The Interdisciplinary Critical-Thinker Facilitator
(Teaching Philosophy Statement)
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I agree with Erickson, Peters and Strommer that one goal of teaching is to challenge and encourage students to explore complexities fully and then to take a stand. They believe that an important goal of learning is to get students to understand complexity not just as an academic pursuit but also to create a world view from which they can make commitments and choices (Erickson, Peters and Strommer, 2006). These values capture the essence of my own teaching philosophy rather well.

I’m an almost decade old political science-trained international relations professor of undergraduate and graduate education. Currently, my teaching is primarily conducted in an undergraduate liberal arts setting. This context of my teaching experience underscores two important themes that guide my philosophy: the role that interdisciplinary teaching and learning plays in achieving this, and my enthusiasm for fostering students’ critical thinking skills.

Because of the ‘multi-disciplinary’ status of international relations in its interrogation of the economy, polity, society and culture embedded in global context, the discipline requires an understanding of its increasing connectivity, diversity, scale and rapidity of change. Interdisciplinarity is an important lens for understanding and addressing the complexity of international relations in this respect (W.H. Newell, 2007). I ask my students to draw upon many disciplinary sources so that they can synthesize those sources using them to reveal meaning to this complex world. How else would I be able to impress upon my students that to understand the range of diversities among the Iranian people, for example, requires going beyond the simplicity of labeling its current state-regime as evil.

Interdisciplinarity thereby performs several functions for my teaching practice and is a core goal. I am a learning-centered, constructivist, developmentalist and sometimes even transformative teacher (Chickering and Gamson, 1991). This is to say I present the knowledge of the international relations content of my courses as contextual, relatively uncertain and tentative by encouraging my students to take positions, make choices, and make commitments so as to engage them ethically in foreign relations. With Iran, therefore, I encourage students to learn about the country’s history, its sociology, its culture, and its political-economy. This way, students will learn how not only to make informed judgments about the country themselves, but they will also develop the ability to evaluate the perspectives of others judging foreign countries like Iran and why and how those perspectives have been formulated. Indeed, it is important to me that my own students will learn to act ethically and responsibly towards relations among nations and peoples around the world.

Constructivist teaching of this sort has a purpose beyond merely providing students with a more comprehensive and balanced analysis of international relations. I also choose to teach this way in order to foster active-student learning principles that encourage my contacts and interactions with students so that I can enhance their motivation, their intellectual commitment and their personal development. My interdisciplinary themes and a constructivist approach not only guides my students toward important themes, events and issues in global affairs, but it also fulfills my second teaching philosophy focus which is facilitating students’ critical thinking.

At the heart of the critical thinking focus of my teaching philosophy is my belief that reading, writing and presentation constitute core cognitive skills that students of international relations must attain. To achieve these skills, I believe that students must achieve the ability to master social science texts- and
other representational vehicles- such as audio-visual media. Doing so provides students with an important skill for the international relations’ learning as students must constantly learn how to translate, apply, analyze, synthesize and evaluate the profound, deeply philosophical and contextually empirical concepts that make up the many readings, writing and presentation assignments that our courses provide for learning. The attention that my own courses place on acquiring knowledge from various mediums and disciplines requires that students acquire higher order critical thinking skills, including analysis, synthesis, integration, and evaluation in order to be able to decipher this knowledge.

The ‘reading-writing-presentation’ focus of my courses therefore is intended to facilitate student inquiry, learning, thinking, and communicating; it is also my goal to use this technique as a strategy to provide students with a series of tasks that enables them to find, evaluate, analyze and synthesize primary and secondary sources about international relations’ controversial topics and issues. Using this approach, students learn to integrate their own ideas with those of others and especially understand the relationships among language, knowledge, and power. An ultimate educational outcome for students enrolled in my courses then will be that they acquire the critical thinking skills needed to achieve the kind of interdisciplinary learning that is required to appreciate the complexity of international relations’ knowledge.

One way that I achieve these learning goals is by providing students with comprehensive and critical understanding of the contested relations among advanced industrial, hegemonic, Western nations and poor, underdeveloped, non-Western nations. For one learning module, a typical reading assignment was two books- Niall Ferguson’s *Empire* (a celebratory history of British nationalism, global conquest and positive contributions to the modern world) and Ashcroft et al’s *The Empire Writes Back* (a literary analysis of the history of the nationalism of formerly British-colonized countries that reject, adjust to, and address the consequences of British actions on their own national formation). From this module, students come to understand the wide range of perspectives surrounding the controversial though topical international relations debate about “Empire and Colonialism”. From these readings and other visual media, they are able to discern a more critical and nuanced appreciation for at least one of the reasons behind the different national policy behaviors exhibited by countries like the United Kingdom, India or Nigeria.

I implement the teaching principles described above- interdisciplinarity and critical thinking- by embarking upon a professorial role that is indicative of a facilitator of knowledge- a teacher who encourages students’ active agency in their own learning. While I do give lectures intended to communicate mastery of knowledge to students; such lectures are dynamic, performative and often enhanced with audio-visual media stimulating students and fostering their interaction. What’s more, in a given a course, I minimize the extent of lecturing to instead focus on classroom delivery techniques that diversify instruction and accommodate alternative earning styles among students. I have a strong preference for collaborative learning techniques and for using inquiry-based, simulated, case study group work. These techniques offer a useful way to encourage cooperative learning among students as well as a unique way to foster their higher order critical thinking (Bloom, 1984).

A decade of teaching in diverse intellectual settings, e.g. community adult education, public and private undergraduate/graduate, private Ivy-league and small liberal arts colleges has produced a teaching philosophy reflected in practice that has produced varied, though always successful outcomes. Student evaluations have credited me with having stimulated their learning. Others have marveled at ways in which my teaching has transformed their learning. My highest student ratings come from those who credit me with fostering their achievement of new thinking, their appreciation of complexity, and for getting them to realize the importance of considering alternative viewpoints in their examination of the world.
References

Bloom, B.S “The Search for Methods of Group Instruction as Effective as One-to-One Tutoring” Educational Leadership, 41, 4-17


