

Teaching statement

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I believe that university teaching should challenge and shift how students understand the world. As a teacher, I believe that students can grapple with these big ideas only when teaching materials are grounded in real world concerns, when courses are designed with student needs in mind, and when students are actively engaged in the learning process. These principles guide my teaching:

Teaching must have real world applications. I believe that students learn best when they can apply the principles they learn in real world situations. The courses I have taught or assisted in have been designed for students in public policy and administration who eventually start careers in the nonprofit sector or local, state, or federal government. I strive to create assignments that are directly applicable to their future needs. For example, I teach basic graphic design principles and presentation skills that improve their ability to give presentations and produce policy reports, and I offer bonus lectures on basic programming and data management skills that equip students with skills applicable beyond politics and policy. One student in a statistics course for public policy students at Duke noted, “I really appreciated [Andrew’s] passion, and also his ability to teach us stuff that we would never ever learn in other classes at Sanford.”

In the statistics courses I assisted in at both Duke and BYU, students worked on research projects in partnership with community organizations, such as municipal governments, school districts, foundations, and nonprofits. At BYU, for example, I assisted an international development course that involved a two-week field study in Ghana where two teams of students conducted research for a local NGO that hoped to bring a new biologically fueled toilet to market. In addition to helping with the logistics of the trip, I worked with the students to create powerful presentations for their client and gave feedback as they practiced their final projects. In my current MPA-level course on data visualization at BYU, I assign students projects and assignments that use real data from nonprofits and governments, since the majority of students will enter careers in those sectors

My choice of teaching tools is also rooted in real world concerns. In a microeconomics course I will teach this winter at BYU, I have assigned students the CORE economics textbook (www.core-econ.org), since it is free, online, and open source, thus saving students significant money. As a teaching assistant in a statistics course at BYU for executive public administration students, I developed a plugin (RcmdrPlugin.MPAStats) for the open source R statistical program that provided a simplified graphical interface for users. The plugin has been downloaded nearly 20,000 times since 2012 by current and former public administration and policy students, allowing them to continue to use analytical tools learned in the course after graduation without needing to purchase expensive statistical software.

Teaching must be tailored to student needs. I believe that students learn best when pedagogy accounts for diversity in student experience, knowledge, and learning styles. In the courses I have developed, I set aside a portion of the first session for students to help set the rules and expectations regarding technology in the classroom, attendance, late work, and participation (within reasonable bounds). This initial collaboration to establish class norms helps aggregate the diversity of experiences and learning styles and allows students to remain actively committed to the class. I also offer a variety of possible assignments in my courses to account for different learning styles. Rather than having their entire grade hinge on a single research project, I have students read blogs, listen to podcasts, redesign statistical graphics, create presentations, draft tweets, and reflect on their learning experiences in short essays.

Teaching must encourage active learning. Finally, I believe that students learn best when they are actively engaged with the subject. One way I encourage this engagement is by using a think–pair–share strategy. After presenting a general principle in a lecture, I divide the class into small groups and assign a short activity or set of questions to discuss. After the allotted time has passed, I reconvene the class and have groups share what they learned. This approach has been exceptionally effective for teaching practical skills. In a policy analysis class at Duke, for example, I lectured about how to create more engaging PowerPoint presentations and then gave pairs of students fifteen minutes to redesign a three-slide, text-heavy presentation. The results were fantastic—at the end of the time, each group of students showed off their finished products and explained their thinking behind the redesign. Although every group had a different strategy, all students were actively engaged and successfully used the general principles taught during the lecture. At the end of the semester when student teams presented their final policy analysis reports, the presentations largely followed the principles they had learned previously.

In sum, by applying these pedagogical practices in my teaching, I help students understand the theories and debates in public policy and international relations and acquire essential skills for remaining engaged with the public and nonprofit sectors in the future. More information about my current and past teaching experience can be found at andrewheiss.com/teaching/ and dataviz.andrewheiss.com.