

Teaching Philosophy – Grant Armstrong

Based upon the lessons I have learned from my professors, my experience as a student, and my experience as an instructor, I believe there are four basic tenets in teaching undergraduate political science students. The students should see the relevancy of the subject matter. The class should be interesting. The atmosphere should be inviting and conducive to oral participation. The classroom experience should be mentally broadening.

The professors in the several institutions I attended went beyond merely providing course material information. Early on I realized the pervasiveness of politics and government in the recurring history of the world. I insist that the young students in political science classes understand the relevancy of the subject to the lives of everyone on the planet.

While I adhere to structure and organization, I do not subscribe to scripted lectures. Instead, I rely on an organic classroom, and believe that the classroom should be an active and lively environment. I strongly believe in classroom involvement and encourage students to speak up. Students can learn a great deal from each other. Thus, the classroom should be a forum for the free and active exchange of information and ideas. I engage students by posing questions related to current events and provide the opportunity for class and group discussions. The free exchange of ideas increases understanding of the subject matter. It also holds the students' ideas up to scrutiny by matching them against the conflicting ideas of other students. The presentation of provocative ideas is a fundamental aspect of learning and a cornerstone of higher education.

Further, it is important to learn the practical and civil value of listening to the opinions of others. I stress consideration of the ideas of others as well as respect for the individuals who have contrary opinions. My job is to make sure that issues and opinions are presented with logic and reason. It is not my job to give the class my personal opinions; rather, it is my job to hone students' skills (e.g., critical thinking) and ability to draw their own conclusions. This approach ensures that the instructor's opinions are not being forced upon them and the instructor's credibility is maintained.

I encourage students to ask questions, and as an instructor I am more than eager to help provide a better understanding of course material. I think students benefit from both individual and group activities. For example, when discussing the Constitution, I require students to note something they would amend (either by adding, removing, or simply modifying) and detail why. Some of these suggestions are then presented to the entire class. When we discuss Congress, I create a simulation of the legislative process consisting of both the Senate and House to demonstrate how difficult it is to pass legislation. I also find that dividing the class into small groups to discuss a topic, and then merging several small groups together helps students better evaluate material and ideas, and to consider alien perspectives. This also helps ease student anxiety about speaking in front of too large a group.

Further, students should feel comfortable approaching me to seek assistance or simply to converse outside of class. I always tell my students they are free to meet with me to discuss course material, current events, sports, pop culture, or whatever else they like. A student should never be made to feel that I do not have time for them. My time is meant for students and any encounter is an opportunity to inform and encourage.

I believe that an enjoyable classroom environment and intellectual integrity are compatible. I integrate pertinent videos and class discussions on current events and other group activities into lesson plans. Any instructional method that can captivate the attention of students should be utilized. It is incumbent on the instructor to create lesson plans and activities designed to do that. As an educator, it is my duty to evaluate my methods and course design constantly in order to increase student interest and involvement. A continually evolving teaching style is vital to the success of both instructor and student.

Finally, I have a genuine desire to teach the practical effects of politics as well as political theory, and I want to pass that passion on to my students. This passion and devotion should be easily discernible to students. An educator needs to learn and grow from their own experience. I would be very disappointed in myself if I do not become a better teacher with each passing year. With heavy emphasis on critical thought and application, and by engaging students with diverse assignments, I hope to do what my professors did for me—make a lasting impact and show the pervasive scope of politics and government.