Philosophy of Teaching Statement

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I first started teaching university students in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. There I learned a slogan for teachers: “Asah asih asuh,” which means “teach, love, and care for.” I found the “love” and “care” parts relatively easy since students are interesting, smart, and creative. I genuinely enjoy teacher-student relations and the opportunity for mutual learning. The “teach” part, however, can be a challenge. It takes time, energy, and usually trial and error to determine best practices for how and what to teach as well as methods of assessment. While the details of my teaching philosophy evolve each year, the core of it is based on one goal.

As a teacher, my primary goal is to help students improve their critical thinking skills. “Critical thinking” is about “how to think” rather than “what to think.” For the discipline of political science, critical thinking refers to the careful understanding and use of theory, evidence, judgment, and application. Political science students with good critical thinking skills are able to organize and articulate ideas concisely and clearly, use evidence correctly and impartially, distinguish between valid and invalid conclusions, question their own and others’ views and assumptions, recognize bias, identify similarities or connections that are not easily apparent, and problem-solve in a variety of contexts.

The heart of critical thinking lies in asking questions. In the beginning of my courses, students typically want to hear the “one right answer,” the one that they expect should be provided on an upcoming examination. They eventually learn that there are multiple perspectives and not necessarily one clear-cut answer. They also learn that there is a lot of information available and many different ways to acquire, understand, and evaluate that information. By asking questions and thoroughly studying what is said, how it is said, who said what and when, and most importantly why, students gain a deeper understanding of and approach to politics and the world around them.

My first task in achieving my goal of improving critical thinking skills is to create a positive environment in which to learn. Early on, I foster respect for teacher-student and student-student interactions. On the first day of class, I give students a questionnaire with questions such as “Why are you taking this course?”, “What concerns do you have about the course?”, and “What should the instructor know about you as a learner?” Students’ responses guide my teaching efforts. For instance, I do my best to respect diverse learning styles (e.g., need for visual aides, combining written and oral lessons, and grounding theory in contemporary cases). A common concern students write about is not having adequate formal preparation. This is a chance for me as an instructor to be honest about who I am and what I know and do not know. I share my knowledge and expertise whenever possible, but I am aware of potential limitations. I tell my students that this is where partnership enters into the picture. Students come from a range of backgrounds and have their own skill sets, which may be shared with others. As partners, we can work together to supplement or change what we know and how we know about the world around us. While admittedly there is a threshold to the collaborative dynamic because as the teacher I am ultimately in control of such matters as the syllabus, examinations, and grading, I still feel that students have something to offer and that they can be good teachers, too. This is further supported by classroom dialogue guidelines. I offer a set of eight rules that incorporate respect, confidentiality, trust, and security. Students work together on revising the rules and compromise on the final version. During the semester, it is efficient and effective to refer to the dialogue guidelines whenever there is a conflict or concern. The guidelines permit students to openly ask and answer questions and give or defend their opinions, which allow for critical thinking skills to develop without too much fear and negativity.
My second task in achieving my goal of improving critical thinking skills is to encourage a framework in which to think about and approach certain political science material. I have a two-pronged method: (1) help students with the “basics,” and (2) repeat essential questions. For the former, I try to ensure that students have a good foundation from which to work. This can involve geography quizzes, reviewing historical timelines, defining and debating important concepts, and exploring the ins and outs of political processes and government systems. The latter involves asking the same six questions for different scenarios: (1) What is the “puzzle?” (2) What do we think is happening versus what do we know is happening? (3) Who are the actors? (4) What are their interests? (5) How do they get their interests?, and (6) What are the consequences of them obtaining their interests? Embedded in these questions is the question of “Why?” These questions can be used for almost any political science topic because they broadly address theory, evidence, judgment, and application, but also allow for in-depth examination of particular political cases. This is especially useful in comparative politics where there is a combination of researching specific political phenomena and attempts to connect patterns over time, locale, culture, etc.

Related to knowing the basics and asking the same set of questions is assisting students in their evaluation of sources. I expose students to a range of political science research methods so that they can determine for themselves what is most persuasive, credible, and accurate. We have discussions about the content, form, and impact of different print and electronic sources, political biases, funding, time periods, institutions, and demographic backgrounds as well. One popular discussion topic is who watches which political news programs and why, which involves fascinating and sometimes heated arguments about Fox News, CNN, Al Jazeera, and the BBC.

My third task in achieving my goal of improving critical thinking skills is to give feedback to students to let them know that they are indeed using and developing these skills. This feedback process includes personal communication and individual and group assessments. Informally, I regularly meet with students on a one-on-one basis to gauge what they know and where they need assistance. Where possible, I provide students with a typed or verbal mid-term feedback report along with individual feedback sheets for papers and projects so that students have a sense of their strengths and areas for improvement. Formally, students take in-class examinations, have take-home papers, submit mini-homework assignments, and give presentations. Formats may vary, but the assessments all aim to involve critical thinking. This method gives students the chance to show what they have learned and practice applying their critical thinking skills. Varied and repeated practice sharpens and develops such skills. If I find that students do not perform as well as they or I had hoped, then I try to review the material and lessons with them again. I may find that I have to adapt my teaching style and assessments, too, in case the expectations and measures were not a good fit. Not only do I give students assessments, but they in turn consider my work as their instructor. I then try to incorporate their advice and preferences in the same course if there is time and later in my next courses.

For me, the teaching part of “Asah asih asuh” is about imparting respect, knowledge, inquiry, and feedback in a way that cultivates critical thinking skills. I hope that such skills will serve my students well in their present and future pursuits and passions as it has in my own career and community service. In this way, to “teach” is what really demonstrates “love” and “care” for the profession and students.