

# STATEMENT OF TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

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## How I Teach

To understand how I teach, it's important first to appreciate why I teach and what I'm trying to get across to students. My primary goal as an educator is to develop and encourage critical thinking. To be sure, I hope my students will retain the substance of each course I teach, but on a life-long path of learning it's more important to develop independent thought – the ability to confront new ideas, to be able to assess them, and to come to a conclusion about their merits. This process is necessarily interactive, requiring students to engage with the professor and each other. Simply listening to a lecture and copying down notes may introduce students to new ideas, but it's not necessarily effective in helping students wrestle with the value and application of those ideas.

## Intellectual Rigor

I have sometimes equated collegiate education with consciousness raising. I don't mean this in political terms, for as the student evaluations make clear I try assiduously to keep my own ideology out of the classroom. Rather, an effective instructor challenges students to consider new ways of looking at their worlds. We ask students to compare and contrast their present understandings with the new material we present. Where do these beliefs and ideas coincide? Where do they diverge? We should neither tell students what to think nor leave them adrift in confusion. Instead, we must guide them in exploring these congruencies and disjunctures so that at the end of the semester students have a better sense of how to synthesize the new knowledge with their prior understandings. Indeed, this approach follows from two prongs of GMU's mission, in which the university pledges to help students:

- develop critical, analytical, and imaginative thinking and to make well-founded ethical decisions.
- address the complex issues facing them in society and to discover meaning in their own lives

I make my teaching philosophy abundantly clear to students, usually from the first class of the semester when I explain my approach as well as throughout the term as the opportunity arises. For example, as I once told a class by email:

*If you come out of college believing what you did coming in, that's fine so long as you challenged yourself by opening up those views to other opinions. But if you leave GMU having not aired out those belief, then not only have you missed the point of being here, but you also leave yourself vulnerable outside of college. A person who hasn't examined his own views cannot know where the weaknesses are in his supporting arguments.*

### Interactive Style

For this reason, there is little lecturing in my classes, at least not in the classic sense of a professor holding forth at a podium in front of a room full of notetakers. My teaching style is more like a dialogue. I may start a class session with an introductory lecture to make sure the students share a baseline of information, but I quickly move into interactive questioning, small group exercises, or role playing to give students a chance to test and apply the material. Otherwise, I fear that students will “learn” the material without actually understanding or appreciating it. For example, in a class about the Fourth Amendment, I could lecture about the exceptions to the warrant requirement when police search suspects, and students could scribble down these categories, but on a test their response would likely be a regurgitation of that list. I want them to understand *why* those exceptions exist, *how* they apply to actual scenarios, and to *evaluate* whether the exceptions make sense. So, I'll bring a group of volunteers to the front of the classroom and assign them roles in a possible police search. At each step of the role play I'll stop and ask the rest of the class to evaluate what the applicable law is, whether the Fourth Amendment allows the officers to search a suspect under the scenario or not and why. At the end of the exercise we'll then discuss whether the legal rule makes sense against the various interests at play in the balance between security and civil liberties.

A teaching style like this necessarily requires student preparation and participation. At the start of each semester I tell students that the class will be demanding, that they have to be willing to work hard to do well in the course. Undoubtedly, I convince some less-than-committed students to consider other courses, and over the years I've developed a reputation (I think) as a demanding professor. But demanding doesn't mean harsh, for my goal is not to scare students. What I aim to tell them is that we're all

part of a collective exercise over the coming semester and that we all have obligations to each other. They need to be prepared each day, to be willing to participate regularly in each other's education, and to show respect to one another. In return I offer an intellectual challenge – a challenge that nonetheless will be fun. There is always laughter in my classes. I move around a lot in class, building enthusiasm that I hope will translate to the students. I use the Web where possible to illustrate subjects, bring in guest speakers who can offer a useful perspective, and talk about stories from the news that apply to the ideas we're covering in class.

### Concern for Students

Foremost, I try to maintain a light and respectful approach with students. If I want them to open up their ideas and beliefs for self-inspection – if I'm asking them really to be intellectually vulnerable – then they have to trust me. That means trusting me to respect their ideas, to avoid embarrassing them when they speak up in class, and to care about what happens to them both in and outside of class. I have great empathy for the student who might be scared by the material but nonetheless is prepared to do her best, and I make sure to praise these students for their efforts. I'm also careful in the questions that I pose to students, ensuring that the most timid students get easier questions at the beginning of the semester to encourage their participation, and gradually raising the level of difficulty of the queries as students get used to joining the discussion.

I am the first to acknowledge that this approach is more easily accomplished in a seminar than a large lecture class, but I have successfully followed this pedagogy in an introductory class of 236 students. I refused to stand behind a lectern and instead paced the classroom making sure that I approached students when speaking to them. I posed questions to the class and managed to facilitate discussions between up to 20 students at a time. I also enticed students to come forward and participate in role playing exercises, sometimes because I allowed myself to play the fool in these scenarios and other times because I offered praise (and candy) throughout the semester to students who were willing to perform in these exercises for their classmates. I even called on students whose hands were not raised, an approach that surprised some students who had expected an otherwise anonymous, large lecture course. Again, I was always respectful and tried carefully not to embarrass participants, for I had a more important, underlying message to the class: this course is about critical thinking, which requires that all of us be actively engaged.

“PEAR”

This goal is all the more challenging given GMU’s particularly diverse group of students. In class I intentionally solicit a wide range of opinions – sometimes asking students to try arguing another’s position – and then gently guide students in evaluating the varying strengths of particular arguments. By now most of my students have likely memorized the acronym “PEAR,” a pedagogical tool I use to remind them to state a **P**osition, **E**xplain it, consider **A**lternatives, and **R**espond to opposing arguments. There are rarely “right” or “wrong” answers to the questions we raise in class; rather the issue is how well students can support their arguments. I also try to involve students in class discussion and encourage them to test out ideas they are still forming. As the syllabus tells them, “I expect students to treat their classmates – and their views – with appropriate respect, but by no means must you agree with one another. Indeed, one of the goals of a liberal arts education is to learn how to disagree without being disagreeable.”

In and Out of Class Interactions

I try to be inventive in class assignments by involving students as much as possible in their own education. In each of the classes I have taught at GMU, some portion of the semester is reserved for material the students produce on their own. In GOVT 301 I set up a moot court in which students researched a mock case, prepared a written “brief” on their own, and then presented their argument to a panel of student judges. In GOVT 424 and ADJ 377 I reserved the last two classes for issues the students researched. As part of a paper assignment in each course, students were asked to examine an important court case, legal issue, or academic study that related to the general topics of the class. Besides turning in their papers, students were also required to submit copies of the central source for their paper. Reviewing the papers later in the term, I selected topics for class discussion and used the students’ sources to create an additional reading packet. Among the issues we covered were drug testing of pregnant women, the constitutionality of the *Miranda* warnings, ineffective assistance of counsel in capital cases, and the Sam Sheppard case. Although this approach means more work for me, the students appreciate the chance to have input over the subjects we study.

I am a big believer that education does not stop when the day’s class is over. On several occasions I e-mail students to follow up an interesting issue from class or to explain a puzzling question from discussion. In several cases, these e-mails spur further student discussion over the Web, and I collect the responses and e-mail them back to the

class as a whole.

I also try to create summarizing memoranda or charts for class. When I find that students are having common difficulties with a subject I will draft a hand-out that explains the question in detail. Following some exams I also provide an analysis of certain answers and explain strategies for approaching similar questions. Of course, I also cover exam answers in class and set aside time to take students' questions.

## Exams

Just as I seek critical questioning in class, my exams test the same skills. I have only used a multiple choice exam for one class – the large introductory course described earlier – but even then I offered a paper option that gave motivated students a chance to meet with me in a small group outside of class to go over their ideas. If I'm trying to encourage critical thought and independent analysis, then requiring students to think on their feet during exams and present a coherent argument makes abundant sense. My exams are open-book, open-notes tests, but the directions remind students to:

Read the questions carefully, think them through, and answer only that which is asked. The point of this exam is not to regurgitate information but to show how you can analyze the material you have mastered. The best answers will attempt to describe the various sides of an issue and then argue for a particular viewpoint.

In several classes I give students a list of potential exam questions at the end of the last class, telling them that a smaller proportion will be on the final exam. Essentially, these questions serve as a comprehensive review and study guide for the class, ensuring that students who prepare for each of the questions will be on top of the course material. In turn, I've found that students' answers are better reasoned and argued. (I've also checked to make sure they're not copying their answers into the blue books ahead of time.)

As with class discussions, I try to put some unusual twists in the exams. Consider the following exam question from Law and Justice Around the World, which I taught in the Fall of 2000:

*It being December, you are visited one night by the ghost of future lives. The ghost tells you, "I've got good news, bad news, and good news for you."*

*The good news is that after your current life is over, you will be reincarnated.*

*The bad news is that you will be re-born on January 1, 2001 and you won't know in which country you will live.*

*But the good news is that you get to decide the justice system of the country in which you will grow up.*

*So, here's your big chance," the ghost tells you. "You get to decide whether you will live in a country that follows common law, civil law, socialist law, or Islamic law. Now tell me: if you don't know anything else about your future life – whether you will be rich or poor, educated or illiterate, male or female, etc. – which legal system will you choose and why?"*

*The ghost gives you until the end of this exam to make and justify your choice. Using examples from the material we have covered this term, explain which system you would prefer and why. As always, a good answer considers each of the options before explaining your ultimate choice.*

There are any number of answers to this question, none of them necessarily right or wrong. Rather, the point is to encourage students to reason through class material and present and explain their positions well. Exams should be an extension of the active learning process, not a passive end in themselves.