

TAMAR MALLOY
STATEMENT OF TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

There is a great deal of overlap between the skills of good scholarship and good citizenship. I find teaching courses in politics compelling in part because they are so well-suited to developing those skill sets simultaneously. When students learn how to question the foundations of their political assumptions—when they start considering what justice means or how institutional arrangements affect our daily lives—they also become more engaged and thoughtful democratic participants. The foundation of my teaching philosophy and practice is to maintain a dual commitment to content and process, with the goal of empowering students from all backgrounds to value and undertake rigorous inquiry as both scholars and as citizens.

As an instructor, I plan my courses around two key questions. First: if, after the course ends, students only remember a few main ideas, what should they be and why? In answering this question, I consider which key concepts constitute a mastery of the material, what knowledge students will need in order to engage with politics in their lives after college, and how integrating current events and historical case studies can train students in using political theory, history, and research skills to make decisions about their own values, priorities, and political engagement. For instance, in teaching Survey of Western Political Thought during moments of global political uncertainty, I have focused our analysis around understanding what makes governments more or less stable, the ways in which canonical thinkers rely on homogeneity and respond to questions of diversity, and the practical and ethical differences between being a subject and a citizen. These central themes, which I make explicit and share with my students at the start of the semester, create continuity throughout the course and help students make comparisons between texts. They also give students a frame of reference through which to consider the world around them and helps them develop analytical skills that they can carry forward into their lives as citizens and community members.

Next, I ask: what skills will my students need in order to understand and deploy those core concepts, in class and beyond? When I begin planning course assignments, I do so with an eye towards developing their analytical skills over the course of the semester, and with an awareness that students may come to the course with different academic and personal backgrounds. I start the semester with low-stakes, informal assignments – in-class analyses of primary source documents, brief in-class or online writing assignments – that help me assess students' strengths and weaknesses as readers, writers, researchers, and thinkers. With that information in hand, I work backwards to help them develop higher order critical thinking skills through class discussion and written work. In past semesters, I have designed lessons so that we can do political research or close readings as a class or in small groups. I have also set aside course meetings for interactive workshops on argumentation, citation, how to design a research question and formulate a thesis, outlining arguments, and finding and evaluating sources. These workshops demonstrably improve students' comprehension and written work and help them move forward as holistically stronger students. Eliciting student feedback—which I do through a mid-semester evaluation as well as mandatory university end-of-term evaluations—also helps me meet students' needs. It has been especially useful for accommodating different learning styles, as when I have used games of charades to help kinesthetic learners understand Rousseau's views on the relationship between language and civilization, or staged mock elections to show experiential learners how different voting systems can effect outcomes.

In addition to these academically important goals, the ethical importance of teaching politics is clearest to me when partnered with my deeply held commitments to inclusivity and diversity. I have worked with students from many different walks of life, including racially and socioeconomically diverse groups, LGBTQ students, students with physical and learning disabilities, students who struggle with mental health, international students, first generation students, veterans, non-traditionally aged students from their 20s to 70s, students who are or have been incarcerated, and students who are working and/or caregiving while in school. In all of these cases, I have found that diversity in the classroom can enrich all of our experiences, and I aim to accommodate different backgrounds in ways that make courses stronger overall. Offering clear expectations and teaching analytical skills benefits all students; it also helps level the playing field so that students' performance is less reliant on their previous schooling, which is often more indicative of socioeconomic status than ability. Setting forth transparent course policies that emphasize growth and rigor and reminding students that disagreeing with assigned texts is a sign of strong scholarship encourages all students to develop their own opinions on the material; it also cultivates ideological diversity by making clear that students are graded on their effort rather than their views. Integrating contemporary cases into our discussions helps all students understand the material; it has also been effective in helping students from minoritized groups engage with the predominantly white male Western canon in introductory political theory courses or with the founding fathers in introductory American politics courses.

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Students who come into the classroom feeling distant from or suspicious of those canonical figures have often come to embrace their works as tools for understanding and critiquing white supremacy, the gender wage gap, the unevenness of LGBT rights across U.S. states, and the criminal justice system. Assigning readings by authors from diverse backgrounds wherever possible, making readings by people from underrepresented groups a centerpiece of courses on contemporary and feminist political thought, and using case studies that touch on issues of concern to minoritized populations has helped all students understand that including diverse voices leads to interesting and eye-opening discussion; it has also helped students with minoritized racial, national, religious, and sexual identities see that voices like theirs are wanted and valued. Similarly, being open about my own identity as a queer woman has helped students understand that learning and growth can take place across identity categories, and students with LGBTQ+ identities have said that that openness helps them to feel welcome in the classroom and to imagine possibilities for their own adult lives.

In all of these situations I have found that setting expectations, supporting growth, making material concretely relevant to contemporary life, and showing students that differences are a source of strength does a great deal to create a welcoming and productive classroom environment. Students have concurred, noting “an environment that promoted discussion” and instruction that “encourages student participation and challenges them in a respectful way that helps students to think more critically about course material” and directs students towards “thinking critically about general subject matters and to relat[ing] them to their everyday lives....[which] is very engaging, challenging and exciting at the same time.” I believe that creating this sort of atmosphere can fulfill the promise and potential of teaching political science by equipping an ever-broader cross-section of the population with the knowledge and tools to think critically about and engage with our political world.

When teaching graduate students, I also emphasize transparency and professionalization. Even the most promising graduate students sometimes find disciplinary norms daunting and opaque, and the combination of frustration, a sense of being an outsider, and a lack of understanding can stand in the way of their success in the field, or their interest in entering it. To help combat that possibility, I design course assignments to develop their professional knowledge as well as their academic skills. For instance, in one seminar each student researched two top journals in the field, then we had a discussion about how someone might choose where to submit their work and created a spreadsheet so that they could continue to easily reference the information. Other assignments have included scaffolded “article drafts,” an “anatomy of an article” assignment wherein they reverse outline and we discuss how to structure an article, guided peer review, practice conference presentations and Q&A, and in-class discussions of navigating academia while minoritized in some way. I bring the same commitments to my graduate mentoring, whether by giving an annual talk to our graduate students about how to navigate bias in student course evaluations, helping students draft their first grant applications, or co-authoring with them. In addition to helping future colleagues learn the ropes, I aim to encourage diversity in the field by making it more accessible. I have already seen this approach help graduate students become more confident and prepared.

Teaching and mentoring also ground and strengthen my own scholarship. I have found myself indebted on multiple occasions to students who ask seemingly simple questions that force me to reconsider my own habits of thought and study. In putting forth ostensibly simple questions—“If Mill’s goal was to cultivate genius, did he think stupid people should have rights?” “Is Rousseau’s *amour-propre* like worrying about how many Instagram likes we have?”—students open lines of inquiry that lead to rich philosophical contemplations in class and remind me of the value of approaching familiar material with fresh eyes. Additionally, the practice of articulating complex concepts for students who are new to the material is an important reminder that political science can – and to be maximally meaningful, must – be applicable to the everyday problems of contemporary life.

Moving forward, I am interested in expanding my teaching portfolio to include courses that draw on my interdisciplinary experience and commitment to helping students engage with the world around them. I am prepared to teach introductory and advanced undergraduate and graduate courses on a broad range of topics including theories of justice, identity, equality, and democracy; identity and the law; feminist political thought; critical race theory; queer theory; American political thought; and modern and contemporary political theory.

While my approach to teaching is of course still evolving, my efforts to date have been recognized with positive student feedback, as well as University of North Carolina Department of Political Science’s John Patrick Hagan Award for Outstanding Teaching and the University of Colorado Boulder Department of Political Science’s Graduate Faculty Mentor Award. I look forward to continuing to build on this foundation.