

DR. RICHARD L. WHITEHEAD

Teaching Philosophy

My teaching style is centered on my teaching objective: to empower students to be socially conscious and informed participants in political life. While I began my teaching career by using a traditional lecturing style, additional practice helped me to hone my style by placing the student at the center of the learning process and teacher as the learning facilitator. When visiting one of my classes, you will likely find lectures to be supplemented with discussion and debates. You might even be lucky enough to visit on a day when students are discussing and debating their essay topics or presenting their course essays.

In my view, students most effectively learn when they practice combining cognition with experience. With this view in mind, my course designs focus on building daily learning cycles that move from abstraction to experience and reflect experience back to abstraction. These learning cycles can be facilitated through inter-peer dialogue and experiential learning. For example, in larger classes I might present students with a concept, like “free and fair elections”, and a current event, like the recent elections in Botswana. Afterwards, students are divided into small ten-minute discussion groups and then asked to present to the class a summary of how their discussion amalgamated the concept with the event. When teaching smaller classes, I arrange seats in a circle or l-shape, with the goal of constructing an environment conducive to mutually respectful class-wide dialogue and student centeredness. In one case, I implemented a weeklong United Nations Security Council simulation, held as part of a writing project for an international relations course I taught. Here, students were divided into pairs, each pair representing a Security Council member tasked with coming to a resolution over the Darfur crisis.

Experience also taught me that students take an interest in course topics when presentations and course readings are intellectually stimulating and perceived to be relevant to daily life. Therefore, course readings from journals, newspapers and textbooks are selected on the basis of their ability to synthesize theoretical concepts with real-world examples. For example, when I taught the politics of race, I spent an extensive amount of time constructing a multimedia course packet, including a reader and a disk with selected audio and video clips of famous speeches and civil rights footage. In all my courses, class topics were supplemented by relevant news articles, emailed to each student before class.

As a supplement to readings, I am always ready to provide intelligent guidance by being up-to-date in the research relevant to the subjects I teach. When Smart Room technology is available, I fortify presentations with Power Point slides and video and audio clips. In future teachings, I would like to explore the possibility of reaching students through venues they are most comfortable with by using social networking sites as platforms for posting news articles and comments.

My principle professional goal as an educator is to feel good about the quality of work I perform. Perhaps nothing measures that quality better than those times when students tell me “I had a heated debate last night with a friend over what was said in class yesterday about nuclear deterrence,” or “our class discussion on democracy made me think differently about what’s going on in Nigeria.” Feedback like this is why I love being an educator and why I give so much of myself to creating course milieus conducive to student-centered learning and student empowerment.