

Mark Kaswan
mkaswan@ucla.edu
Teaching Philosophy

We all have an effect on the world around us. This is obviously true for us as teachers and for those students who go on to careers in politics or public service, but it is just as true for those students who go on to careers in law or other private businesses that may have little apparent connection with politics. My primary objective in teaching is to give students the analytical tools they need to actively pursue the effect they want to have. This means preparing them to be participants in their world by learning to critically evaluate the information and options they are presented with, and to consider the moral, ethical and practical consequences of the choices that they make.

My perspective has been strongly shaped by my teaching experience—in particular, a course in democratic theory for students with off-campus internships (Political Science 195: Corporate and Community Internships) sponsored by UCLA’s Center for Community Learning. The syllabus I developed centered around critical analysis using the workplace itself as its primary “text”. In a department concerned about awarding “empty units,” the strength of my syllabus led to a policy change, as it convinced them to accept the course as fulfilling requirements toward the Political Science major. In recognition of my work, in 2007 the director of the Center for Community Learning and the dean of undergraduate education at UCLA nominated me for the prestigious K. Patricia Cross Future Leaders Award given annually by the American Association of Colleges and Universities.

Students in the course wrote short weekly essays and a research paper, and held one-on-one meetings with me every other week. Their internships varied widely, from politicians’ offices to multinational corporations to small film production companies and even a minor-league baseball team. About two thirds interned in for-profit companies, settings not often considered to be political in nature or particularly relevant to democratic theory, but highly relevant to their future

careers. The weekly essay prompts I developed gave the students analytical exercises that required that they engage in critical reflection of their internship site. For instance, one week's assignment asked students to consider the demographics within their internship site, and then to consider structure of power by considering the means by which decision-making occurred. Readings were assigned as needed to help provide background.

My teaching also developed in my one-on-one meetings with students, where we would discuss their essays and research papers. I learned a great deal from the back-and-forth with my students: after five years of teaching the course I was still discovering new ways of explaining concepts and new questions to ask students to provoke their thinking. Over time and through my dialogues with students, I developed a number of "mini-lectures" on recurring themes, such as a conceptual definition of politics that could incorporate even the most non-political internship site (like that minor-league baseball team, which, it turns out, has a very interesting relationship with its major-league "parent"). Our discussions of their weekly essays and research papers—for which students were required to identify a topic related to the politics of their internship, whatever it might be—meant that I had to be able to cover an enormous range of material. Over the course of a single day I could find myself discussing issues related to Congress, political economics, international relations, feminism, media politics (both fiction and non-fiction; TV, film, radio and print), the politics of sports, and more.

The course was effective. One student, interning at an multinational media corporation, reflected on how her perspective had changed, saying, "Before I took this course, I never really contemplated the political aspects of a company or business because I saw business companies as a completely separate entity from politics." Another, interning at a US senator's local office, said,

“As a result of this course and the weekly writing assignments, my perspective of the world has changed because now I am more astute in analyzing the political dynamics of my surroundings.”

The kind of critical engagement found in an internship-based course can be translated into the classroom, although the lack of one-on-one interaction makes it more challenging. Nonetheless, in teaching my Survey of Political Theory course at the University of Nevada Las Vegas (a fairly large class of over 50 students), I have been able to engage students in lively discussions on Plato’s critique of democracy and the degree to which it is applicable to our own time, and Machiavelli’s timeless analysis of power and the question of whether the ends can justify the means. Later in the semester we will have opportunities to discuss Hobbes’ and Locke’s theories of human nature and Mill’s concern regarding the “tyranny of the majority”—all ideas that have great relevance, particularly in today’s supercharged political climate. In smaller classes I would look forward to promoting greater engagement with the material through frequent short writing assignments that ask students to connect the themes of their reading to contemporary politics, and group projects that get students working together.

Whether lecturing to a large class, leading a discussion in a small seminar or working with students one-on-one, I think there is more to teaching students than providing them with a rich body of information. An effective education will teach students to critically evaluate their experiences and the institutions that shape them, to synthesize what they learn from it and then using it as the basis for action. I think this should be the fundamental mission of university education. I take it as the mission of an effective teacher.