

Teaching Philosophy

William O'Brochta

Early in my first semester teaching, I scheduled individual meetings with students to review drafts of their theory papers in *Theories of Social Justice*. Many of the students' theories contained summaries of class readings, but were missing both their own theoretical contribution and perspective. When asked about their writing process, several students commented that they chose to summarize rather than theorize because they did not see what they could contribute to existing work, and they did not think their interests and life experiences were relevant. This observation has led me to focus on cultivating student investment in the research process in all my classes at levels appropriate for the type of course and helping students understand the practical and policy implications of the research they interact with and conduct themselves.

I believe that students bring valuable perspectives and interests to political science that they can use to engage with research and to further develop skills broadly applicable to their lives. With confidence in the research process and motivation from peers and myself, a neuroscience major brought scientific perspectives to a theory of political misinformation, a finance major was excited to fit his research into existing knowledge about unionization data, and a football player observed parallels between team behavior and ethnic groups. These unique outlooks were deeply relevant to students in both introductory and advanced courses, providing them motivation to study political science topics in-depth. My chief goal in the classroom is to help students find how they can contribute to political science research relevant to real world problems and important to their own values and career goals.

The first step toward this goal is to foster a culture of deep inquiry and excitement in substantive political science topics. This means reading actual research articles from a diverse group of scholars so that students can see the range of research questions being asked, methodological approaches being employed, and diversity of scholars conducting research. To motivate students to connect with research, I devote time in each course to helping them develop strategies to read and analyze research articles. Students then engage with research before each class and reflect about substantive and research methods topics in a two-page reading journal. Reading journals often provide sparks of inspiration for students to relate personal experiences and perceptions of policy problems to the course. When reading a piece about gender and multi-ethnic violence for one upper-level writing intensive *Immigration, Identity, and the Internet* class, students argued whether ethnicity was always one's primary identity. One student's argument about her grandfather's identity prompted her to color her future assignments with this perspective and to interview him as part of her research article.

Engaging with research and making broad connections motivates students to want to start the research process themselves. Students have passions and curiosities about the political world that in-depth investigation can help them explore. Reading journals allow us to efficiently review foundational concepts and quickly move into activities designed to show students how individual pieces of research connect to broader topics and have real world consequences. Once one group of students learned how individual utility thresholds can lead to a collective action cascade in a mid-level *Political Protest and Violence* class, they were excited to propose solutions to tackle an ongoing dispute between environmental protesters and government leaders. I encourage this practical application of political science

by devoting a substantial part of all my classes to research design workshops that culminate in students producing original draft research articles and discussing their policy implications.

Students in all my classes tackle the challenge of reading and producing research together; semesters are structured to use substantive readings to slowly introduce research design concepts for students in introductory courses and research methods for students in upper-level courses. During frequent in-class methods workshops, students work in teams offering suggestions to improve each others' work and making connections between the diverse set of research questions, theories, and research designs students are working on. This type of group work emphasizes substantive topics and shows how they can be applied in different contexts. Each team then promotes the work of its members by highlighting effective strategies different group members are employing, culminating in a gallery walk around the classroom where students learn what other groups have identified as best practices. This reflects my fundamental belief that everyone, regardless of course level or student major, has valuable contributions to make to others' work.

Finally, I work with students to understand the personal and political impact of political science research. A major part of class is devoted to making comparative research tangible for students. For example, we explore how educational disparities relate to support for social welfare programs through a simulation where students interact with difficult-to-use technology without instructions. This helps students understand what it is like to try to learn skills without education programs to support them and reveals the policy implications of current political debates. Each of my classes also has a major simulation and community engagement activity meant to tie research into policy. The classroom turned into a negotiation when student representatives of European nations debated foreign relations with China while the class acted as reporters, writing up a newspaper article on the proceedings from different country perspectives. St. Louis City Aldermen convene to debate a bill on providing translation services to Bosnian immigrants using arguments from interviews with local Bosnian service agencies. Students distill their research articles into policy suggestions that they then prioritize in a legislative session. These activities get students to understand the implications of research and how it can inform their engagement as citizens.

I actively evaluate and adapt my teaching practices with the goal of promoting student investment in political science research and its practical consequences in a way that resonates with students in courses at different levels. Student feedback and involvement in course decision-making promotes a supportive learning environment. In addition to inviting formal student evaluations and colleague observations, I solicit student feedback at least twice per week using informal "ticket out" index cards. After receiving feedback, I discuss relevant changes with students so that they are invested in the learning process. My teaching research shapes the ways in which I design and revise courses. I am currently focused on evaluating how effectively students in *Introduction to Comparative Politics*, as students in a larger class with less experience at the university, can work through the research article writing process. This course plays a critical role in student decisions to learn more about the discipline. My research shows that students both do a good job writing a research article in this course and that the process of doing so makes the discipline relevant and exciting for students. By using evidence-based practices to evaluate the effectiveness of my teaching philosophy, I hope to challenge students to find their own voice in the discipline and to learn how they can make connections from their work to local and global societal problems.