

Teaching Philosophy

I believe that the purpose of a liberal arts education is to teach students how to think critically. My goal is to ensure that each student in my class is able to craft and communicate a coherent and logical argument based on information gleaned from the class. I believe that if I allow a student to pass my class without those skills, I have failed as a teacher. I make a point of explaining the importance of these skills to the students, and often use examples from my business career to help the students understand the consequences of not being able to develop and communicate their ideas. Because these skills are so critical to the students' futures, I feel it is vital that I put time and effort into continually honing my teaching skills—skills I developed in the ten years I spent as a professional trainer and in the three years I have spent teaching at the University of Tennessee.

In order for the students to craft an argument, I must first teach them the raw material. I use the principles of adult education to guide my classroom approach. First, information must be presented so that each different type of learner can assimilate it. Lectures provide the appropriate medium for auditory learners; however, lecture alone is inadequate for visual and tactile learners. I use power point presentations, pictures, maps, readings, and video clips to ensure that visual learners have the visual cues they need to assimilate information more easily. Tactile learners are the most difficult to accommodate in a political science class since there is typically very little to touch and feel in a political science class. To accommodate these learners, I make the power points available prior to class so that they can print them and take notes on the hard copy. This gives a tactile learner something on which to focus in class. I have also developed in-class exercises that allow these learners to actively engage in the class. For example, in Introduction to American Government, I often use a Congress workflow team exercise in which the students create a workflow that demonstrates each step in the legislative process; at the end, I sign their bill into law.

In order for the students to communicate an argument, I must provide forums in which they may do so. The first forum is verbal. Adult learners typically come to the classroom with thoughts and opinions of their own. In the case of college-aged students, their opinions are often newly formed and emotionally grounded. It is important that I give the students an environment in which they can learn to develop their own ideas intellectually and express them appropriately. To this end, I encourage the students not just to answer my questions, but to challenge each other by posing questions and discussion topics of their own. I then facilitate open debate on the subject at hand and ensure that the students provide fact-based arguments to support their opinions. When students are encouraged to have open discussions in class, they become more confident expressing themselves verbally. The second forum is written. I always include at least one writing assignment in my courses and exams are typically short-answer and essay. Although students may dislike writing, they benefit from the writing they do in my class because I emphasize content, structure, *and* grammar. Simply having the correct information is not enough—they must be able to synthesize the information into a logical and grammatically

correct argument. This is one of the most important skills they can acquire in college and it will serve them well in any field.

In addition to varying my approach in my classroom teaching, I try to keep in mind that a one-size-fits-all approach does not always work with individual learners. To ensure that students get the attention they need, I try to be approachable and open. I provide multiple channels of communication, from office hours, to email, to discussion boards on our online course site. I feel that this multi-channel approach is particularly effective when a student wants to approach me with a problem; many college-aged students are uncomfortable with face-to-face communication, but find it easy to express their difficulties in electronic form. Because I make myself available to the students I am able to build relationships with them. I am often asked for recommendations, called upon for career and academic advice, introduced to visiting parents or significant others, and invited to graduations. Many of my students have taken multiple classes with me, so I get the added enjoyment of watching them grow both intellectually and emotionally.

Finally, adult learners tend to disengage quickly if the learning environment is not stimulating. I try to make class not only informative, but engaging. My teaching style is informal and relaxed, and I often incorporate games or activities that help the students stay focused on class. My relaxed approach allows me to create a learning environment that encourages intellectual exploration and open debate. In addition, I use participation points to encourage the students to actively participate in the class. I have found that my approach works well. Despite the fact that I always teach in the early morning and do not have an attendance policy, my classes are typically very well attended.

In sum, by incorporating a variety of teaching methods that engage and challenge students both individually and in groups, I am able to impart critical thinking and communication skills to my students. Because of this approach, students acquire both information about politics and strategies for life-long learning. At the end of each semester, I am confident that the students are better prepared for future academic and professional endeavors and that they have helped me to be a better teacher and mentor.