

Teaching Statement

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Teaching Philosophy

My aim for students is that they become engaged thinkers who are willing to ask questions, seek out knowledge, and participate in conversation with those around them — even when those viewpoints differ from their own. Further, I hope to instill an excitement for these challenges, as they learn and grow as active, educated participants in the political process. To do this, I organize my classroom around three principles: (1) intellectual openness, (2) inclusivity, and (3) excitement for challenges.

To encourage intellectual openness, I hold initial discussions about the importance of understanding that everyone comes to the classroom with different backgrounds — demographically, experientially, *and* in terms of familiarity with the subject. In my classrooms, this has set a tone that encourages creativity and a willingness to ask questions, while disarming any need to posture or appear to be an expert. It is okay to be wrong; it is okay to try out new ideas; it is okay to say something that you are still working through in your own mind. Indeed, it is the only way to grow and learn.

Students have consistently responded well to this comfortable learning environment. In their evaluation of a course on political methodology, one student wrote: “[Leah] explains complicated things in a way that make them seem less intimidating and is very approachable. She is always willing to help and makes you feel confident asking questions...” After a course on intersectionality, a student commented: “I loved our recitations and felt safe to express my views...” In order to demystify concepts central to Political Science, I have found that it is absolutely crucial to foster an environment free of defensiveness and full of openness.

The second principle of my classroom is inclusivity. Students approach Political Science for various reasons and, as such, hail from different backgrounds and experiences, with varying levels of excitement for the subject. Engaging all students with the material is central to the learning environment I seek to foster. In order to do so, I utilize a combination of individual, small group, and large group work.

In recitations for *Intersectionality: Race, Gender, Sexuality, and Social Justice*, students would often think/pair/share in response to a discussion question. This activity requires students to first write down their own response to the question, talk about their answer with a partner, and finally share in a full class discussion. I use the moments of paired discussions to engage the quieter voices of the room. To do so, I walk around the classroom, listen in, and contribute to the groups. I then remark that a (quieter) student made a particularly interesting point and ask if we could open the whole class discussion with that point. Students usually love this and feel somewhat honored — it always feels good to hear that you made an insightful point! — and when the full class discussion opens, voices that

tend toward silence emerge. Over the semester, these voices became less and less quiet, as they became engaged and confident with the material.

Third, in order for students to prepare for and meet challenges, they must have the desire and excitement to do so. To this end, I develop an interactive learning environment organized around answering questions. When I teach *Quantitative Methods in Political Science*, students complete a semester-long group project that answers a question they find interesting with the analytical and programming tools they acquire throughout the semester. Projects have ranged from investigations into the effect of incompatibilities on armed conflict to racial disparities in evictions. Often, students find these projects rewarding and exciting, as their own curiosity guides the work. In several cases, students asked me to advise them on future projects — whether it was for their schoolwork or simply a project they had devised out of their own interest. Long after I was their instructor, former students still come to me to brainstorm new ideas or troubleshoot R code related to their own, independently developed projects that they trace back to the learning that occurred in our class. Mentoring students in this capacity is one of the most rewarding aspects of my work.

An openness to new information, commitment to inclusivity, and an excitement for challenge is something that I strive to instill in my students — as it is exactly what motivates my own love for teaching. I look forward to the growth and learning that accompanies new students, new courses, and new tests, as I continually develop alongside my students.

Commitment to Diversity

One of my core teaching principles is inclusivity. Often, students come to the classroom without a language for talking about race, identity, and diversity. As an instructor, I strive to break down this barrier and open the door to conversations that engage important, sensitive issues with an understandable language that incorporates all students' experiences. To establish such a classroom environment, I seek to: (1) explicitly address diversity, (2) facilitate tough conversations with compassion, and (3) mentor students.

In every course I teach, I start with a confidential survey in which students can communicate any information with me that they feel is necessary to ensure their comfort and safety in the classroom. This helps me get a sense of the students' backgrounds, demographics, and level of comfort with the subject. One student remembered this during their end of the year evaluation, writing: "Leah has been the only instructor I have ever had at UNC to ask her students what their preferred pronouns were on the first day of class. She was able to create and maintain an environment where we felt comfortable being ourselves."

Further, it is important to me that students feel comfortable talking about difference in the classroom — but this comfort should not lead to shying away from difficult conversations. Even in quantitative courses, I incorporate diversity in lessons that require students to replicate the data analysis from studies on topics like racial discrimination in hiring or reducing negative transgender bias. In courses on race and identity, I facilitate conversation to ensure that all students are able to voice their perspective *and* listen to others who may have a perspective that differ from their own. One student writes, "...[Leah] made

sure everyone had a chance to talk, which enabled us to hear from different perspectives.” Another says, “As a whole, I felt that my personal beliefs were challenged in a healthy capacity...”

Finally, I strive to mentor students to provide support as they work toward their academic, professional, and personal goals. To this end, I encourage students to visit me during office hours even if it is just to chat. Many students take me up on this and I have written countless letters of recommendation and advised several projects outside the scope of the course. A student highlighted this, noting: “[Leah] was always willing to meet with me and discuss important issues. She is awesome and gets students to think about political science and social justice in a different way.”

A commitment to diversity requires facilitating the inclusion of all students, as well as being open to growth and development. I center this commitment in my classroom as I understand it now — and I plan to continue doing so as I learn and develop as an instructor.

Teaching Experience and Interests

At the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, I taught two semesters of the undergraduate course on political methodology titled, *Quantitative Methods in Political Science*. I was also the Teaching Assistant (leading the weekly lab section) for the graduate-level *Probability and Statistics* course for first-year Ph.D. students. In both settings, I designed and implemented original syllabi intended to introduce students to statistics and programming software (R) to answer social science questions.

As a Teaching Assistant, I led three weekly discussion sections for *Introduction to American Politics*. Then, I twice served as a TA for a course that was cross-listed (and jointly taught) with the English, American Studies, and Women’s Studies departments, titled *Intersectionality: Race, Gender, Sexuality, and Social Justice* — leading two weekly discussion sections. Leading these interdisciplinary discussions required moderating student explorations into sensitive and, at times, difficult topics. Creating an open environment so that all students from diverse backgrounds felt safe expressing their opinions and relaying their personal experiences was critical.

Beyond these assignments, I have sought out opportunities to work with students in multiple research capacities. I was the Graduate Research Assistant for *Political Psychology*, working with students in small group environments to help them with quantitative methods and statistical programming. For three years, I worked with and oversaw undergraduates on a large-scale data collection and analysis project on racial disparities in policing. Finally, I was a Statistical Consultant at the library help desk, working with students from a variety of fields on their research designs and analyses.

In the future, I hope to continue teaching quantitative methods, race, identity, intersectionality, and American politics. I am also prepared to expand the scope of my instruction to courses like political communication, framing, public opinion, and public policy.