

Teaching philosophy

I came to Huxley College in 2006 with over a decade of teaching experience from two different tenure-track appointments. This teaching journey began early in my graduate studies at George Mason University (GMU). In an honors seminar taught by political scientist Hugh Hecló, we had lively discussion sessions on each week's readings. I remember with great clarity how Professor Hecló began one session trying to engage one of the seminar's quieter students. With great frustration, she described how hard she found it to understand the readings until, pointing at me, she said "he explains them!" After receiving my MPA in 1994, I soon began splitting my graduate assistantship between research support and teaching. I continue to relish in those teaching moments where I am more than a lecturer, but an enabler for students as they advance their understanding and thinking in and out of the classroom.

Central to these and all my courses has been a commitment to the pedagogy I call *deliberative engagement*. Beyond debate or trying to reduce the information deficit of the public, deliberative engagement involves the consideration of not just experts and data, but also experiences and values. According to the [Kettering Foundation](#), "Deliberation can be understood as the cultivation of a set of capacities that can lead to a new construction of knowledge, one that comes out of the public's work together." First, I strive to foster a discursive classroom as described in Brookfield and Preskill's *Discussion as a Way of Teaching*. A discursive classroom, they argued, "may be one of the few arenas in which students can reasonably experience how democratic conversation feels."

For example, I have my students engage in a normative assessment of their future role as environmental professionals by posting questions such as the following. Who does an environmental professional serve? Who has and who should have influence in a democracy? Finally, is the role of an environmental professional purely about providing information and recommendations or to educate stakeholders and the public? These establish a classroom environment that allows learners to address one of the central challenges of environmental controversies.

We regularly address the perceived tension between science and democracy inherent in environmental policy conflicts as a third exercise in many of my classes. The complexity of environmental challenges and the concurrent demand for technical expertise may impede the public's participation in environmental decision-making. The United States faces many environmental policy problems that are highly technical and increasingly scientific in nature with high degrees of uncertainty, including climate change, endocrine disruptors, and habitat restoration. At the same time, the United States is a democratic system that experienced a growing distrust of government and science over several decades and a resulting demand for citizen involvement in environmental policy decision-making. The need for integration of science, ethics, and social decision-making is readily apparent, difficult to practice, and even more difficult to teach about.

The principal tension often becomes the mutually exclusive relationship between scientific expertise and participation. Emphasizing science and technical expertise too much as the ultimate voice on policy outcomes erodes democracy, especially since the function of scientific analysis is not to intend to choose but to influence an appropriate policy action (which is the principal role of risk management). Likewise, too much democracy may put scientific analysis in a peripheral role and risk having complex problems addressed in an ineffective and non-probabilistic manner. Achieving a balance between these

conflicting demands of “technocracy and democracy” represents an essential challenge that I address in many of my environmental classes.

Teaching tools

Since I received my training in public policy and spent nearly a decade on the frontlines of our nation’s political “beltway,” I experienced firsthand how politics often centers on information used (or not) to support or oppose what should be done about particular public problems. It is important for future professionals and citizens to recognize the structure of these arguments and be critical towards them even when it agrees with their point of view. Therefore, all of my courses emphasize the development of critical thinking skills with the application of a variety of techniques highlighted below. I strive for courses that foster the development of more civically engaged students.

First, I strive to foster a deliberative classroom as described in Brookfield and Preskill’s *Discussion as a way of teaching*. A discursive classroom, they argued, “may be one of the few arenas in which students can reasonably experience how democratic conversation feels.” I have therefore made discussion a more explicit part of my classroom by not only engaging students during the class, but by devoting significant amounts of the weekly contact hours each week to discuss case studies of environmental dilemmas.

For example, I utilize *Public Policy Praxis: A Case Approach for Understanding Policy and Analysis* and several of its cases in our environmental policy analysis course. One chapter presents the fictional case of a big box store siting proposal for a community. Students are formed into groups of 3 and 4 and deliberate over the following questions. “Complete a stakeholder analysis, and identify the many interests in this case. As you work on this, note that competing interest groups and individuals frequently present alternatives in strategically convenient and often dualistic terms. First, how does each group define the problem? Second, what stories are they telling? Third, how does this reflect their values, interests, and power?”

This deliberative but simulated experience is then complemented during the lecture portion of that week’s session that covers not only material from the chapter, but the growing attention in policy studies to the analysis of policy narratives. Students read the relevant article from a special of the *Policy Studies Journal* (Volume 41, number 3) helping them balance the practical with the theoretical. Environmental policy practitioners face the growing challenge of understanding the power of policy narratives in particular. This is a topic that also provides an opportunity for my students to intersect the scholarship of critical human geography and postpositivist policy studies.

The most relevant strand of the former for environmental studies is traceable to the social construction of nature and space literature (Smith 1984; Lefebvre 1991). “The major analytical issue . . . becomes the question of how nature is (re)produced, and who controls this process of (re)production in particular times and places” according to Whatmore and Boucher (1993, 167). Likewise, postpositivist policy studies have given analytical attention to either environmental discourses (Dryzek 2013; Fischer and Forester 1993) or framing (Lewicki et al. 2003) that becomes central in the both the text for the Environmental Policy Analysis course and one of my own publications (Abel and Stephan 2008) students are assigned.

However, in a new twist for my upcoming spring offering, students will also read a paper that was just delivered at the annual meeting of the Western Political Science Association. Titled “The scalar politics of environmental injustice: obscured constructions of air pollution in Seattle Washington,” this article presents a summary of the collaborative work my graduate students and I have been engaged with over the last two years. One of the principle community leaders, Alberto Rodriguez, will also share his experiences with the class for one session. Our work was supported by one of ten Collaborative Problem Solving grants supported by the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and provides a model of democratic policy analysis praxis.

Second, I employ the essay exam as another critical pedagogical tool. I believe essay tests help students improve their writing skills, their powers of analysis, and their ability to communicate their informed opinion. To achieve these results, my essay exams rely on several different types of queries. Questions will require students not only to identify core concepts for a course, but to: (1) criticize them based on particular criteria; (2) compare and contrast different ideas; (3) examine and generate questions about an issue; (4) illustrate with a contemporary example; (5) outline the development of a concept; or (6) validate the concept’s salience. I provide students with an essay question guide in the beginning of the semester that describes these expectations in general terms. I also offer study quizzes where students can submit randomly selection questions from the midterm and final and earn points that are applied to exams. I regularly offer two study quizzes before each test.

Third, I regularly use critical writing assignments to help students learn how writing is rewriting. I also commit to helping them develop their scholarly voice by developing a thesis, defending it with evidence, addressing a counterargument, and rewriting this assignment twice. In my classes with the best student reactions, I developed a successful collaboration with the Library’s Writing Center. We held a writing workshop in the Center and engaged students in an exercise I called “standing on the shoulders of giants” that Google Scholar presented on its main page. In an interactive experience, they are introduced to the form and structure of an argumentative thesis. We further used the metaphor of the courtroom and how a prosecutor must prove the defendant is guilty with evidence, or one’s thesis must stand on scholarship and evidence. We also described how policy research is a contingent and collected evidence could undermine one’s claim. And finally, we discussed how policy is a dynamic and experimental process where unintended consequences usually arise, the cycle restarts, and critical information must be reassessed.

Next, students formed small groups and were tasked with reviewing a scholarly journal abstract and distilling the author’s thesis. We then reconvened, reviewed their interpretations, and then introduced them to the possible paper topics. Writing Center staff then led them through exercises to generate ideas, narrow and focus, choose an idea, and analyze the assignment. I also developed opportunities for students to work in peer groups by recruiting successful students from the prior year’s class to serve as undergraduate teaching assistants. They were required to regularly hold study sessions while receiving credits for the ENV5 495 Teaching Practicum class.

In conclusion, my commitment to deliberative engagement is reflected in my three principle pedagogical tools: (1) cultivating a deliberative classroom; (2) fostering critical thinking through essay exams; and (3) helping students learn the writing is rewriting. My teaching philosophy and pedagogies are consistently intertwined with my own scholarship and demonstrate the praxis of being a teacher-scholar. Instead of siloed activities, I strive to develop and intersect pedagogy and scholarship the exemplifies a practice where “the dash between teacher and scholar is a link, not a line of demarcation” (Ruscio 2013).