

Teaching Philosophy

Felipe G. Santos

I am passionate about social change and this passion inspires my reflections about how social sciences should be taught. I enjoy understanding the causes that led to a political and social outcome and the strategies of the different groups to influence the result. I am also intrigued to explore the arguments of those I do not agree with to have a clearer picture of how they reason and why they think the way they do. When I teach, I try to inspire my students to feel that passion, the will to connect theories and practice, and to think critically while being empathetic to the position of the other. This way of teaching is based on three reflections. First, learning social sciences should be guided by our curiosity to better understand society. Second, theories and concepts are easier to learn when we connect them to real events. Finally, a good teacher must be a constant learner, and this is achieved through research excellence.

Learning should be guided by the curiosity of the student and not the evaluation of the teacher. Most classrooms contain an implicit hierarchy in which students expect to receive knowledge from the teacher and be evaluated about how much information they are able to absorb and convey. If we are not mindful about this, we risk creating a context in which students try to perform according to external expectations, and where knowledge is only useful until the date of the final examination. The role of the teacher is to reduce this hierarchy and create a more horizontal context where the curiosity of learning is stronger than the anxiety of being evaluated. I like to begin my classes with five minutes dedicated to asking students how they are. Starting in this way allows me to have a sense of whether I should adapt the pace of the session and whether I should pay special attention to specific dynamics or persons. Additionally, organizing more horizontal activities is important, so the teacher is not seen as the locus of knowledge and evaluation, and students are encouraged to move out of their comfort zone when approaching an issue. For this, I enjoy creating discussion activities, dividing students into smaller groups. This cozier context facilitates debates and generates a dynamic of constructive criticism among peers.

Second, curiosity is triggered when concepts and theories prove to be useful to analyze real events. For this reason, I always try to be transparent about why I chose the content and organization of the session, as well as the ways of evaluation. When students understand why I have organized the aspects of the course in the way they are, they give more importance to them. Additionally, I believe that assignments should be envisioned with the objective of encouraging the connection between concepts, theories and real-world happenings. For instance, I enjoyed specially my involvement as teaching assistant in a course called Social Justice Frameworks in Action, where students had group assignments where they had to apply the perspectives presented during the course to a case study of a social justice problem they previously selected. The results of this course were very encouraging to my predisposition towards inquiry-based learning, as students became passionate about their group assignment and showed a great understanding of the course theories. This should apply to all disciplines, but it has special relevance for the social sciences. With the growing complexity of the

information we receive, teachers should provide students with the capacity to engage critically with evidence and connect it to more abstract concepts.

Finally, it is impossible for students to analyze the present if their course curriculum is not up to date. Being able to combine teaching and research excellence is essential to translate the most recent developments in one's field to the classroom. Being on the top of the one's academic discipline and contributing to its advancements is crucial to maintain the curiosity that a teacher must pass to students. Moreover, taking the position of a constant learner through research reminds the teacher about the situation of his students and be better able to empathize with their position. On this line, I would also like to involve my students into joint research projects. I was inspired by the report that my advisor Prof. Austin Choi-Fitzpatrick authored together with his undergraduate students on non-violent drones use from 2009-2015.

In addition to improving students' learning, I believe these three reflections are important to continue loving my job. Generating a comfortable class dynamic makes it more fun for me to share my time with students, exploring topics I am passionate about. Reading assignments that use theory to analyze politics is more interesting than engaging with more abstract papers. Moreover, putting emphasis on updating the course syllabus with recent academic work makes me a better researcher, able to produce a valuable output for my university and the wider academic community. In sum, I am convinced that my passion about politics also raises the curiosity of my students about the subjects I teach. Moreover, this relation is iterative, because every time I leave a classroom of curious students, I become more passionate about teaching.