

Teaching 2019 | M. Joel Voss

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Philosophy of Teaching

"The correct analogy for the mind is not a vessel that needs filling, but wood that needs igniting... and then it motivates one towards originality and instills the desire for truth." - Plutarch, De Auditu

Plutarch's ageless wisdom captures my teaching philosophy quite well. The classroom is an environment that can ignite students' creativity, desire to learn, and above all else, engagement. This ignition, I have found, is three-pronged: helping students understand why the class is relevant, creating an engaging educational experience, and empowering students to take control of their learning. I have found that a dynamic and energetic atmosphere draws students into the learning experience and, once actively involved, their own desires to learn take over. They start to think creatively. They learn to appreciate new ways of viewing the world. They make connections.

The first step to higher learning and understanding a class's relevance is to be able to answer the "so what" question. To this end, I begin and end class by asking students to explain the importance and broader implications of the material for both the course and outside world. For example, students come to learn that constructivist approaches not only clarify interstate interactions but can also explain race relations in America. By answering these questions, students quickly understand the importance of the subject and how to apply the material widely. This approach also allows me to recognize the depth of their understanding. Students are busy. Helping them realize why a subject is relevant, even a general education course, facilitates their engagement in active learning.

Active learning also requires an engaging classroom experience. My teaching style, which is dynamic, energetic, and oftentimes humorous, creates a model for students to follow. Students take this enthusiasm and use it to find interesting and innovative ways to explain the material during "think, pair, and share" group work or with me during Socratic Dialogues. I use self-designed games, like my Security Council - Intervention mediation exercise to help explain complex concepts. Popular culture is also an important part of the classroom. I enjoy using references to Harry Potter and games like *Warcraft* and *Halo* to explain complex phenomena. My students in turn give examples of the Prisoner's Dilemma using *The Dark Knight*, doping in sports, and cheating on college admissions. They have also explained the Security Dilemma through the lens of "Black Friday" shopping! Using seemingly unrelated examples to explain complex phenomena is a tool I have found keeps everyone intellectually energetic and wanting to learn more. I am particularly delighted when I receive emails after class sessions with popular culture examples of political theories, especially from students who may not feel comfortable participating in front of their peers.

Empowering students to take control of their learning requires students to have efficacy over their performance. Although every student in the classroom may not receive an "A," each student should believe they have the ability to obtain the highest grade possible. Efficacy requires having clear guidelines on the syllabus for assignments, giving students appropriate, positive feedback coupled with methods to improve their performance, and understanding that students have diverse learning approaches and needs. When students feel uncomfortable in the classroom, because of their language abilities or shyness, for instance, I find ways to

help them overcome their concerns. For example, I allow recording pens, provide notes and outlines, and have an open door policy for students to come and discuss material. As a first generation college student, and as someone who has taught a number of ESL students across disciplines, I believe it is absolutely critical to help students find and then expand their comfort zones.

I am a Teacher-Scholar. I believe that scholarship is an indispensable component of engaged, responsible teaching, so long as it nurtures rather than marginalizes the classroom. An active research agenda helps bring the relevance of the discipline to the classroom and allows students to engage with important and current debates, such as humanitarian intervention or the rights of minorities, and also helps students understand possible career paths. Being a Teacher-Scholar creates a model for appropriate undergraduate research, something in which I strongly believe and with which I actively engage. Under my direct supervision, students are publishing in undergraduate research journals, attending conferences, winning major fellowships, and being admitted to prestigious graduate programs. Watching students succeed is without a doubt one of the best parts of the profession. In the reverse, my teaching also engages my research. For example, with the help of my engineering students in a course I created on technology and human rights, I am now pursuing issues on how technology and human rights interact. This part of my research agenda is new and grounded on the interactions with students in one course!

My global human rights research agenda has helped clarify my goals as an educator. Above all, I want to empower students to become active members of the international community. Therefore, I use service-learning opportunities both in class and outside of class to help students both foster community and learn best and worst practices by stakeholders. By bringing students and the community together, barriers are broken down and the relevance of their education is reinforced. Despite initial trepidation, service-learning projects are always a favorite part of class.

Learning is an important part of teaching. As a Mellon Teaching Fellow, a holder of several Certificate in Teaching Techniques, and a lecturer in multiple fields, I am learning how to engage with students across disciplines. This interdisciplinary approach has no doubt improved my teaching but I am sure there are many different teaching approaches to learn. Therefore, when possible, I engage with students both formally and informally, as well as elicit feedback from faculty and staff in order to improve my craft. Being part of a living and learning community prior to UT joining UT especially helped me understand how to reach a broader audience. Plus, interacting with students in large, general education courses has helped me reach students that may not be initially interested in the material but helping them see the relevance and connectedness of our core classes to their major requirements.

Teaching Outcomes

One of my primary goals since arriving at the University of Toledo is to create interesting courses that meet students' needs and demands. With feedback from students, I have created or revamped a large number of courses over four years including lower level courses like principles of international relations and current international problems, which is a general education requirement and a great recruiting tool for our department. Upper level courses include Europe, international relations of the Middle East, American foreign policy, International Organizations, human rights, and terrorism. I have also developed online courses on topics like "war policy and the United States" and "violence in politics," which were very successful and will hopefully be added to the Department in the future. I also have several other new preps that will be offered in the future like international law, an upper level course on international relations theory, and hopefully a course on game theory. This is a large number of preps over the last four years but it has helped grow the Department and has had a positive impact on students.

I believe it is clear that my approach to offering a wide selection of courses and my approach to teaching is paying off for the Department. My courses fill up quickly and enrollments are very healthy. There are some students in the department who have taken four or five of my courses. Retention in my courses, including general education courses, is very high. Further, my evaluations continue to be above the Department mean. In addition, evaluations from both outside observers and department colleagues has been positive.

However, I do not want to become complacent. In order to improve teaching and help the Department, I completed a class on online pedagogy to improve my online teaching methods. I believe this will also be beneficial to UT students and the Department. This course on pedagogy builds on a previous course that I took with the Course Design Institute, to help give instructors a hands-on approach to new learning techniques and to allow us to create and improve our syllabi. I used the Institute as a basis for revamping our Global Studies classes in order to meet General Education Requirements. Prior to coming to UT, I took several other classes on pedagogy and I consistently ask for feedback from my colleagues.

I take advising and mentoring seriously and I believe this is helping with student success. Students continue to come to me for independent courses and honors thesis. Over the last four years, I have advised five senior honors theses, five independent study projects, and numerous honors contracts every semester and an MA thesis as well as composed dozens of letters each semester. I have also hired students as research assistants on several projects and will continue to find opportunities for student research. The students I mentor and advise have presented original research at national conferences and have gone on to prestigious graduate programs. Students at UT or in my prior positions place at places like McGill, Stanford, the London School of Economics, and Columbia. Students I have advised at UT and elsewhere have found careers with local, state, and national governments as well as think tanks, our foreign service, the foreign service of their home governments, and consultancy firms like Deloitte and have been awarded prestigious fellowships like the Fulbright.

The Future

I am very proud of the hard-work and growth of my students. I look forward to continuing to energize and help our students succeed and to become proud members of the UT community, local community, and international community. Post-tenure teaching plans include developing new classes for the Department on more specialized topics and piloting classes like “science fiction, fantasy, and politics” for continuing studies. I would also like to extend my previous experience team teaching across disciplines to create a course on human rights and STEM-related fields. I also want to take the skills and expertise learned during my postdoc as a professor-in-residence to help develop more living-learning programs at the University of Toledo. LLCs are a great tool for both recruitment and retention and should be developed more. Finally, I hope to create a study abroad program for either general education courses or political science students on diplomacy in Geneva, Switzerland. As a first-generation college student, I continue to look for opportunities to help others succeed. I hope these programs help our students reach their dreams.