

Natasha A. Bennett- Teaching philosophy

Motivation

As academics, some of the most profound impacts that we can have on the world come through our role as educators. While our research can undoubtedly have an effect, it is our teaching that has a broader audience. This fact became clear to me while holding office hours for my human rights class. One student writing his research paper on Guantanamo Bay asked me, "Can I use my personal experience?" I laughed nervously and asked what possible experience he could have. It turns out that he had been a guard at Guantanamo Bay. This young man, not much younger than myself, was now sitting in the front row of my class researching how practices at Guantanamo Bay violates the Geneva Conventions.

Fostering Empowerment and Accountability

Higher education provides critical opportunities for students to cultivate their sense of self, their passions, and develop the skills to be informed agents in a democratic society. For John Dewey, democracy is not merely a form of government but a personal commitment, a way of life that relies on social interaction and continued educational growth. My teaching philosophy ultimately revolves around the idea that democratic politics are practiced and reinforced in the classroom. Like democratic societies, the most productive classes rely on independent thinking, collaboration, and a sense that empowered individuals have a responsibility to hold themselves and their educators/institutions accountable. Below, I detail the four main strategies that I use to foster a sense of empowerment and accountability among my students in a global world.

1. Global Perspective- "Local is Global"

Bringing a global perspective into my classroom translates to introducing students to the notion that they are part of the global imaginary, that their local environments are not isolated. This perspective emphasizes that *global* does not merely mean *international*; it means that they are part of global phenomena and that global problems require global solutions. To promote this sense of global citizenship, I expose my students to real-world events to help them apply academic theories to their immediate (and not-so immediate) surroundings. In the classroom, I like to bring in news articles and events that we analyze in class in conjunction with the assigned scholarly work, accomplishing two goals. First, it gives students a chance to practice reading news articles with an analytical eye, while giving providing them with the context necessary to use as an example. For example, when discussing the definition of state and the importance of state sovereignty, we analyzed a New York Times article about Sweden's declaration to legitimate the Palestinian state. Through this example, groups were able to apply definitions, and debate the merits of legitimacy and sovereignty. In other instances, I design essay prompts to respond to in-depth pieces about contemporary events. These types of lessons widen world awareness and foster the skills for critical thinking and reasoning.

2. Confidence and Concentration- *"Even the professionals do not know everything, and things are rarely entirely correct or incorrect."*

Across my courses, I have found that more and more students appear to struggle with maintaining their concentration as distractions both inside and outside the classroom demand more of their attention. In turn, these distractions can affect students' self-confidence as they can limit profound engagement

with the material. In my classroom, I strive to identify ways to improve students' concentration and self-esteem to ensure that life's distractions are not detrimental to their education. I gear my assessments and in-class activities to improve their ability to focus, which in turn can give students a boost of confidence. For example, as a teaching assistant for introductory and upper-division political theory courses, I became frustrated with students who did not appear to do the reading. After having a discussion with my students, I found that those who had attempted the reading were having difficulties understanding it. Others had been too intimidated to read past the first page. In my sections, I compiled close-reading worksheets for critical passages that they complete in groups. Students have praised these worksheets as they help show students how to read complicated passages and give them the time to concentrate on the reading, all while giving them the tools and confidence to continue the work on their own. In my other classes, I have also adopted close reading assignments for students to complete online, and in their own time, for more complicated materials, such as journal articles and book chapters. They include a combination of reading comprehension, inference, and organizational questions.

The figure below is an example of applied, low-risk reading comprehension questions that are designed to help students develop the skills to navigate difficult texts:

Figure 1:

The image shows a screenshot of a quiz interface with two questions. Question 2 is a fill-in-the-blank question: "According to her thesis statement, Rudra attributes differences in the power of _____ to explain differences in welfare spending between developed and developing (LDCs) countries." It has a "Check" button. Question 4 is a multiple-choice question: "Which paragraph in Rudra's introduction is the 'road map' (or the discussion of how she presents her argument?)". The options are: a. The third paragraph, b. The fourth paragraph, c. The first paragraph, and d. The second paragraph. It also has a "Check" button. Both questions are marked as "Not complete" and "Points out of 1.00".

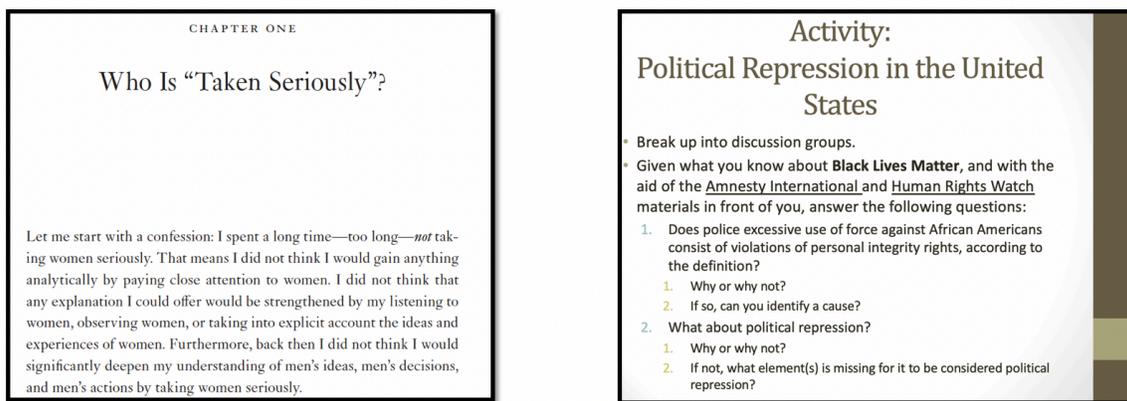
Developing these skills, however, is not always enough. Students today live in a social environment where so much information is accessible through the phone in their pocket. Even so, asking questions from a place of ignorance is fundamentally an essential part of the process. To help mitigate the sense of fear or intimidation that I have noticed from my students and encourage independent thinking, I do my best to bring them into scholarly debates and show them how professional scholarship is continuously evolving. Doing this serves multiple purposes. First, it provides them with provocative questions and conflicting answers that do more to engender curiosity than does asking them to memorize straightforward information (although this is often necessary). Secondly, it shows students that even the professional scholars do not have all the answers, that notions of what is true are rarely settled, and that as students they are part of that knowledge formation process.

3. Social Interaction- diversifying the knowledge formation process

Empowerment and accountability rely on learning from one another and paying attention to how people experience the larger socio-political structures, and how experiences shape global understanding and shape their motivations for a range of social activities. I see social interaction in the classroom as both a way to encourage student enthusiasm as well as a way to guarantee that students are aware that their

voices and experiences matter because it is vital to expand the range of how we define and gather knowledge in the social sciences. To help students develop a passion for learning and recognize that they are, and will continue to be, an integral part of the knowledge formation process, I emphasize opportunities for social interaction through a range of classroom activities that engage vital social issues. In the classroom, I strive to create respectful spaces for dialogue and conversation by posing discussion questions to small groups or include more structured class debates. I also like to include applied activities and group work with open-ended questions so that students have the opportunity to reflect how their experiences shape understanding and learning. The figure below provides examples of a reading and an activity that serve to encourage respectful dialogue.

Figure 2:



4. Passion as Motivation

Because passion is perhaps the most powerful motivator, I actively incorporate opportunities for student choice in assessments and syllabus design, allowing students to engage with the issues that interest them. As is often done in graduate-level seminars, when possible, I reserve a week for students to select among two or three relevant subject areas so that they can have a hand in their own education. For example, in my Globalization and Politics course, the class could choose two out of three areas: gender, identity, and the environment for their special topics section in the syllabus. In my human rights course, students had the freedom to select any contemporary human rights issue on which to write their final project, allowing them to develop their own passions further. One student, who was introduced to the Rohingya protracted refugee crisis in my class, chose to write her paper on the subject given Aung San Suu Kyi's public refusal to condemn atrocities committed towards the Rohingya population in Burma. She continued her work on this subject through an internship at the UN and this fall is beginning law school to pursue international human rights law. In a thank you note, she writes “I can undoubtedly say that one of the main factors that has impacted me to not only become more alert on what is going on around the world but also in pursuing to become an international human rights lawyer has been your class!” After deliberating for several weeks in my office hours, another student eventually chose the subject of prisoners' human rights for her paper. She is now studying for the LSAT in hopes of contributing to criminal justice reform. Engaging a question to which they feel connected helps foster new passions and then channel these passions into productive and critical endeavors.

Beyond the Classroom

In the future, I hope to develop further as an instructor and a mentor by finding new ways to include students on my research projects, either by mentoring research assistants, leading service-learning projects, overseeing independent studies, or creating "research teams" of students interested in subjects tangentially related to my agenda. My most memorable opportunity as an undergraduate was when my undergraduate thesis advisor included me in his ethnographic research project with the local Oaxacan migrant community, to investigate transnational migrant experiences. These are the kinds of innovative opportunities I would like to create for my future students. Interactive and guided learning experiences create new spaces for diverse social interaction, cultivate passion and critical thinking, and foster confidence, empowering students to be informed agents and hold themselves and others accountable in democratic societies.