Enthusiasm in Teaching*

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All teachers develop their own ideas about teaching and learning, but most of us have too few opportunities to focus directly on those ideas. Over the past few years, teaching a course on college teaching for graduate students has given me such an opportunity. Two years ago, my participation in a panel at the Midwest Political Science Association meetings provided a chance to pull together some of my thoughts about the role of the teacher. This essay presents some of those thoughts. Over the years I have learned a good deal from what other teachers say about their work, because their perspectives helped me to think through my own approach to teaching. My hope is that this essay serves readers in the same way.

My theme is enthusiasm. When we think about enthusiasm in education, our concern is usually students' enthusiasm for learning. I think that our own enthusiasm for teaching is even more critical. Of course, the more that people care about teaching, the more time and energy they devote to it. Just as important, a teacher's involvement and excitement communicate themselves to students, helping to engage them in the learning process.

To a degree, our level of enthusiasm for teaching is beyond our control, a product of firmly rooted tastes. But how much we enjoy teaching also reflects choices about how and what to teach. That conclusion is more or less self-evident, but some of its implications for the teaching process took me a long time to learn.

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One implication concerns general teaching styles. From the beginning of my career, I was plagued by the feeling that I did not teach in the most effective way. Reading syllabi from other people's classes or talking with others about their approaches to teaching, I often came away with the conclusion that I was doing things all wrong.

But gradually I came to recognize what I think is the closest thing to a general truth about teaching: There is no single best way to teach. One reason is that students and teaching situations differ a good deal. More important is that *teachers* differ. If we adopt an approach to teaching that is not compatible with our interests and abilities, we are unlikely to do our best work because we cannot fully engage our own enthusiasm.

In this respect, I think, taking advice from others about teaching—good as that advice may be—is not always wise. Teachers who adopt a style that is not natural for them are not going to enjoy themselves. Indeed, the process of teaching may become painful.

I make this point with considerable hesitation, because I do not mean to say that teachers should settle comfortably into one way of teaching and eschew innovation. For the great majority of us, there will always be plenty of room for improvement. For that matter, change in itself may improve teaching by making it fresher and more interesting for the teacher. But I have found it easier to innovate, to change my classes in ways that facilitate learning, when I do so within the framework of a general style of teaching that I enjoy.

Perhaps the best illustration of this point is an issue with which teachers often wrestle, the balance between presenting material through some form of lecturing and use of student participation to work through a topic. The setting in which someone teaches may dictate this balance, regardless of the teacher's own preferred style. In this situation the challenge is to meet the needs of that setting in a way that makes good use of the teacher's strengths.

More often than not, however, teachers have a wide range of choices about the balance between lecture and discussion. It may be that there is an ideal mix of the two for a particular class in a particular situation. But different teachers are comfortable with different mixes, and students will not benefit if a teacher adopts a mix that feels uncomfortable. The same is true of other kinds of choices about approaches to teaching: Teachers will do best when they use styles with which they can be successful.

The value of enthusiasm also relates to the topical coverage of courses. For a long time, I chose topics and material with the goal of covering the subject matter of a course as comprehensively as possible. In my judicial process course, for instance, I aimed to provide students with a full understanding of courts that extended from the Supreme Court to municipal courts. That approach struck me as the appropriate one, but it created problems in practice. The most direct problem was that the time available was insufficient to cover everything adequately. I sometimes hurried through topics, presenting material in a superficial way that was unlikely to advance students' understanding of the subject.

A more serious problem was that some of what I presented did not interest me very much. There were days when class sessions seemed

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like an onerous duty because I was talking about things that I found boring. I doubt that I was a good teacher on those days, no matter how hard I tried to do well.

It took too many years to change what I was doing. The stumbling block was a feeling that I would fail my students if I left out anything significant about a subject. What if students in an American politics course completed the course without getting the full story about voter turnout or congressional behavior?

If I had known the scholarship on student learning, I would have recognized that my efforts were largely pointless. Students could not remember everything I thought to be important no matter what I did, so it made sense to focus on fewer and more interesting things. But I had not yet come to this scholarship, and I had not discerned its lessons on my own. When I began to change my approach, I was spurred to do so by the prosaic goal of reducing the number of days on which I did not enjoy teaching. Initially, the changes I made were almost unconscious. Only later did I start to think directly about how to choose content for a course in light of my experience.

One important criterion, I think, is personal taste. Like students, teachers differ in the kinds of things we find interesting. As a specialist in courts, I have been struck by the contrast between those of us who find everything about courts to be fascinating and those whose eyes glaze over at the mere mention of the third branch. In teaching an introduction to American or comparative politics, to take two examples, teachers should feel free to give primary emphasis to the subjects they find more interesting. Students will benefit far more from the instructor's interest in particular topics than they will suffer from the limited coverage of some other topics.

A second criterion for choosing content is something that I reluctantly label relevance. My reluctance stems from the negative connotations—in part deserved—that the term developed during its period of widest usage. But I think there is nothing wrong, and a great deal right, with selecting subjects and material on the basis of what is most important for students to know as observers of the political system and potential participants in it.

This need not mean concentrating on matters that directly affect students' self-interest or that relate to their current interests. Rather, what I mean is that some topics are more important than others for a practical understanding of what goes on in politics and government. The image I have in mind when I select specific topics for a course is one of a former student who reads a newspaper or watches television news or scans Internet sources. What should that person know in order to comprehend the events described in news stories? Certainly such comprehension is important to decisions that people make as participants in politics. But I think it is also important for the satisfaction derived from understanding politics. I want my students to understand what is going on in that world and, as much as possible, why it is happening.

This criterion has two virtues. One is that it is easier to draw students into the subject matter of a class when that subject matter helps them to understand the political world better. We still have the task of demonstrating relevance, of showing students *why* they will understand the political world better if they work through a particular subject. But choosing the most relevant subjects in the first place makes this task easier. The forces that determine the success or failure of interest groups in attracting members may be complex, but students enjoy learning how groups such as AAA and AARP have done so well in overcoming the difficulties of building membership.

The other virtue of this criterion is that it stokes the teacher's own enthusiasm. There are subjects that I care a good deal about but that

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have limited benefit for students' understanding of politics. On those occasions when I devote time to these subjects in class, their dubious relevance to students leaves me with nagging doubts about what I am doing. When I was a beginning teacher, it did not take me long to realize that my having written a dissertation about a topic was insufficient reason to include the topic on my syllabus for a judicial politics course—especially when the dissertation was about patent policy in the courts. But when I present subjects that I see as critical to students' understanding of politics, I find myself fully engaged in finding ways to foster that understanding.

A few years ago the criterion of relevance led me to reconfigure my introductory course in American politics, a course that I always find difficult to teach well. I now orient class sessions around issues of explanation in politics, issues that illuminate the workings of politics and that might occur to even casual observers of the political process. Why did the public's trust in government decline so much over the years and then rise sharply and quickly last September? Why did the Senate acquit Bill Clinton? Why is Alan Greenspan so powerful? This approach certainly has not overcome all my difficulties with the course. But it has made the course considerably more fun to teach and, I think, more interesting and beneficial for students.

It seems to me that relevance is important for advanced courses as well, even though students are more likely to arrive with a strong interest in the subject matter. To take one example, I regularly teach an upper-division course on civil liberties in the courts. Such a course may be guided by a variety of goals in various combinations. One of my goals, not surprisingly, is to help students understand the constitutional law of civil liberties.

To further this goal, I initially tried to cram into class sessions as many court decisions and legal principles as I could. I feared that if I left out something important, students would depart the course with an incomplete understanding of civil liberties law. But gradually it occurred to me that an incomplete understanding was all that students were going to get in a single course, no matter what I did. Besides, the law changes, and much of the detail that students learn in a civil liberties class will be outdated not long after their graduation.

So I have cut back on the volume of legal material in the course. By doing so I give more emphasis to the topics that I think are most important for an understanding of general principles and patterns in civil liberties law. Just as I do in the American politics course, I keep in mind a vision of what former students need to know in order to follow the issues and controversies that pop up in the mass media.

For the most part, I think this criterion has made my class more interesting to students. In one respect, ironically, it has the opposite effect in the short run. A good deal of what the mass media report about civil liberties can be mysterious to someone who does not understand some fairly technical rules of law. When it is reported that someone has brought a "civil rights suit," the legal basis for the lawsuit is usually unstated. The reason why state supreme courts can strike down a type of school funding system that the U.S. Supreme Court found acceptable is not self-evident. And the biggest mystery of all is why some seemingly outrageous violations of rights cannot be challenged under the Constitution. That mystery can be solved only by someone who knows that few constitutional protections of civil liberties extend beyond government to the private sector.

So I spend a fair amount of time in the course working through the technical rules that govern the constitutional law of civil liberties. I cannot say that my students are excited by this material, nor do all of them learn it well; I still have to figure out better ways to help them through it. But I enjoy giving them what help I can, because it seems

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to me quite important that they learn the principles needed to follow what goes on in civil liberties. And I think that most of my students ultimately recognize the importance of these principles and gain satisfaction from understanding them.

All of this ties in with a quite different aspect of enthusiasm: our attitudes toward students. College teachers often go through a period of disillusionment as they confront the reality that most students have a lower level of commitment to their studies than we would like and some have only a minimal interest in our courses. One major challenge of teaching is preventing this disillusionment from turning into a permanent cynicism about students or a judgment that students' limited commitment to our classes is a moral failing. Such attitudes are difficult to hide from students, with predictable consequences for the effectiveness of teaching.

For me, one key to avoiding these attitudes has been to recognize that nearly every student has an interest in learning, latent though that interest may be. Earlier I mentioned the satisfaction that students may get from understanding politics better. I think that most people gain fulfillment from achieving a better understanding of the world in which they live, and that includes the political world. We are likely to increase our success in tapping students' interest in learning when we focus on issues that are most relevant to their understanding of the political world around them.

Those readers who think that I have simply restated the obvious may well be right, but I wish that some of what I have learned about teaching over time had been more obvious *to me* in the first few years of my teaching career. For those who are going through the same struggles with teaching that I have experienced, it may be worthwhile to reiterate what I think is the main lesson of my experience: Finding ways of teaching that you enjoy is a good start in achieving excellence as a teacher.

Note

*This essay is adapted from a roundtable presentation at the 2000 meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association. I would like to thank Kim Quaile Hill for organizing the panel, Alan Gitelson for chairing the panel and encouraging further development of the presentation, and Carol Mock for improving the essay with her suggestions.

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