I love to teach, and I can think of no career more fulfilling than ours. When a student suddenly smiles at having grasped a difficult theoretical concept, when an insightful student’s comment sparks an illuminating discussion among her peers, when I see a student catching a vision of what global politics really means in his life and in the lives of distant peoples he has never met, I get excited.

Consequently, I have a deep desire to be the best teacher possible, and to accomplish this goal I have fashioned a teaching philosophy which simply states that meaningful teaching must be cooperative, engaging, transformative, and empowering. Meaningful teaching requires the full participation of the students and the professor. Meaningful teaching critically engages the students’ minds and powerfully engages the students’ hearts. Meaningful teaching transforms the students by changing how they perceive their world and their role in it, and by transforming them from passive receptors of political rhetoric to critical consumers of theory, rhetoric, and news. Finally, meaningful teaching empowers students both to critically engage the academic field of political science and to actively transform their political world.

This philosophy is, however, in constant danger of becoming little more than empty rhetoric unless it is accompanied by a carefully crafted means of its enactment. Putting this philosophy into practice requires first, a deep desire to instill in my students the love of world politics which leads to a life-long desire to learn about and become actively engaged in their political world; second, creating a community where students can share and explore ideas with me and with their peers; third, constantly improving both my knowledge of the field and my use of innovative techniques to convey that knowledge; and fourth, maintaining rigorous expectations that every student fulfill his or her utmost potential. Allow me to elaborate on each of these key elements.

Students’ Motivation
The natural motivation behind this teaching philosophy is my great desire to help students learn. Learning, however, requires much more than a professor’s simply expressing information. Successful communication requires the full participation of both parties, and unless the student is receptive, learning will not occur. Some students are naturally receptive—students who come to college with an inherent desire to learn—but many others require additional motivation. Although it is tempting to anchor this motivation in fear (especially the fear of a bad grade), I have found that love of the subject more powerfully motivates students to plunge deeply and critically into the subject. Students who fall in love with world politics also leave class with a gift far more valuable than any specific knowledge they might accumulate, they carry with them the desire for life-long learning and the longing to become actively engaged in the political world around them.
A student will develop their love of world politics through the convergence of several stimuli. First, the student has to know I care intensely about his or her learning. I begin to show the students that I recognize them personally by quickly learning all of their names. Thereafter, I make myself available to answer any and all questions they have. I linger after class to answer questions as students leave. I hold extensive office hours and make myself available to read drafts and rewrites, answer questions, or talk about a student’s personal progress in class. This effort to make myself available fails, however, if the students do not feel comfortable approaching me. I attempt to make students feel more comfortable by chatting with them informally as well. I arrive at class 10 minutes early and use the time to visit with students as they file in. When appropriate and feasible, I integrate a few minutes of informal discussion about college life into a class discussion. When I sense a student struggling, I will extend an explicit invitation to come by my office to trouble-shoot. Finally, I assert in my syllabus and reassert frequently throughout the semester that I am available and happy to help students meet the high expectation of our course.

Second, I demonstrate in every class my own love of world politics. I report to the students the findings of my own research and explain why I find that research exciting. I report to students what I learn at national academic conferences and get them excited about where the field of political science is going. I get them involved in the news and tell them of my personal experiences and involvement. This enthusiasm comes quite naturally, and my enthusiasm definitely has a contagious effect on my students.

Third, I expose how world politics affects students’ lives. I impress upon students that world politics has a very direct and very immediate impact on their lives. I convince them that the decisions they make every day—from their environmental impact, to their participation in the economy, to their voting—all have a very real and immediate effect on the lives of others throughout the world. We do class projects to clarify and enhance their positive influence at the global and local levels by both writing to politicians around the world as well as by involving the class in community service. This helps locate world politics centrally in their lives and empowers them with the knowledge that they can make a positive difference in the world around them.

**Classroom Community**

As I establish my relationship with the students and their relationship to the subject matter, I must also establish or refine the students’ relationships with one another. My teaching relies heavily on class discussion and debate, neither of which can be effective if the students are uncomfortable in their social environment. I therefore begin each semester with a simulation exercise which gets the students working with each other. The simulation places the students in small cooperative groups to represent countries which then cooperate and/or compete with other represented countries. The students eagerly meet outside of class to strategize and thus develop close friendships within each group. They then return to compete with their classmates representing other countries and develop healthy rivalries and friendships throughout the class. As a result, the students soon feel more at ease sharing ideas and critically exploring ideas with their peers.
Nurturing a close social community also requires attention to certain material conditions. Whenever the classroom, desks, or tables allow it, I prefer not to have all the students in straight rows facing the front of the classroom. Instead, I have the tables, desks, or chairs arranged in a semicircle which allows everyone to see anything of importance at the front of the room (me, overheads, maps, video clips, etc.), but this arrangement also keeps a fair measure of focus on other students enabling students to talk with each other and elaborating on or rebutting each other’s comments. In addition to the position of the students, I have found that another important variable in this environment is position of the professor, but only if that position varies. A good class setting allows me to direct attention to myself when necessary, even walking among the students when appropriate to focus their attention, but also allows me to withdraw myself from their attention when necessary to refocus attention on the community of students, their comments, and their feedback.

Knowledgeable and Prepared Professor

Given the proper setting and well-motivated students, teaching is still absolutely dependent upon a professor who is well-prepared, knowledgeable, and creative. I lecture rarely, and then only briefly. Instead, I carefully select readings to provide vital theoretical frameworks. I allow the students’ required reading of the New York Times to plant in their minds the requisite factual information to which they will apply and begin to make sense of abstract theories. This approach allows me to jealously reserve class time for a critical exploration and application of these theories to what they see happening in the world around them. Devoid of opportunities for passive “learning,” class time is instead consumed by discussion, debate, role playing, small group projects, and simulation exercises. By employing a variety of innovative teaching methods, I have discovered that it is possible to maintain very rigorous learning standards while keeping class fun and interesting.

This strategy requires, however, a great deal of preparation. Rather than simply summarize the readings in class, this requires me draw the students’ attention to current events that clarify the readings, prepare exercises or games to reinforce the lessons learned in their readings, and draft a series of discussion-inducing or debatable questions to compel a more critical examination of what they learned. It is this critical thinking that becomes a central goal and the mark of a good course. Critical thinking skills developed in the guided exploration of ideas may not be recorded in a student’s notebook but they will be reflected in cognitive abilities and habits that become second-nature to the student, and enable him or her to become a critical consumer of all information thereafter.

My teaching strategy requires that learning is not limited to class time. Students are compelled to come prepared having read all of the readings, or they will not be able to participate effectively in a discussion. Requiring students to back up their comments with evidence from the news or readings discourages their attempting to pass off empty rhetoric or witty rebuttals as legitimate “participation.” Similarly, a great deal of learning also takes place after class. Students receive their drafts and papers with extensive comments which they are expected to consider and integrate into subsequent drafts or rewrites. In this way grades are rarely a final determinate of a student’s capabilities, but are used instead as a pedagogical tool to give students feedback and let them know exactly how their performance measures up to my expectations.
Rigorous Expectations

The final element of my teaching philosophy is the essential element of rigor. My experience on both sides of the podium suggests that discussion-oriented classes are among the very best or the very worst depending primarily on the professor’s expectations and her willingness to enforce them. Without rigorous and fairly-enforced standards, a discussion among students can easily become a frustrating waste of time. Without explicit rules and clear expectations, a simulation, game, or object lesson might be fun but not necessarily productive. Without well-defined ground rules, a debate can be more divisive and intimidating than enlightening.

Rigorous expectations are clearly set first in the course syllabus. In my syllabi I explicitly set out the criteria for good or inadequate participation, clearly spell out the expectations of each assignment, and provide internet links to my actual grading and feedback sheets where points for each component of each assignment are itemized. The extent of these expectations cannot be perfectly communicated, however, until the first substantive class discussion or the first assignments are graded. Regarding class discussion and debates, many students need close, constructive guidance to unlearn counterproductive habits acquired elsewhere. When discussing the Pew and Harvard case studies, I rely heavily on the Harvard Business School’s case study teaching method to keep the discussion focused and productive. When discussing other class readings, I maintain high expectations of performance, but also allow the freedom to explore unexpected ideas and questions raised by the students. Regarding writing assignments, I tend to be very tough on the first set of papers, but with those tough grades I provide an uplifting pep-talk and an invitation to rewrite the papers for a better grade. In my experience, students feel much better about themselves and their education when they are able through sustained effort to rise to a high standard than to easily pass a low one.

Conclusion

I have taught twenty-nine university courses, and worked as a teaching assistant and small breakout group instructor for dozens more. I have had the pleasure of working with some very capable professors and have gleaned from their mentorships many valuable teaching skills and techniques. Even more important, however, I developed a deep love of teaching that compels me to continue to refine my techniques and polish my teaching philosophy. As my teaching career progresses, I will continue to instill in students a desire to learn and a love of world politics, I will continue to create in the classroom an environment in which critical discussion among peers can flourish, I will continue to strive to improve my knowledge of the field and pedagogy, and I will continue to push students to reach their highest potential.

In conclusion, I invite you again to read my students’ comments and hear, echoed in their words, the profound love I have for teaching. Be assured that as long as there is a student who has not yet had the world unfolded to her vision, or who has not yet truly comprehended her role and power within that world, I will continue with all my heart to engage, enlighten, and empower through meaningful teaching.