Michael O. Slobodchikoff

Teaching and Mentoring Philosophy

I am currently teaching at Troy University. I have been the instructor of record for five different classes, and am scheduled to teach three more classes beginning next semester. During my time at the University of Arizona, I have been the instructor of record for five different classes, and I have taught several of the classes multiple times. I have taught these classes both in the classroom and online. Additional information such as course syllabi and evaluations can be found at my personal website (http://spectrum.troy.edu/mslobodchikoff).

Students learn in a multitude of ways. Some students learn best through traditional ways such as lectures and readings, while others learn best through active learning and discussion. I combine both approaches in a way that allows students to maximize their ability to learn; this means being accessible and easily available to students. Moreover, I am adaptable to the needs of my students and often urge my students to contact me by email or office hours should they have any questions on the material. Students first contact me for help with challenging material, and as they recognize my availability and willingness to help them, they begin to come to my office hours for informal advising and mentoring as well as to write them letters of recommendation for their future endeavors.

I view active learning as an essential part of my teaching philosophy. Students learn more when they take an active part in their learning through group discussions, simulations, group presentations and panel discussions. By engaging the students in active learning, I find that it often sparks their interest, and allows them to make connections between complex theoretical concepts and current events and institutions.

For example, in my Democracies, Emerging and Evolving (POL 437) class, I have the students take part in a simulation where they are leaders of regions of a post-civil war state that have gathered at a constitutional convention. They are provided with background information on their respective regions, assigned specific roles, and given a minimum list of goals that they are trying to achieve in the new constitution. Groups are often given conflicting goals. It is important that none of these goals are shared with other groups. I tell the students that at the end of the simulation, they must adopt a constitution, but 2/3 of the class must vote to accept the constitution.

Although the students begin the simulation with the idea that it will be easy to adopt a constitution, they quickly find that it is an extremely difficult process. Not only must they determine how their own role fits into the process of the constitutional convention, but they must also develop a negotiation strategy among both their own group as well as with other class members. They quickly learn that they must develop a hierarchal structure within their own group or the simulation can devolve into chaos. Because each student is graded on his/her participation, each student must fully immerse him/herself in the assigned role. Thus, students often continued the discussion and negotiations outside of class. In fact, at the request of many of my students, I had to open online discussion sections related to the simulation for students to continue the negotiation.

I have run simulations in three classes at the University of Arizona, and each simulation has been a complete success. Through the simulation, the students really came to understand the theoretical problems that we had studied prior to the simulation, and they realized that although international politics and political systems are extremely complex, the systems can be analyzed and understood. Through such active learning, students are not only able to understand current international political issues, but are also able to offer sound analysis about evolving political crises.

In addition to the continuing use of simulations in class, I am developing a modified teacher and learner-centered course that uses a "Steve Jobs delivery model." Specifically, I am working on developing strategies and using technology (e.g., iPads) that will help students to become active learners and that will keep them more actively engaged in and out of the classroom. I am incorporating technologies such as Twitter in larger classes, giving students a chance to actively pose questions that they otherwise would not feel comfortable asking in large lecture classes. I am also broadening my on-line teaching portfolio to include a graduate-level course on Russian foreign policy.

One of the major challenges that I have had to resolve was how to create an active learning environment in an online class. I wanted to maintain the same level of classroom discussion, group-learning, and simulation participation as was maintained in the traditional classroom setting. By scheduling live discussions online, maintaining a discussion board, and having group discussion sections, I was able to have students engage each other and get the same full learning experience as those who had taken the class in the traditional classroom setting.

Students often need reinforcement and informal mentoring outside of the classroom. I believe that it is important to have open office hours where students can come and discuss not only class materials, but also talk about how classroom concepts and exercises fit into their future plans. I urge students to make use of my availability to talk to me and to discuss their future plans. Although most students first come to receive guidance on class content, many of those students return to discuss how the content is applicable to their own lives and interests and then come to ask advice on their future careers and plans. By my listening and providing positive reinforcement, many students have come to see me as a teacher who really cares about each of them as an individual as opposed to just a nameless student.