

Teaching Philosophy | Carlos Algara

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Statement of Teaching Philosophy

“For the mind does not require filling like a bottle, but rather, like wood, it only requires kindling to create in it an impulse to think independently and an ardent desire for the truth.” -Plutarch, De Auditu

Plutarch’s eternal acumen in the essay *De Auditu* articulates my conceptual approach to teaching. In the essay *De Auditu (On Listening to Lectures)*, Plutarch argues that the key to “an ardent desire for truth” is not a filled mind but rather an independent mind with the skills needed to foster intellectual curiosity and a passion for truth. As a social scientist, I have the responsibility to teach students the ability to think skeptically about the social world around them and to develop competence in understanding and critiquing theoretical explanations explaining social phenomena. I achieve this using a collaborative and multi-method approach to foster dynamic active learning in a diverse classroom setting. Through the use of methods stressing data literacy and qualitative narratives, this collaborative approach not only helps with the endeavor of teaching a diverse student population how to think like social scientists, it also makes me a stronger teacher scholar. I also strongly believe that my experience on Capitol Hill as an *APSA Congressional Fellow* will strongly provide the essential narratives to connect real-world political examples about the legislative process and democratic representation to my students’ social scientific understanding of the political world.

I begin every course I teach by setting the stage for robust intellectual inquiry and clear expectations of learning outcomes. Doing so requires close attention to two key components. First, I must design a course that answers the critical “*so what*” question. Second, I must set the parameters of course discussion that fosters active learning and presents opportunities for informal evaluation. With respect to the first component, I begin each class and course component by asking students to articulate the implications of the course material to our understanding of political processes in the real world. For example, I ask students to discuss the potential implications of information costs to the quality of legislative representation in the United States. Highlighting the finding that citizens with higher education and incomes are more likely to participate in the political process, I ask students to discuss the implications of these findings with respect to legislative responsiveness to constituent policy preferences. In another example, I will lean on my qualitative insights as an *APSA Congressional Fellow* to ask students why legislators may be cross-pressured between contributing to their party’s effort to provide for a strong collective electoral brand or providing district-centered representation. In this discussion I hope to invoke the dilemma of representation faced by cross-pressured legislators, such as U.S. Sen Jon Tester (D-MT), and lean on qualitative insights into how legislators delicately navigate representation when district-centered and partisan-centered representation may suggest diverging roll-call representation. The hope of these exercises is to set up a Socratic dialogue, creating an active learning environment with students assessing social scientific arguments and their broader implications to the political world outside the classroom.

In my own experience as a first generation college graduate teaching at a majority-minority serving institution, such as the University of California, Davis and University of Texas, El Paso, I am cognizant of the diversity that exists in my classroom. In undergraduate classes, many will be first-generation college students or speak English as a second language. This rich diversity guides the development of my teaching pedagogy and involvement in various teaching workshops and courses on campus. One critical component of my pedagogy, learned through this involvement, is creating an inclusive space to facilitate active learning and scholarly exchange. Recognizing the potential that classroom discussion may be a pressuring space, I incorporate online survey questions asking all students to share their thoughts in an anonymous platform. This student feedback, presented in real-time before the class, allows for the discussion

of ideas from students that may be predisposed to not share before the entire class in a standard discussion format. I employ these interactive exercises at various points in lecture, to not only share the diverse opinions that exists in the class, but also to assess the level of active learning and effectiveness of material presentation.

Through engaging in active learning, I strive to empower students with the skills needed to think critically about social processes in the political world and to communicate effectively. While skepticism comes naturally to many students, many barriers can prevent the cultivation of effective communication, especially in a diverse classroom. To assist students in developing effective communication skills, I employ multiple assessment instruments designed to encourage social scientific inquiry. In substantive courses, one such exercise is to evaluate a theoretical model explaining a form of political behavior discussed in the course.¹ This exercise helps foster the skills of effective communication by priming students to think through an argument and evaluate the argument in light of evidence or alternative arguments. In a research methods course, this exercise may involve asking students to evaluate the limitations of observational studies in making causal claims of a theoretical explanation. These exercises require that students not only communicate the material effectively but also think independently and develop clear argumentation. Many of these students relish these opportunities and, in assessment of these instruments, students state that this provides an outlet for creative thinking in a social scientific framework.

I view the task of a social scientist as one encompassing the teacher scholar model. I believe that scholarship is an indispensable component of active teaching and helping instill an ardent desire for truth. Cultivating an active research agenda helps convey the relevance of the discipline to the classroom and not only exposes students to salient debates, but also provides them with an opportunity to engage in these debates. This research agenda also fills my lesson plans with empirical evidence to convey thematic concepts. For example, my work on the changing nature of Senate elections provides an example for the growing salience of the partisan electoral model, with clear implications for partisan polarization and legislative policymaking. Incorporation of my empirical work provides students with exposure to various forms of data visualizations, and their insights on these research examples strengthens my research program.

I hope to extend this component of the teacher scholar model by focusing on developing data literacy as a key learning outcome in my curriculum. My methodological training guides my passion for data literacy and desire to give students the tools needed to critical evaluate empirical claims. In my experience as a methods lab instructor, I am attentive to the challenges of teaching applied data visualization and evaluation methods. I view this challenging task as an opportunity to thoughtfully teach students applied open-source coding that can prepare them for analytical opportunities beyond campus, such as positions in industry or the pursuit of a graduate degree. This emphasis on data literacy can facilitate the strengthening of empirical analytical skills essential for students to think like independent researchers in any scientific field. In my assessment, this exposure to data literacy will enrich and strengthen the education of every student on campus.

In my view, being an effective professor requires instilling Plutarch's assertion of creating "an impulse to think independently" for an "ardent desire for truth." My pedagogy as a social scientist is to provide students with the ability to think critically about the social world and to communicate effectively on the basis of sound argumentation. I hope to improve this pedagogy in the future by collaborating with students outside of the seminar context. I have a strong desire to engage with students on independent research projects and, in particular, to instill the passion for data-based inquiry. While I hope to make data visualization an explicit learning outcome for each of my courses, I hope to mentor students in independent research projects aimed at investigating interesting and relevant political phenomena we observe in the "real-world." I believe that collaborating with students at every step of social scientific inquiry will strengthen my own research and teaching agendas.

¹I present this exercise of describing and evaluating a theoretical model of political behavior in the sample evaluation materials of this teaching portfolio upon request.