

Teaching Statement

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As incentives go, there are few in place to motivate good university instruction. If done right, teaching is one of an academic's more time-intensive responsibilities, yet advancement within academe is rarely based on pedagogical facility. Coupled with that, the voluntary nature of higher education invites many college instructors to adopt a laissez-fair attitude as class leader. Because the state does not oblige students to attend college, and because so many college students are paying for their degrees, the onus of learning (according to many) falls on the students. No one wants to be a bad teacher, but truly good university instruction is less a matter of external incentives and more a matter of personal drive. I care a great deal about what my students take away from their time with me. In every class, I work hard to make certain my students appreciate two, seemingly contradictory ideas: (i) The value of learning for specific, practical reasons of public import, and (ii) the value of learning for no reason in particular.

The social sciences have tremendous relevance to the public, though it can be difficult for students to see this connection. So that students in my course the Politics of Sustainability might appreciate the public value of scholarly research, they jointly compose research papers and presentations that are directly useful to policymakers. The project spans the entire semester as the students tackle each stage of research at set intervals. They formulate a question, develop hypotheses and tests, gather data, conduct analysis, and then deliver their findings. Whenever possible, students work directly with the policymakers whom they hope to aid. Past projects have been presented to officials from the Indiana Department of Transportation, the Bloomington mayor's office, and the Indiana University Office of Sustainability. One particularly enterprising group convinced the governors of the Indiana Memorial Union to alter a major renovation of the largest student union in the nation by showing that their proposed plan failed to account for the preferences of a significant, albeit neglected, segment of the student population.

Public education should produce public benefits. Engaging students in civic-minded research yields immediate policy gains as well as the long-term advantages that attend development of human capital and concern for the community. Young people realize they have something to contribute to the governing process, and officials see the value of broader public participation. Still, it would be foolish to believe that education, even at the college level, is always practical. Neither my students nor I know what information will be of greatest utility to them. Students often lament that much of what they learn in college will be of little direct use in their future careers. I heartily agree with that sentiment, and encourage them to delight in its accuracy. College—a luxury enjoyed by a relatively small proportion of the population—is a time when students are able to partake in learning for its own sake. The specific, substantive information they learn in my class may have little bearing on how they earn their livings or raise their families. But the abstract concepts central to my material and the ability to think creatively may help them lead a richer life.

Imparting the value of learning for its own sake proved especially difficult the semester I taught statistics to master's students. All save a handful of those enrolled were working professionals. For them, earning a master's degree was a calculated decision meant to aid their careers. Grumbings about the personal uselessness of multivariate regression and ANOVA were not those of a restless teenager but a busy adult. Indeed, most students would never calculate a p-value after my course.

But I took a special delight in one student's boast to her classmates that she was able to explain to her husband the misuse of Bayes's theorem in a rerun of his favorite Star Trek episode. Another fellow found game theory helpful in his weekly Dungeons and Dragons gathering. It was not just the nerds in the class who saw the benefit. Halfway through the semester, the wife of a student was diagnosed with a life-threatening illness. Medical statistics were suddenly of particular interest to him, and they became a common source of class examples. We were all relieved to learn that the initial diagnosis was a cruel example of a topic we had covered earlier: type I error. Learning may not always pay actual dividends, but it can make the world a more interesting, and sometimes more manageable place.

It is not enough to want to communicate these lessons. I have to ensure that my audience is receptive to what I am teaching. And what worked one semester for one set of students does not necessarily go over well with others in future semesters. I build flexibility into every lesson plan. The first time I taught my course on the politics of sustainability, students programmed simple computer models of the Tragedy of the Commons using the free and approachable NetLogo software. Although a bit daunting, the exercise was successful. Students saw to see the logic behind the scenario having built it themselves. The second time I taught the course, the exercise was a flop. Most students had no idea what was going on in their programs, and those that did had difficulty relating it to course material. Wanting these students to possess a deeper appreciation for this fundamental theory, I returned to the Tragedy of the Commons two weeks later. This time I ditched the computer simulations and brought a simple card game that, with the help of friends from the School of Education and the Department of Brain Sciences, mimicked strategic interaction over a shared natural resource. After several rounds of play, almost all students could explain in terms of the card game the economic theory that eluded them in their readings and the programming exercise.

Activities like these are time-intensive. Rather than try to pack as much information as possible into a single semester, I focus on the key concepts, illustrating them with in-depth cases from which students can extrapolate. A good example comes from my class on the American presidency. Since it would be impossible to cover the whole of that office's history in a single term, I distill lessons that recur throughout and convey those lessons with especially memorable examples. *Marbury v Madison* is an important part of American history, sure, but more importantly the narrative contains a valuable commentary on the strategic interaction between branches of government: Long-term gains can be secured by taking what looks in the short-run like a loss. Although students were initially perturbed at the depth in which we covered this one historical instance, they soon proved adept at identifying and mapping out political actors' otherwise hidden incentives. This ability is far more useful to students than the trivia normally gained through lecture. It is not my job to give students facts. It is my job to give them an idea of what facts are worth going after, and it is my job to give them the tools to make sense of those facts once gathered.

Teaching takes time to master, but I do what I can to improve my effectiveness as an instructor. I have taken courses on teaching political science from some of my favorite teachers. I won a grant to develop a new course on sustainability that brought students from outside majors to our department. I take difficult and unusual teaching assignments with both traditional and non-traditional students. I engage my students in the research process rather than regurgitate relevant findings. Most importantly, I listen to my students. Not just after the course is over, but as they are learning. I know that I have much to learn about teaching. Few are better positioned to instruct me on that than my students.