasible, and are sufficiently original to warrant intensive study. When my knowledge of the topic is limited, I put my students in touch with the faculty or PhD students who work on similar topics. Once the research questions are formulated and the research design is set up, I encourage the student to develop new avenues and questions related to the problem. I am willing to coauthor with grad students and walk them through the publication process. I also like to involve students in papers that I am working on if they are interested and have the time. As a former graduate methods teacher, I am proud to say that I have never had a student drop out and all my students have completed their theses.

To conclude, all of my pedagogical strategies are dedicated to teaching the principles of relevant and practical research in dynamic, hands-on ways that will remain with the student long after he or she leaves my classroom.