

Our role as academics- and specifically as political science instructors- is to make courses academically challenging, help students understand the science of politics, and give students tools to engage the political world. However, I believe our responsibility as teachers is to develop and organize materials in ways that are accessible to a range of students. It is this belief that guides my teaching philosophy: my role as a teacher is to create spaces where students want to learn, are not afraid to make mistakes, and are set up to succeed so that they are able to understand and apply rigorous, academic material and develop skills that prepare them to succeed in both the university and professional worlds. To do this I create assignments and lectures that reach diverse learners, offer many opportunities to correct mistakes, connect theoretical concepts with real world applications, and push students to develop professional skills.

### **Assessment: Students and Teaching**

Over the years I have talked to many bright students who struggle in classes where they must rely on a single skill set- often one that is not their strength- to succeed on assignments. Despite truly understanding the material, they feel frustrated and experience limited success because, for example, they are not good at memorization or multiple-choice exams. As a teacher I want to assess my student's capabilities in an effective format, whether their strengths lie in writing, oration, test taking or design, and at the same time I want to help them develop the skills that will aide them in professional life. To achieve these dual goals I create assessments that reach varied learning styles and foster professional skill acquisition. For example, while teaching *Public Policy Analysis* in an online format I assigned a two-part policy research project that offered students opportunities to demonstrate their understanding in diverse ways and worked on four professional skills: research, writing, numeric literacy, and visual communication. For the first part of the assignment students wrote a traditional policy brief that consolidated and analyzed independent research. For the second part they gathered visual depictions of the problem, legislation, and policy outcomes (ie: graphs, charts, photographs, enlarged quotes, etc.) to create an infographic and explanatory caption that would be appropriate to explain their policy in a news magazine.

Though I thought this approach would help reach diverse learners, I wanted to investigate this more systematically. In an effort to become a better teacher I tap into my skills as a researcher and use each of my classrooms as an opportunity to develop the science of teaching and learning (SOTL). In this instance, I assigned the two-part assessment in combination with pre and post-class surveys so that I could better gauge both the project's effectiveness and student experience. As I anticipated, the assignment better addressed diverse learning needs, with auditory and reading-based learners favoring the written assignment, while visual and kinesthetic learners preferred the infographic. Importantly however, the dual assessment also challenged students step out of their comfort zones, with students acknowledging that there less-favored assignment pushed them to think about their policy differently. Because I offered multiple assignments using the same concepts and base information, students with diverse learning styles, interests and backgrounds were able to not simply earn high marks, but highlight their strengths and demonstrate their learning; at the same time, they were able to work on professional skills without their entire grade relying on a single skill set.

### **Real World Application**

In pre-class surveys nearly 60 percent of students say they only occasionally or rarely see a connection between class material and real life; these students are also less likely to see the purpose of what they are doing and to feel less engaged by the material. Political Science has much to offer students, but it is also easy to get bogged down by purely theoretical approaches, losing students in the process. To avoid this, I am very strategic about the examples I select and I organize classes in ways that balance theoretical approaches with real-world applications. In a mid-sized, in-person Public Policy Analysis course that met twice a week I did this by using the first class period of the week to assign readings and lecture on theoretical concepts, while the second class period was used to apply theory to a policy case study, engage in in-depth class discussion, and participate in hands-on activities. One week we discussed the social construction of target populations; the first day students read Schneider and Ingram's classic, though highly academic, article on the topic and I spent the day breaking down the theory through an interactive lecture.

On the second day, we applied this concept to the case of in-state tuition for undocumented immigrants, looking at the different ways that these immigrants were constructed in two states that had debated the policy but ultimately come to different conclusions. On another occasion I used a simulation of a congressional hearing to drive home two concepts: the way a single problem definition can produce diverse policy alternatives, and the role that interest groups play in developing policy. Each student read congressional hearings on energy independence from both an environmental and fossil-fuel perspective; in addition, students were assigned to be either members of congress or interest group representatives. They then read real-world policy statements from their assigned perspective; for example, the humanitarian interest group read a policy statement from Oxfam America explaining the way that ethanol increases grain prices throughout the world. In class, we held a mock-congressional hearing where each interest group presented their perspective to "congress." In their post-class survey, many students commented that their favorite material came from our policy case-studies, which helped them understand the much dryer theoretical concepts at the heart of the course.

### **Success in Failure**

In order to promote success; I accept that my students will make mistakes, but these failures can be used as effective engagement tools in a learner centered classroom. One of the more memorable things a professor ever said to me was that "every time you begin something new, you are a beginner." I keep this in mind as I teach because many of my students are beginners- beginners at political science, beginners at being a college student, sometimes beginners at being engaged learners. This means they are bound to make mistakes and in order to translate these mistakes into true learning, I must give them space to fail. In my classroom I do this by creating iterative assignments that allow students to turn their mistakes into success. In place of traditional exams, I use iterative unit assessments where students can earn back 50 percent of the points they lose by fixing their mistakes. I also do this by creating scaffolding so that low-risk assignments build on one another and prepare students for higher-stakes ones. Finally, when I assign writing, something that many of my students struggle with, I require them to submit two to three drafts for completion grades so that they can get feedback before they submit their final assignment.

## Melanie Bowers Teaching Statement

In the aforementioned in-person Policy Analysis course, students completed a group project and submitted drafts at three checkpoints. At the third checkpoint a group of students submitted a draft that did not meet my expectations. I gave them extensive feedback and told them that if they submitted the same paper as their final product, they would receive a C-. These students took this feedback to heart and transformed their work into an A project. Though a C- is not technically failing, in my book it is unacceptable; but, because they had the space to make and fix mistakes, they were able to succeed.

My goals as a teacher are to promote student success and engagement while helping enhance their professional skills. Each course I am a part of gives me greater insight into how to do this, but to truly understand what works I systematically gather data on my students' preferences, experiences, and learning outcomes. From experience and data I have begun to develop a set of teaching practices that I incorporate into every course: create assignments and lectures that reach diverse learners, offer many opportunities to correct mistakes, connect theoretical concepts with real world applications, and push students to develop professional skills. These practices have fostered excellent classroom dynamics and student success and I continue to look for ways to improve my classroom.