TEACHING PHILOSOPHY: Read, Think, Write… Repeat

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> *"You have changed my life." "You are the person who opened up my world to the wonders of international relations…Thank you for challenging me and for being so supportive through everything last year." "We're sitting here trying to figure out what to say to you, but we just can't find the words. We want you to know that you've changed our lives in so many ways."*

These are some of the comments I have received from former students which are included in this teaching portfolio. They are among the most gratifying words that those fortunate enough to be involved in our line of work could hope to hear. We who teach have many of the same sentiments toward the mentors whose dedication to teaching inspired our own efforts. As an idealistic graduate student teaching my first course and profoundly aware that I had found my calling, I frequently said that teaching was so gratifying that I would do it for free. More pragmatic now (one must pay the rent, after all), I remain enthusiastic about teaching and honored to be a member of the academy. It is a demanding profession that requires passion, enthusiasm, and dedication; in teaching, however, these characteristics are not directed toward self-betterment or individual success but are fundamentally directed toward the success and self-realization of others.

Before and since joining Adelphi, I had the opportunity to teach in a number of different academic environments, from public research institutions such as the University of South Carolina to a small, liberal arts college for women, Chatham College. In 2003, I had the opportunity to teach doctoral students during a summer course at Central European University in Budapest. In 2010, I will teach at the University of Macau on a Fulbright Scholar award. Each of these settings has been unique and required adjustments in teaching style and pedagogy. Throughout my academic career, I have consistently evaluated my own efforts and sought new ways to improve my teaching. Over the past several years and in these different contexts, I have developed a number of teaching goals, detailed below, that are central to my teaching philosophy. I am gratified that these efforts have been recognized. In August 2001, I was the recipient of a national teaching award by the American Political Science Association and Pi Sigma Alpha, the National Political Science Honor Society. I also received at Outstanding Faculty Award of Merit in May 2001 from my previous institution, Wilkes University. I was very honored to be awarded the Adelphi University Teaching Excellence Award for tenured faculty in 2005-2006, and recognized again by the American Political Science Association and Pi Sigma Alpha in 2006.

Teaching Objectives

1. To Foster Critical-Thinking Skills

Certainly, the entire liberal arts philosophy is dedicated to this end. A liberal arts education aims to instill an appreciation for ambiguity and complexity. It is interesting to

watch students make an important intellectual transition during their college years. They enter with the objective of learning the answers, which they often think should be black-and-white. By their senior year, students with a solid liberal arts education instinctively look for alternative explanations or perspectives to understand events and phenomena. They have learned that there are multiple ways of addressing issues. Acknowledging multiple perspectives and providing the tools for individual evaluation of competing claims is essential for developing critical thinking skills. A liberal arts education fundamentally broadens the perspectives of students and the awareness of this complexity constitutes intellectual growth.

In my own courses, particularly Theories and Practice of International Relations, I present competing worldviews and theories about international relations that are essentially different ways of understanding the world. Through class debates, analysis of op-ed articles and editorials on current issues in international relations, students grasp that different theories and worldviews underlie both explanations and prescriptions for action in international relations. At first, students are uncomfortable with the idea of competing worldview and theories. They want to know what is correct. With slow and patient work over the semester, students begin to see the strengths and weakness of each approach. After being exposed to these different "ways of looking at the world," students are better equipped to understand the values that prompt judgements and to evaluate different claims about international relations for themselves. It is wonderful to observe this process unfold.

2. To Create a Dynamic Classroom Environment

I prefer that students take an active approach to learning, and my courses reflect a mixture of discussion and lecture. While I encourage discussion and debate in all my courses, first-year students often lack the conceptual and substantive foundation, as well as the confidence, to make this work successfully. Therefore, in lower level courses I encourage participation in a structured way, such as using a class period devoted to debating particular issues on which students have read competing arguments. For instance, in Global Issues or in Theories and Practice of International Relations, we might debate issues such as the US position on the International Criminal Court or dealing with climate change.

Getting students involved and active is critical. In Global Issues II, students engage in a five-week simulation of international negotiations with students from around the world debating various global policy issues. Students conduct research and prepare position papers and engage in debate with their peers on the issues. They absorb more and are more engaged in such an environment. In the past I have used Security Council simulations in courses on the United Nations. The most successful of these efforts occurs in Model UN courses where students prepare and participate in 5 day on-site simulations at the UN itself. In these instances, I view my role as a facilitator rather than a fount of wisdom. When students become actively involved in hands-on experiences, the learning process is accelerated.

In upper level courses, students are often eager to participate, and so confidence or shyness is usually not an issue. At this level, I encourage participation to focus on developing analytical or evaluation skills through the use of teaching cases or structured research papers. For instance, in US Foreign Policy I ask students to prepare cases in which they apply various decision-making models to the Harvard or Pew Case Studies on foreign policy. Students engage in debate and defend their application of decision models in sophisticated and professional ways. The maturation of students as they not only learn but also apply concepts and theories in our field is a joy to behold.

3. To Encourage Interdisciplinary Learning

While it sometimes seems that technology is driving our world, and students often enter college with the instrumental aim of pursuing only that knowledge that will "get them a good job," the ability to think critically and to make connections is more important than ever. A well-integrated liberal arts education is the best preparation that students can have to meet the challenges of a knowledge-based society. "Thinking outside the box" is a phrase that is in decline because it is so associated with the technology boom (now bust), but it is an apt concept. In fact, the narrowness of the technology ideology contributed to the puncturing of the technology bubble. Interdisciplinary education allows students to make critical connections, and to overcome compartmentalization that stifles creativity and growth. Cross-disciplinary fertilization allows students to approach problems and issues from different perspectives, improves critical thinking, and develops communication skills. It is also refreshing for faculty to team-teach. Some of my most successful courses have been those in which I have team-taught with a faculty-member from another discipline or those in which I have taken an interdisciplinary approach.

Perhaps the best example of putting this principle into practice is illustrated in my interdisciplinary course "Globalization Through Film" that explored the concept from several viewpoints using both film and readings. We examined the development of a single global system from imperialism to decolonization to contemporary global North-South relations. The course used classic and foreign films such as *The Mission, Gandhi,* and *The Cup* in conjunction with important literary works such as Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness* and Orwell's *Shooting an* Elephant together with excerpts of economic studies such as Lenin's *Imperialism* and the contemporary work of Benjamin Barber and Thomas Friedman*,* to explore different dimensions—historic, economic, social, cultural, and political—of the globalization process. One of the greatest benefits of this interdisciplinary course is that students became attuned to the political and social messages, whether implicit or explicit, in a medium that they had previously valued simply for entertainment. That kind of connection, I believe, is best made through interdisciplinary teaching.

4. To Improve Writing Skills

My student-centered courses are writing-rich. I firmly believe that writing well is an ability that students must develop for success in any post-collegiate endeavor. Critical

thinking is aided by the physical act of writing, and clear, persuasive writing entails an investment in sustained thought. By requiring frequent writing assignments and offering frequent commentary on student efforts, I have been able to motivate students and create individualized, ongoing student-professor dialogue. Students at first complain about writing, but they do acknowledge that it helps them process ideas and information. While I must be sensitive to the varying obligations of Adelphi students, many of whom work long hours in order to attend university, this is an important part of the learning process and is a central component of my teaching.

5. To Challenge Students and Help Them Succeed

My courses are known to be challenging but rewarding. I understand that my reputation is that of being "tough but good." I am demanding, but as important, I am supportive. Students know that I care about their learning. I spend a significant amount of time reflecting upon and improving the substance and structure of my courses, my teaching style, and my ability to communicate. I take an "open door" approach to being accessible to students, and my experience thus far is that students have felt very free to drop by, to ask questions, to seek advice and to chat about world politics. For example, I had a long, on-going discussion with a student leading up to and after the Pipes lecture at Adelphi during spring 2002. I am still in contact with this student, who is a doctoral candidate at the University of Connecticut. It is gratifying when students come by to discuss an issue they found intriguing in class discussion, to tell me that they can now understand what they have been reading in the newspaper, and of course when a student completes an impressive, original senior thesis. The satisfaction one experiences when helping both talented and challenged students better master their understanding of the world around them is priceless.

In conclusion, I take teaching very seriously and I welcome the opportunity to teach at an institution that shares that commitment. When faculty are enthusiastic about learning, students absorb that passion. I have had the pleasure of developing a rapport with students and I am happy that I continue to hear from former students with the heartwarming sentiments that make teaching so rewarding.