

## TEACHING STATEMENT

Erin K. Little

### Teaching Interests

I am prepared to teach undergraduate courses introducing international relations, comparative politics, and global issues. I also have materials prepared for upper-level undergraduate courses concerning international conflict, human security, and international law, with a particular interest in international humanitarian law.

### Teaching Philosophy

My goal every time I enter the classroom is to find new ways to foster intellectual curiosity alongside my students, so that their learning continues beyond the scope of my lessons. To this end, I take a principle-based approach to learning and instruction that strengthens active learning pedagogies. Briefly, I prioritize three primary principles: 1) elevating an academic and practical understanding of social science; 2) focusing on depth before complexity; and 3) exemplifying collaborative learning. For any techniques I incorporate in the classroom, from simulations to visual aids during lecture, I rely on these principles to focus the goal toward intellectual curiosity.

#### *Elevating our Understanding*

Learning inherently requires us to extend our understanding of the world beyond the ‘known’ and ‘comfortable.’ The classroom provides a unique opportunity for students to encounter a diverse set of ideologies and identities that they may not encounter in their normal daily tasks and perhaps may not be likely to encounter again after they move beyond a university environment. As an instructor I seek to build upon the myriad backgrounds of my students to stretch their comfort zone and introduce new ideas and counterfactuals that encourage them to think critically about the ways in which we attempt to order international society. To this end, I incorporate academic literature into my lectures, both to socialize an analytical standard of research and to structure new subject matter. Often, this step alone expands the outlook of my students, but I find that some form of personal engagement with the material helps students to remember and internalize what they have learned.

For example, in my introductory international relations course, we survey academic theories concerning the changing character of war, such as John Herz’s assertions that air warfare and later nuclear capabilities penetrated the “hard shell” of a state’s defense. Students experience this principle more personally during a statecraft-style simulation later in the semester as well as a project that requires them to select one autobiography from a predetermined list and connect the author’s experiences to the course material.

I likewise use narratives and global voices to expand upon the academic literature in my lectures. For example, in exploring post-colonial theory, I reference the work of Ngugi wa Thiong’o, a Kenyan author who first writes in his native language before translating his work to English in order to preserve the voice of his people. Attaching key ideas to individuals with a face and story personalizes the course material and makes subjects across diverse contexts more relevant to the students, while also legitimizing often-marginalized voices.

As an honors option for my classes, I work individually with students to develop a research project that takes this principle a step further. After learning the material and doing some activity or

assignment that engages personally with the material, I ask honors-option students to teach some element of the material in their own words. They create something new to them, applying introductory research design and methods to create something suitable for presentation in an undergraduate colloquium. This inherently elevates their understanding beyond the scope of the course itself.

### *Depth before Complexity*

In our post-modern technological environment, where we experience a barrage of global information daily, I value providing a space in the classroom to process and more effectively communicate responses to our observations. We can simplify what appears obscure and complex without sacrificing the depth necessary to gain a meaningful understanding of course material.

In my international law class, for example, we explore the question of Taiwan's statehood. An approach emphasizing complexity might enumerate all the historical details recounting Taiwan's relationship with mainland China, the United States, and the UN. This can be overwhelming, and ultimately make students an expert on Taiwan's history, but may lack the depth to connect this history to a pattern of behavior concerning statehood, identity, and state sovereignty in the international system. Instead, I asked my students to each take a position in a debate on Taiwan's statehood, one side engaging Taiwan's view and the other engaging mainland China's view.

Preparing for the activity did introduce complex elements of Taiwan and mainland China's bilateral history. However, by beginning the debate on a more focused question - "Is Taiwan an independent state under international law?" - the students explored practical applications of the Montevideo Convention and implications of the issue on questions of state sovereignty, citizenship, and national identity. We began with accessibility and simplicity. The answer seems obvious if we consider the criteria of the Montevideo Convention, since Taiwan arguably meets all four criteria. Yet, Taiwan's lack of international recognition intrinsically invites deeper questions that became the dominant subject of our class discussions. This framework provided a strong foundation to then incorporate increasing levels of complexity.

### *Collaborative Learning*

By engaging so thoroughly in a dynamic, social science, we acknowledge that our learning grows and adapts as observed phenomena beckon new research questions. This exists for instructors and researchers, as well as students. So I value exemplifying the learning process in the classroom. Active learning techniques welcome collaboration among students. These techniques normalize a space for students to share their voice and to learn from others without being punished for imperfect knowledge or wisdom. As an instructor, I seek to give back as much engagement in these activities as students are willing to share, becoming part of the collaborative learning process.

For example, for my introductory comparative politics class, I ask student groups to design a state following guided questions on a worksheet to specify a series of nuanced criteria. I give them full freedom to design not only their state political and economic structures, but also their territory, climate, typography, and political history. I match their work and engagement by taking their designs and creating a bespoke regional map that matches their state descriptions. We then use these states in a simulation, in which the crises to overcome match the environment that they have created. States designed with unstable or inconsistent face domestic crises at home that follow the theories we discuss in class. Likewise, interstate relations must overcome both geography and political alignment. The result is a dynamic and collaborative learning activity that allows me to facilitate, rather than control, the course of my students' intellectual curiosity.