

Teaching Philosophy

By Jonathan M. Fisk

My experiences as a student, professional and instructor inform my teaching philosophy, which is grounded in two core beliefs. First, effective professors are responsive to the needs of their classes but facilitate an atmosphere of rigorous critical thinking, reflection and the application of course concepts to everyday life. Second, active research and scholarly engagement are necessary components to achieving a classroom (or seminar) that critically engages and challenges the course materials.

Principal 1: Application and Critical Thinking

I expose my students to a variety of platforms to sharpen their critical thinking skills. I have utilized budget simulations, multi-media ranging from the Colbert Report to the Simpsons, TED talks, class debates and other simulations, role-playing, hypothetical situations and games, each requiring students to apply concepts to contemporary events. In my legislative politics and environmental politics courses, I used simulations for 'topics' that are often conceived as dry by students. When discussing appropriations, policymaking and budgets, I required students to pass a budget individually and then to collectively organize themselves and adopt a budget based on House/Senate rules. Through the process, I believe that my (POLS 304 and 361) students were better able to understand the sources and causes of legislative gridlock and (environmental) agenda setting issues. One student commented "the in-class simulation was frustrating from either perspective...as the minority Republican and Democrat, I had to deal with my voice not really being heard and I had to compromise a lot to gain some of the changes I wanted from the majority party in order to make my constituents happy. I can see why Congress is not really able to get anything done."

Materials in my courses also come from a variety of sources –textbooks, journal articles, but also Twitter, YouTube and other online sources. When discussing congressional elections, I showed several Colbert segments and a TEDTalk that in an engaging way demonstrated the influence of money in elections. My U.S. Environmental Politics class also incorporated a variety of outside sources such as NPR reports, documentaries and online EPA enforcement tools. Much like the class activities, without the requisite follow-up and intentional application to theory the utility of this type of multi-media is diminished.

Principle 2: Research Rigor

I believe that effective public service encompasses the problem solving skills of managers and the work of scholars devoted to identifying broad trends, theories and patterns. The magnitude of many problems also demands 'an all hands on deck' approach necessitating the contributions of both academics and professionals. Staying current in contemporary trends and news stories enable me better show the stakes of public service and the challenges of studying the political science.

Research rigor also extends to more academic endeavors. Part of this includes bringing new research into the classroom and engaging its methodological assumptions, implications and findings. Another part is conducting and training students in research. In my U.S Environmental Politics (POLS 361) course, for example, I required my students to research state-municipal relations relative to natural gas and urban drilling. They then presented and applied their research in a policy debate attended by a homeowner, a sitting Republican Colorado State Senator, an inattentive voter and graduate student representing a Democratic lawmaker. We then debriefed to discuss how the students might effectively frame their arguments to differing groups and institutions. I also introduce students to research by walking them through the process. My POLS 361 student went through the peer-review process as they worked collaboratively to produce a series of practitioner-oriented research articles that appeared in the Kansas Government Journal.