

RACHEL E. FINNELL

DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE – UNIVERSITY OF KANSAS – 1541 LILAC LANE, LAWRENCE KS – RACHELFINNELL@KU.EDU

Teaching Philosophy

Professors of political science are in a unique position to not only impart academic knowledge, but to also prepare students to become better citizens. As such, it is important that we teach students to know how to process and evaluate new information, form and communicate reasoned arguments, and see the value and perspective of other arguments, especially when those viewpoints are opposed to their own. Our goal is to enhance whatever interests they may have coming into our classroom and use it to impart on them the knowledge and skills that will be useful in their life. My classroom experiences at the University of Kansas and other institutions have taught me that this rests on three pillars. First, an expertise in the subject matter, reflected at various levels of abstraction. Second, an ability to convey knowledge in a relevant, personally meaningful, manner. And third, a personal openness and availability that nurtures students' academic development.

Facilitating class discussion is essential to engaging students. Through my experience teaching courses at multiple institutions of higher education over the last several years I have learned to steer classroom conversation to highlight the topic of the day. For each course, I utilize a combination of class discussion, writing on the board to connect key concepts, and PowerPoint helping me to develop a more interactive classroom. However, I also recognize in order to be the most effective teacher I must make continuous efforts to evaluate and improve my instruction. Comparative politics lends itself well to my instructional philosophy. My teaching proceeds on two connected tracks. First, students learn in depth how and why other countries' political systems function as they do, expanding their ability to function as global citizens. Second, they are exposed to the methods and standards of professional scholarship in a way that is meaningful and accessible.

Outside the classroom, students are inundated with instant information, ranging from television sound bites to up-to-the-minute internet news; they are bombarded with a cacophony of international and domestic news broadcasts. Giving students the intellectual tools with which to sift through this relatively unstructured morass of information is something I believe in strongly: to think their way toward interpretations that are intelligent and informed. In short, I am teaching students to be connoisseurs of information and better citizens. My aim is to educate students to how to grasp and interpret comparative politics in an increasingly interdependent world. What I want students to take away from my class are developed analytical tools and a critical appreciation of politics.

Additionally, I often employ in-class simulations to further students' understanding of course material. For example, at the end of each semester in my State and Local Government course and in the in-person Intro to Comparative Politics course my students engage in a state constitution building simulation. The purpose of this simulation is for students to put into practice the information they have learned over the course of the semester. As a homework assignment, students are charged with creating a party platform which highlights the institutional design and a few key public policy issues they wish the new state or country constitution to have. Furthermore, on simulation day, students must present their ideas, debate with each other, and ultimately come to a compromise on a new constitution. In this case, I have recognized that it is my job to provide the context and structure for such learning to take place, but having students engage in a simulation with their peers has proven to be an effective teaching method for how to process and evaluate new information, form and communicate arguments, and to see the value and perspective of others' arguments.