Philosophy of Teaching Statement

Joseph K. Young

Theories from education suggest that instruction should vary to incorporate the “multiple intelligences.” I discovered from teaching high school students that people learn in many ways and indeed have different types of intelligence. College instruction often relies on one method—the lecture. As a college instructor, I incorporate lectures, discussions, debates, role-playing, and simulations in an attempt not only to stimulate interest but to reach the diversity of learners present in a large public university.

For example, in an introductory course in international relations, I use a simulation of interstate negotiations to introduce concepts such as relative and absolute gains, the democratic peace, and the security dilemma. I also adapt the simulation for the comparative classroom by varying regime type and whether democratic groups in the simulation are structured as parliamentary or presidential systems. Using these simulations increases interest in the subsequent discussions related to how presidential systems differ from parliamentary systems and how these differences relate to regime performance. I published this simulation in a recent edition of *International Studies Perspectives* with extensions for a variety of classroom experiences.

In addition to injecting different methods of instruction, I strive to create a democratic classroom. In most political science courses, we provide strong normative statements and empirical evidence suggesting that democracy is superior to other regime forms yet we rarely allow democracy to function in our classrooms. I feel that providing students with democratic experience in the classroom should also be a goal of the political science educator. I encourage students to debate and determine (within limits) grading policies, weights for different aspects of their grades, and other rules and procedures. Although the debate can be lengthy and passionate, an overwhelming number of students like to have a voice in determining the rules that govern their class. In addition, they develop
ownership and responsibility in the course and gain experience in debate, voting, negotiation and concession. Experimenting with different types of voting (single-ballot plurality vs. two-ballot run-off election) demonstrates to them in a concrete way that the rules can determine the outcome.

Introducing concepts and theories in a college classroom is impossible without connecting to research and relying on the latest scholarship that confirms or infirms the present state of knowledge. Order, democratization and economic development are probably the three most important themes related to the developing world in general and Latin America specifically. In addition to requiring students to remember facts about these themes, I use the same approach in teaching that I do with research. I identify questions and puzzles and present students with contradictory empirical evidence and competing theoretical claims related to why democracy in Latin America is fragile, or how best to develop an economy, or how a state provides both order and protection of human rights. I used this same approach in my Politics of Terrorism course and presented students with conflicting explanations for why groups use terror, why terror can succeed or fail, and why ordinary people may or may not choose to belong to these groups.

Although questions and puzzles guide my teaching and research, I draw inspiration for teaching from the Brazilian educational philosopher, Paulo Freire. Freire believed that education is not a process where teachers with a wealth of knowledge deposit information in empty student accounts or what has been termed the “banking” concept of education. Instead learning is a process that occurs through the interaction of students and teachers through a variety of methods and styles of communication.