

Teaching Statement

My favorite experience as a teacher is watching the “lightbulb moments”—when students grappling with a difficult question or concept have a moment of clarity that moves their understanding forward—happen. In my experiences as an instructor and as a student myself, I have seen these moments happen when the classroom environment inspires active engagement with challenging, real-world problems and concepts. As such, my primary goal as an educator is to create an environment in which students are inspired to explore big, important questions about the world, are equipped to understand and adjudicate between competing perspectives, and feel empowered to engage and contribute. Fostering an inclusive learning community lies at the core of my pedagogical approach, and I am particularly committed to making sure students from marginalized and underrepresented groups feel comfortable sharing their views. To this end, I always strive to be organized, enthusiastic, creative, and self-reflective as I teach.

At the University of Pennsylvania, I have served as a teaching assistant in three classes over four semesters: Introduction to International Relations (Fall 2017, Fall 2018), International Security (Spring 2018), and American Foreign Policy (Spring 2019). These courses ranged from large, introductory-level courses to mid-sized lectures. I have also guest-lectured on migration in Professor Guy Grossman’s African Politics class. In Fall 2018 I served as the head TA for Introduction to International Relations, organizing a weekly meeting and guiding lesson plans for four other TAs in one of our department’s largest undergraduate classes.

In 2019 I received the Teaching Certificate from the Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL) at the University of Pennsylvania. As part of the Teaching Certificate program I attended workshops on topics ranging from generating group discussion, to supporting student mental health and teaching difficult/potentially-traumatic topics. My teaching was also observed and evaluated. Additionally, during the COVID-19 pandemic I attended a set of CTL workshops on hybrid/online teaching. Apart from my teaching experiences at Penn, I also participated in a pedagogical short course, entitled “Interactive Teaching on Ethnicity, Ethnic Discrimination, and Mobilization,” at the American Political Science Association’s 2019 meeting.

In the classroom, I view my role as an educator as that of a facilitator, rather than merely disseminator, of knowledge. This means I approach every class with a plan to involve students actively in classroom activities. Through small group discussion, student presentations, and simulations, I encourage students to engage deeply with course materials in a “hands-on” fashion. I employ a range of methods to allow students from different backgrounds and experiences to participate comfortably. Affirming diversity means leveraging students’ unique experiences and learning styles in order to make all equally engaged in the collective enterprise of learning. By approaching lessons with a diversity of methods, ranging from debates and simulations to group work, I systematically seek to engage students of all learning styles. Likewise, I encourage students to share their personal feelings and opinions by emphasizing the imperative of respectful discussion, and by presenting many sides of the complex issues we cover. By getting students in the classroom actively engaged with their peers, with core ideas and theories, and with current events, I stimulate critical

thinking while lowering the stakes of participation, making it easier for all students to share their perspectives.

Another of my primary goals as a teacher is to help students learn and practice critical thinking skills. In the modern information environment, learning how to distill complex arguments and evidence to discern main concepts and connect them to real-world events is a key challenge. I find it particularly useful to walk students through the structure of academic scholarship to help them learn to identify core components: main arguments, key assumptions, points of extension and departure from existing research, and methods and evidence used to support claims. I practice this exercise with students early and often, frequently tasking groups to briefly discuss each of these elements from key class readings. In the interest of connecting political science concepts to real events, I also frequently assign research alongside newspaper articles, reviews, interviews, and podcasts that incorporate social scientific ideas. I also encourage students to stay up-to-date on current events, so that they can connect course concepts to the world.

The usefulness of this effort is highlighted by an example from my International Security class. In the course, one of the concepts students are most familiar with from the outset is terrorism. Virtually all students have some sense of what terrorism is; however, few have a concrete understanding of what it actually means. To clarify analytical debates from our readings, I divide students into small groups and pose them a question: “what is terrorism?” After talking in their groups, students share details of their discussions with the entire class, and I record responses, highlighting points of similarity and difference between groups’ definitions. Building on our conceptual discussion about what terrorism means, groups then segue to consider theoretical and empirical implications of how we define terrorism. In other words, how does the way we conceptualize terrorism influence how we theorize about it, and how we study it empirically? Students discuss a range of academic papers and relevant current events to understand how our conceptual definition impacts our conclusions about the causes of political violence. In concluding, I have students propose a few suggestions for counterterrorism policy based on their discussions. This latter element is particularly important, as it helps students begin to grapple with the difficulty of discerning policy implications from research.

For students to engage deeply with course material, the classroom needs to be a supportive environment and an inviting and open space for all. But fostering this kind of space requires recognizing the diversity of students’ backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives, and on my part, being self-reflective. To this end, I work hard to make myself accessible to students outside the classroom, such as in office hours. Much of the work of cultivating student interest, identifying students facing challenges, and connecting them to supportive resources on campus comes from these personal interactions. I have helped former students secure advisers, select classes, and access on-campus research opportunities, in addition to writing references for internships. For my part, I frequently check in with my students to assess what is working (and what is not) and adjust plans to better meet the needs and goals of the class. Engaging students in the classroom means meeting them where they are and helping them translate the course to their own lives.

As a result of these experiences and my own research, I am prepared and eager to teach introductory lecture courses in international relations, comparative politics, and public policy, as well as advanced seminars in conflict, migration, Middle Eastern and African politics, international security, peacebuilding, development, ethnic politics, and quantitative or qualitative research methods. In the enclosed packet, you can also find information about my teaching experiences, including student reviews, which highlight my effectiveness and growth as a TA.