

Teaching philosophy. I believe that the best classes teach students a way of thinking as well as new facts. For undergraduate students, I see political science as a way to help students learn to: 1) evaluate information; 2) express coherent, persuasive opinions, both verbally and in writing, and 3) identify a puzzling question and sketch an approach to answering it. While I want students to know about Bretton Woods, Abu Ghraib and other events that shape our world, my hope is to nurture thoughtful consumers of information who hold well-grounded opinions and stand ready to investigate a tough question. For graduate students, political science classes should help refine these skills while also mapping the state of the field. My goal is to leave graduate students with a strong sense of seminal texts, the cutting edge of research and the open questions that remain.

I try to balance these goals in each class, depending on the level and number of students. In the seminar I taught at Mills College in 2009, my focus was on critical reading and clear communication. A key assignment for developing these skills was the think piece, a reading response written three times a semester and circulated before class. Although I handed out guidelines, deciding what to write was part of the assignment. This turned out to be harder for students than I expected, but there were advantages to such a challenging assignment. On Mondays, nearly all the week's designated writers came to my office to discuss their ideas and, often, solicit advice on rough drafts. Some of the best learning happened outside the classroom, as I watched students clarify their thoughts, absorb writing advice and build up confidence to take a leading role in seminar discussion.

These meetings also built trust with shy students, a huge help in creating a classroom with high standards that also feels safe enough for nearly everyone to participate. At Mills, I also found that writing up key points from student think pieces on the board at the start of class helped encourage quieter class members by pointing out their best ideas. After a rapport develops, it is possible to push students more, perhaps by cold calling a student who looks like she has something to say, or working with a student to stop saying each sentence as if it is a question.

Through my experiences at Berkeley and Mills, I have also come to believe that variety is key to a successful class. Not every student learns equally well through what I think of as the meat and potatoes of political science: reading, writing, lectures and discussion. Without giving up the emphasis on key texts, debate and writing, I work hard to open up other avenues of learning, like simulations, group work, take home exercises and visual media. At Mills, for example, the best moment in the semester for some students was the croquet game designed to illustrate the logic underlying Alexander Wendt's article "Anarchy is What You Make of It." Other students brought up podcasts—listed on the syllabus as supplemental material—in discussion, or most came to life during discussions of film clips. From the first class to the last, I continually remind myself that that students learn differently and the best classes are designed with multiple types of students in mind.

Lecture classes present the additional challenge of keeping students reading and engaged in the anonymity of a large classroom. In introductory courses, I plan to use required postings

on course blogs to help students start to wrestle with the moral and ethical questions that so frequently arise in conversations about politics. Especially at the undergraduate level, I tell students that it's fine to take contradictory positions on different days or even to change your mind. I see these flip-flops as a sign that students aren't taking shortcuts, but grappling with hard questions and coming to their own conclusions. Regardless of class size, my goal is to convey a sense that politics matter and political conversations, whether they take place online or in the classroom, are important.

Teaching experience. In 2001, I was an undergraduate teaching assistant for Wellesley's introduction to international relations course, taught by Kathy Moon. In that role, I set up appointments with students discuss ideas or help with writing. While in graduate school at UC Berkeley in 2006, I also served as a graduate student instructor for War!, an upper-level introduction to international security with Ron Hassner. I ran weekly hour and a half discussions for two sections of 25 students, attended course lectures, graded student work, and held weekly office hours. First one-on-one and then in front of a classroom, these positions gave me experience helping students see connections between authors, make intelligent critiques and come to their own conclusions.

My interest in teaching was such that I kept an eye out for teaching opportunities and, in spring 2009, I had a chance to teach Theories of International Relations at Mills College. There were fourteen students in the class and the class met once a week for two and a half hours. As instructor, I designed the syllabus, led discussions, held office hours and was responsible for grading. Teaching my own class was pivotal in trying out my teaching style and experiencing how much fun the give-and-take of a seminar can be. Now as a teacher rather than a student, the best moments are when the students (nearly) forget me to talk passionately among themselves.

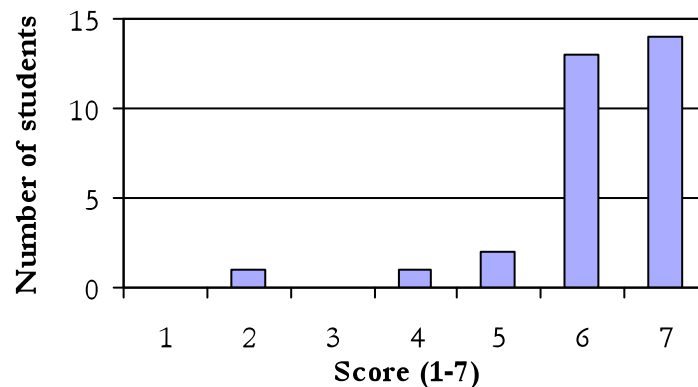
Although I have not had the opportunity to teach at Harvard, I have met regularly with several students as they developed proposals for an undergraduate thesis and saw the process through to completion. These advising opportunities gave me valuable insight onto how to guide students from an initial area of interest or a normative concern to a researchable question. I also saw how critical it is to help students develop short-term deadlines to break a big project into manageable chunks.

Directly following, please find a summary of my teaching evaluations at Berkeley and Mills College. At Mills, students rated the "the overall quality of instruction" 4.77/5.0. At Berkeley, the average response to the question "How does your graduate student instructor (GSI) compare with other Political Science GSIs you have had?" was 6.2/7.0.

War!, Graduate Student Instructor (GSI), University of California, Berkeley, Spring 2006 (Please find a PDF of the complete set of student comments (63 pp.) at <http://tinyurl.com/3c7wrnr>).

On a 1-7 scale (7 being the highest), students in PS 124A gave me an overall score of 6.2 as a GSI (see Figure 1 for the score distribution). Moreover, students' answers to open-ended evaluations show that they particularly enjoyed "freedom of thought and expression," including one student who felt "it was definitely the best discussion class I have ever had at Berkeley!"

Figure 1: Teaching Evaluations for PS 124A (War!), Spring 2006



As a Graduate Student Instructor, my goal was to facilitate respectful, productive discussions that simultaneously helped students make sense of the reading and develop their own opinions about international relations. At the end of the semester, students expressed appreciation for "incredibly thought-provoking" discussions that "were among the best I've experienced in college." My "passion for teaching political science" and "genuine interest in the subject" was evident to my students and they felt that I helped clarify authors' "complicated language."

Most important, students found the classroom to be a "good safe space" that "made you feel like you could say anything without being judged." As one student wrote, "I'm shy, so I appreciated how Rachel let everyone speak if they had something to say." Others agreed that I helped keep "discussion focused and cordial" with the right combination of "flexibility and patience." Overall, students found discussions "so fun to attend," especially because the group "never had any blank silences or quiet, forced conversation."

Theories of International Relations, Visiting Lecturer, Mills College, Spring 2009.

(A PDF of the complete set of student comments (14 pp.) is available at <http://tinyurl.com/3rcdy74>)

Table 1: Course Evaluations for Govt 132 (Theories of International Relations), Spring 2009

	Excellent (5)	V. Good (4)	Good (3)	Fair (2)	Poor (1)	Mean
Overall quality of instruction	11	1	1	0	0	4.77
Quality of lectures	12	1	1	0	0	4.79
Quality of class discussions	7	7	0	0	0	4.50
Explanations by instructor	13	1	0	0	0	4.79

(Note: 14 respondents)

As Table 1 indicates, students overwhelmingly enjoyed the course, citing the “amazing discussion and analysis,” “thought-provoking discussions” and “interdisciplinary perspectives.” As one student wrote at the end of the semester, “Rachel is an amazing professor—not only pushing students to learn course material, but to become improved learners, writers, readers and people! This course was amazing. Keep teaching!”

As at Berkeley, my overriding goal was to foster lively discussions that felt safe enough for everyone to participate. Students reported that my “natural, relatable and effective” style helped “encourage participation of every single class member” and “push students to further their own critiques of the reading, rather than pull it out of them.” One shy student wrote, “I found myself found myself participating more than in any other class. Rachel is a clear, motivated and inspiring instructor. I wish she was staying.”

I was especially pleased that students appreciated “the higher expectations we are held to in this class” and worked hard. As another student put it, “I generally enjoy the readings for the class, despite their difficulty. This is my heaviest course, but I am taking away a lot.”¹ One student described me as “a tough grader, but provided feedback that allowed for improvement, which she acknowledged if accomplished.”

By the end of the semester, students could describe concrete skills they had taken away from the course. As one student wrote, “This turned out to be one of my best classes at Mills. [The instructor] challenged us to think critically, examine sources and critique them, find hidden biases, viewpoints, etc.” Another student learned the most from one-on-one discussions in office hours, which she found “extremely helpful. I loved having conversations concerning my writing—those conversations had a great improvement on my writing.”

¹ The previous two quotes are drawn from mid-term evaluations.