The Interdisciplinary Critical-Thinker Facilitator:
International Relations, Comparative Politics, and Africana Studies

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. The co-authors of Teaching First Year College Students (2006) 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 over-a-decade-old political science-trained, international relations, comparative politics, and more recently pan-Africana Studies professor of undergraduate and graduate collegiate education. During this span of time, my teaching has ranged from undergraduate liberal arts and social science learning environments to graduate advanced research and knowledge production training. The liberal arts public affairs and Africana studies disciplinary contexts in which I have taught have led me to the reliance on interdisciplinarity as a central theme and tool that guides my teaching philosophy.

Both the interdisciplinary and multi-disciplinary status of international relations in its interrogation of the economy, polity, society and culture embedded in global context, as well as the even more disciplinary integrative Africana studies interdiscipline with its ethnic and area studies socio-cultural, historical and humanities emphases of politics and economics, have nurtured for me an acute deployment of course themes and teaching styles that illustrate the importance of increasing local-national-regional-and global connectivity, diversity, scale and rapidity of change (W.H.Newell, 2007). Interdisciplinarity is an important lens for understanding and addressing the complexity of my core teaching subjects in this respect.

That is to say, much of my teaching involves encouraging students to draw upon and synthesize many disciplinary sources using them to reveal meaning about the complex world that we live. How else would I be able to impress upon my students that to understand the range of complex underlying variables embedded in my key disciplinary lens, ‘the political’, including Race, Culture, Class, Inequality and Social Justice? Interdisciplinarity thereby performs several functions for my teaching practice and is a core objective that guides my ability to foster successful learning.
My perspectives toward teaching fall into the paradigms of learning-centeredness, constructivism, developmentalism, and sometimes even transformative education (Chickering and Gamson, 1991). In this regard, I present the knowledge of my teaching content of my courses as contextual, relatively uncertain, and tentative. In doing so I encourage my students to take positions, make choices, and make commitments so as to engage them ethically in foreign relations. With complex comparative country-case teaching analysis in using cases that range from a discussion of racial inequality in the US to human rights in Zimbabwe, 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 considered ‘pariah’ and alternatively examine more critically why and how those perspectives have been formulated.

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 comparative studies and global interconnectivity. Teaching this way also fosters 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. The approach facilitates students’ critical thinking in reading, writing, and presentation to develop core cognitive skills that students need to attain for effective integrative learning.

To acquire these skills, I believe that students must achieve the ability to master social science and humanities texts, as well as other learning mediums, such as audio-visual media. Doing so provides both the undergraduate critical thinking learner and the graduate advanced research scholar with an important skill for translation, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation of the profound, deeply philosophical and contextually empirical concepts that make up the many readings, writing and presentation assignments that our courses provide for learning.

Interdisciplinary teaching and learning and advanced critical thinking are intertwined in this regard. The attention that my courses place on acquiring knowledge from various mediums and disciplines requires that students acquire higher order critical thinking skills in order to be able to decipher this knowledge. The ‘reading-writing-presentation’ focus of my courses 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 approach critically international relations and Africana studies’ array of controversial topics, themes and issues. I believe that in using this approach, students learn to integrate their own ideas with
those of others and especially understand the relationships among language, knowledge, and power.

Interdisciplinary teaching also guides the multidisciplinary reading and teaching material syllabus design approach used for my comparative studies, international relations and Africana studies courses. I enjoy selecting a range of readings and visual sources from several different disciplines for classroom usage. I am surprised at how I have been intellectually enriched by the range of *non-political science* books that I have assigned in history, anthropology, literature, economics, education, and sociology to name just a few of the disciplines that I draw from to integrate knowledge for students’ *trans-disciplinary* (theory-real-world community praxis) comparative and global policy-analysis and problem-solving.

Observe an illustration of the way that I attempt to implement interdisciplinary learning goals in my curriculum. In my comparative studies courses, for example, I present classroom modules which foster among students a 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 session assigned 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 narrative on 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 and global studies debate about “Empire and Colonialism” and its legacies. From these readings and other visual media to support textual reading (in this case, British director, Stephen Frears’ *Dirty Pretty Things*), students will discern a more critical and nuanced appreciation of inequality among North-South country comparisons as well as contemporary global relations.

Interdisciplinary critical thinking teaching informs my professorial identity in other intricate ways such as classroom teaching style. I see myself as a facilitator of knowledge - a teacher who encourages students’ active agency in their own learning. The work of Bell Hooks (bell hooks) presents an important guide for this kind of learning. Hook’s has stated that the success of a classroom community depends on our roles as higher education teachers to generate excitement, interest in one another, listening and hearing one another’s voices, in recognizing one another’s presence (hooks, 2003). Hooks has called this style of teaching, ‘teaching to transgress’ or engaged learning (hooks, 2003). When Hooks argues that teaching is a performatic act, she means that teaching can serve as a catalyst drawing out the unique elements of a classroom, and that teachers are meant to
serve as a catalyst that calls students to become more and more engaged as active participants in learning (hooks, 2003).

To achieve an engaged classroom, while I do give lectures intended to communicate mastery of knowledge to students who have little of it; such lectures are interactive, 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 privilege instead classroom delivery techniques that diversify instruction and accommodate alternative learning styles among students. As much as I can – particularly among undergraduate students- I employ collaborative learning techniques and inquiry-based, simulated, case study group work. These techniques offer a useful way to encourage cooperative learning among students that also fosters their higher order critical thinking (Bloom, 1984).

A decade of teaching in diverse academic settings, e.g. community adult education, public and private undergraduate pedagogy/graduate doctoral training, private Ivy-league graduate professional and small liberal arts colleges of freshmen, juniors and seniors 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 this increasingly complex globalized world.

References

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


