

STATEMENT OF TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

Tess Wise

It was in my high school AP Calculus that I discovered that teaching is my favorite way to learn. Calculus was a hard class. During the first quarter I struggled and was satisfied with the B I received. I knew I needed to do better, though, because I wanted to go to MIT and an A in calculus was basically a prerequisite. Luckily for me, one of the younger students in the class, Olivia, adopted me as her homework buddy. I was no genius at calculus, but I was a little older and more experienced than Olivia and she felt comfortable asking me for help. We spent hours on the phone together going through the homework. Almost miraculously my grades started to improve. I found I had a new focus—when I read the textbook, I wasn't just reading for me. I needed to make sure I understood the concepts fully so I could explain them to Olivia. When I took notes in class, I tried to make them as clear as possible, knowing I'd need to refer to them when talking with Olivia. Thanks to Olivia, I got a 5 on the AP exam and ended up at MIT.

While working on my PhD at Harvard I had the opportunity to rediscover the power of learning through teaching as I was involved in teaching more than 15 different courses across the discipline of political science, from foreign policy to the American Presidency to quantitative methods. My most common role was as a teaching fellow, in which I would run two to three weekly discussion sections of about 18 students each. I also had the opportunity to teach my own graduate-level course in quantitative methods at Brandeis University. While some of my graduate student colleagues warned me that teaching would interfere with finishing my PhD as quickly as possible, for me, teaching was a benefit, not a cost. Through teaching I learned the discipline of political science the same way I learned calculus. Concepts I hadn't entirely grasped as a student, like what exactly a standard error was, became comfortable and familiar. Whole areas of the discipline that I'd never ventured into, such as the American Presidency, were opened up to me.

When I teach, I consider my students to be partners in learning because, as I learned from Olivia, teaching is not a one-way transfer of information. Teaching is learning together. Though the teacher and the student may be learning somewhat different things, the classroom works best when both are learning. For learning to occur, students (and teachers) must feel comfortable not knowing all the answers. Olivia turned to me for help with calculus because I was less intimidating than our rather stern calculus teacher. I was someone around whom she felt comfortable being honest about when she didn't understand. In every class I teach, I meet with all the students one-on-one to get to know them better and learn about who they are outside the classroom. By getting to know my students individually, the distance between teacher and student is reduced; I produce a classroom in which questions are as important as answers and students are not afraid to try out new ideas. As one student put it, "Tess made you feel good about participating in discussions. I was never concerned about giving an incorrect response to one of Tess's questions, because I knew that she would prefer that I give a wrong answer, than no answer at all. I never felt embarrassed about being wrong in front of Tess because I knew that

she really wanted me to learn, and according to her, it's better to be wrong and clear up confusion in a low-stakes environment than on a final exam."

To be clear, this does not mean that anything goes. I expect genuine effort from my students, and find that the easiest way to get that is to give my own genuine effort—one student described me as "the most enthusiastic TF [teaching fellow] that I've ever had." I have been fortunate to have my efforts recognized by students who have nominated me for awards and written thoughtful teaching reviews. In 2015 I received the Joseph R. Levenson Memorial Teaching Prize—the highest honor a Teaching Fellow can receive at Harvard for the class *Quantitative Research Methods*. For more information about my teaching I would encourage you to review the teaching section of my CV or [watch a video](#) of my discussion section from Political Psychology.

One technique that you will notice in the video of my teaching is the use of the blackboard. While many teachers have moved on to more technologically sophisticated methods of conveying information, I prefer to write on a blackboard for a few key reasons. First, it forces the teacher to physically engage with the material (improving my memory) and slows down the pace of information. In a world where students are bombarded by information both inside and outside the classroom, slowing down long enough to write gives them time to digest. Second, unlike a slide show in which the previous slide is lost after the next slide is selected, a blackboard presents information in context—students can see what has come before (and, of course, the first step of any blackboard-based class is to write an outline in the corner). Finally, the blackboard encourages students to engage in hand-written as opposed to typed notes, which help students remember the material better and is more likely to keep them off of their computers during class.

To conclude, I am an academic who is unabashedly enthusiastic about teaching. I genuinely enjoy getting to know my students and am always pleased when they invite me to their a cappella concerts, sporting events, or dorm dinners. I believe there is immense value in getting to know one another—a theme that connects my teaching philosophy to my research philosophy, in which using ethnographic techniques I am constantly talking to people from different contexts than my own. During this particular epoch in American politics, taking the time to have genuine, constructive dialogue that includes a lot of listening is more vital than ever.