

Teaching to Empower

Teaching Philosophy for Carly Mayes, ABD

What is power? What does it mean to empower our students? As a teacher of government, my job includes relating the factual mechanics and systems of government to my students. However, I believe the more essential aspect of my role as an educator lies in teaching my students how to think critically about problems so they can reach their own well-reasoned conclusions. My paramount goal as an educator is to encourage a spirit of self-efficacy in my students so they can become active members of their communities by applying these critical thinking skills to take action on the political issues most important to them.

As a graduate student at Oklahoma State University, I had the opportunity to teach large sections of our introductory American politics course, a course that was mandatory for all students, regardless of major. Recognizing that student learning is often facilitated by connecting abstract concepts to real world experiences, I looked for opportunities to connect what we were discussing in class to current political events. For example, I was fortunate enough to teach a section of Introduction to American Government with an enrollment of about 70 students soon after Justice Elena Kagan was appointed and confirmed to the Supreme Court. After assigning a newspaper article about the confirmation process as extra reading, I divided the class into small discussion groups and provided them with guiding questions. Following these small group breakouts, we came back together as an entire class, allowing for a lively, student-led debate about the importance of the confirmation process in our modern political system. These small to large group discussions have become a feature in my classroom and allow my students to engage with controversial material in a way that increases individual comprehension of the material and builds bridges between students as they create a shared understanding of critical concepts.

In addition to engaging in class discussion, my students develop their critical thinking and communication skills by engaging in individual research and peer instruction. While at Lone Star College, I designed a two-part research project in which my students wrote an individual research paper and then presented that research with a team of their peers. These groups are organized around topics we will cover in class – for example, political participation or Congress – and students self-select into a topic of interest to them during the first week of class. Each group member is then tasked with developing a research question related to this larger topic. Recognizing that this is the first time many of my students have engaged in this kind of research, I worked with one of the instructional librarians at my campus to develop curriculum on information literacy as it applies to research in political science. Students spent an entire class period learning how to evaluate sources and about the library's resources. Then students worked in their groups to develop their research questions, while my colleague and I rotated between groups, assisting students with specific questions. After becoming "experts" in their specific subject area through completing their own research, students are then tasked with teaching this material to the rest of their classmates, with the requirement that they include some interactive element in their presentation. In the past, students have opted for simulating the Electoral College process, engaging in debates about policy options, and games such as Jeopardy. This assignment requires that students develop skills in critical thinking, research, and

written and oral communication, which are critical for success in the student's professional life, regardless of the field they choose to enter.

Although imparting factual information and developing my students' critical thinking skills are the main focus in my role as a teacher, one of the most personally rewarding aspects of the job is my role as a mentor. I make it clear to my students that their success both inside and outside the classroom is of great concern to me and that I will make all reasonable accommodations to help them achieve that success. By conveying this attitude in the classroom, I had the opportunity to develop one-on-one relationships with many of my students during office hours and in my capacity as a student organization adviser. In addition to helping my students overcome various academic hurdles, these individual interactions also provided me with an extra opportunity to convey my passion for the study of government and highlight specific ways in which the material covered in class pertained to the life of the individual student. I also believe that these personal interactions help indirectly develop the student's sense of political efficacy. By showing my students that they have the ability to solve their personal problems if they can identify and utilize the correct tools and processes, they can begin to understand they have the ability to solve larger and more complex political and social problems by using some of those same skills.

As a teacher of political science, my goal is to empower my students to enter political life in three main ways. First, I will provide them with a foundational understanding of how the American political system works and relevant players that drive that system. Simultaneously, I will engage them in activities and discussions that develop their critical thinking skills so they can evaluate political problems and reach their own conclusions. Finally, I foster a spirit of personal political efficacy in my students so they will have both the desire and tools to become active citizens. I will attempt this challenge by showing them how political problems and systems impact their personal lives and by exhibiting my own passion for the scientific study of politics. It is my hope that in building a foundational understanding of government and developing critical thinking skills, my students will leave class prepared and determined to build the communities they envision.

Amplifying Student Power through Equity and Inclusion *Statement on Inclusion for Carly Mayes, ABD*

As an instructor of introductory government courses, one of my foundational goals for all of my students is that they leave my class with a greater understanding of the way that systems of oppression are woven into our governmental structures, creating a society in which human differences – such as race, ethnicity, and gender – serve as predictors of success. The recognition of this fact is also where my philosophy of inclusion begins. I know that each of my students enters my classroom with a different lived experience, shaped by these systems of oppression. However, I also know each student's lived experience has given them knowledge and skills – power – unique to that student. This power gives them both the right and the responsibility to define what success looks like in their life on their own terms. As a teacher, I believe my most fundamental job is to help my students connect to their inherent power and provide the additional tools they need to achieve their goals.

The process of connecting my students to their inherent power is built into my curriculum in several ways. For example, on the first day of class, I break my students into small groups and have them brainstorm the norms they want to guide our classroom discussions, with the goal that we will create a “free space,” where ideas and beliefs can be discussed openly and without fear of retribution. When we reconvene as a larger group, we go over the suggested norms and the students vote on which items they want included in the final list. I then update the course syllabus so that these norms become part of our classroom community's contract. While I do serve as last line of defense in making sure these consensual norms are followed, I have found that in the rare case that a norm is violated, the other students hold the offending peer accountable.

Another example of connecting my students to their inherent power is the “Public Narrative” assignment. In this assignment, students are asked to identify an issue facing their community that they feel strongly about, then craft a narrative connecting their lived experience to that issue. The two main goals of the assignment are for my students to connect their story to the larger community narrative in which they live and to get them to think about how their experiences can be leveraged as strengths to create the change they want to see in their communities. By casting my students as the protagonists in their Public Narratives, my goal is to reinforce the idea that they have both the power and the responsibility to define what change and success look like in their lives.

Recognizing and celebrating the individual autonomy of each of my students is an important first step in helping them achieve their goals, but it is also my responsibility as an educator to connect my students with the additional resources they need to be successful. For some of my students, this means working with other campus resource officers to ensure they have the accommodations they need to start on equal footing with the rest of the class. My own identity as a disabled scholar is informative here, and my experiences navigating academic bureaucracy have shown me the importance of building close working relationships with campus resource officers who can help my students achieve their goals.

While I am particularly committed to working to ensure students with disabilities get access to the resources they need, my goal is always to make my class accessible to all of my students. For me, this means working to demystify the culture of higher education, by clearly articulating all of my expectations and teaching my students the skills they need to be successful, rather than assuming they already have them. Clearly articulating my expectations means that in addition to providing detailed instructions for their assignments, I also provide my students with the grading rubrics I use to assess them. Not only do these grading rubrics explain how the assignments are assessed, they also show my students that I value equity and fairness in the assessment process.

Teaching skills on top of covering the state-mandated content for my courses requires that I build time for those skills into my daily curriculum. For example, I start each class period with a five minute block during which students can ask any questions they have about material previously covered in class or upcoming assignments. To get things started, I remind them of upcoming assessments or clarify points of confusion from the previous class. Students who do not feel comfortable asking questions out loud are encouraged to submit them in writing. To ensure that I can follow up as needed and to further underline that they are critical members of the classroom community, I ask one student each class period to write all of the questions down and return the list to me at the end of class. By engaging in this practice every class period, I not only have the opportunity to clarify and explain, but I also demonstrate that I value and expect help-seeking behavior in my students.

Another example of teaching these requisite skills is the curriculum for the class period before the first exam. All of my exams are comprised of short answer questions and one essay. To prepare my students, I provide them with a study guide that is essentially a longer version of the exam they will take, and includes three potential essay questions. During the class period before the exam, I break my students into groups and assign each group an essay question. As a group, their task is to create an outline of the main points they should cover in the essay. When we reconvene as a larger group, we go over each group's outline, essentially filling in a major part of the study guide. Once this skill has been demonstrated in class, I remind my students to engage in the exercise before every exam and encourage them to work on their study guides in groups, as we did in class.

Teaching study skills and modeling help-seeking behavior are two of my favorite jobs as a teacher because I know what compelling tools they are, especially in the hands of students who believe they are capable of succeeding on their own terms. Being a successful college student is not unlike finding success in any other domain. It takes the right tools, persistent daily work, and the belief that success is possible. I strive to create equity in my classroom by connecting my students to their inherent, individual power so they can define what success looks like in their lives and to provide them with consistent opportunities to develop the skills they need to meet those goals.