

Philosophy of Teaching – Flavio Hickel Jr. Ph.D.

I owe a debt of gratitude to a set of remarkable teachers that gave me the confidence to ask critical questions, challenge preconceptions, and think creatively. I believe that these traits have served me well in my career and I strive to impart them upon every student that enters my classroom. I believe that my task as a teacher is to not only provide the academic tools necessary to understand and explain political phenomenon, but more importantly, to inspire students to ask the questions that will help them excel in their own intellectual journey.

To achieve these goals, I work to create a positive learning environment that respects ideological and demographic diversity. My courses emphasize that while there are indisputable political facts (e.g. U.S. unemployment statistics underreport the actual number of unemployed) there are few “correct” answers to political questions (e.g. the best way to tackle the unemployment problem). I strive to present a variety of perspectives towards the course material so that students are exposed to different ways of interpreting political phenomenon. I model an intellectual orientation that respects these differences to create an environment in which students can comfortably and constructively debate ideas and develop their own opinions.

With this foundation in place, students are in a better position to strengthen their own critical thinking skills. My courses tend to be highly participatory with Socratic questioning, group collaborations, and student-led discussions interspersed throughout my lectures. In this way, students actively learn from the texts, from their instructor, and from each other. I provide opportunities for my students to challenge assumptions, consider opposing perspectives, and arrive at reasoned conclusions. For example, students in American Government will work together in small groups to prepare for class debates on the virtues of the Electoral College while those in my American Presidency course will discuss the evolving relationship between the president and the news media. Because such debates are grounded in contemporary political phenomenon and active learning techniques, I find that students are more enthusiastic and likely to engage in a deeper learning process that stimulates critical thinking.

I also believe that it is important to acknowledge that not all students learn in the same way and that not all methods of measuring student outcomes best capture their intellectual development. As such, my courses rely on a combination of readings, discussion questions and lecture slides that incorporate videos, diagrams, and charts. I distribute my power points to students after class so that they can focus on classroom discussions but also require that they complete pre-class quiz questions to ensure that they are adequately prepared ahead of time. In addition to traditional multiple-choice and essay exams, I measure student outcomes through writing assignments that require the application of course material to contemporary political phenomenon. For example, my American Government students write film reviews where they draw connections between what they have seen and what we have discussed in the course, while those in my Political Parties and Interest Group course complete case studies examining the lobbying strategies of organizations of their choosing. I believe that this diversity of teaching and evaluation methods simultaneously caters to students’ intellectual strengths and challenges their weaknesses in a well-rounded manner that promotes the attainment of their full academic potential.

The pedagogy I have outlined and the results I desire require not only passion for the material, but also for genuinely helping students to reach their full potential. I strive to be demanding but fair - to challenge my students and push them out of their comfort zone. Some students thrive under this pressure and I want to be a mentor that can inspire them to reach even higher. On several occasions I have supervised independent studies and am currently working with one promising undergraduate on a research article we intend to submit to a peer-reviewed journal. However, I believe that it is equally important to recognize and be available to help those students who are struggling in the classroom. Regardless of whether I have 300 students or 30, I strive to make my lessons as participatory as possible and provide sufficient office hours such that I can meet with any student who desires more one-on-one instruction and support. One student commented that: "Despite the class having more than 100 students, Professor Hickel was very engaging on an individual level and cared about each student who asked for his help." Another stated that "Flavio Hickel showed great interest in his students and really cared about us knowing the material."

I also firmly believe that teaching is in many ways a performance. Having spent over a decade as an amateur musician, I learned that the delivery is just as important as the content. As a teacher, it is similarly imperative to know your audience and find the most effective way to get them excited about the material. To that end, the students' identity, background, and interests are just as important as class size in determining a teaching strategy. My own college experience pursuing multiple degrees in different fields and class environments provides me with versatility to connect a variety of topics in political science to the diverse interests of students. I also believe that my extended experience teaching at the most diverse university in the country (Rutgers University) has well prepared me to engage students from a variety of social, economic, and ethnic backgrounds. These experiences not only assist me in advising students on their academic career goals, but also in exciting those students who have less of an inherent interest in political science. The greatest compliment I receive is when a student informs me that they have decided to major in political science after taking my course.

If there is one thing I have learned as a teacher, it is that you never stop being a student. I reflect upon each performance I deliver in the classroom seeking new understandings about how best to present the material and maintain student interest. As such, my course materials evolve and seldom remain the same year after year. I scrutinize my student evaluations to find areas that require the most improvement and to build upon those which have been successful. I believe that teachers must never rest on their laurels. We demand that our students are prepared to face the new challenges that await them after graduation and teachers have a similar responsibility to adapt and evolve. A teacher must constantly strive to improve their methods so they can create an environment that inspires intellectual curiosity and critical thinking.