

Teaching Statement

Carl Müller-Crepon, May 2020

As a teacher, I aim to contribute to my students' ability to understand important socio-political phenomena and evaluate theoretical arguments. Over the past years, I gained experience on how to best reach these goals. In 2020, I taught a seminar on the political economy of development and conflict in Africa for the Master in Comparative and International Studies at ETH Zurich. In 2017, I held a summer course on ethnic civil wars for undergraduate students. Both courses were co-taught by Yannick Pengl and received evaluation grades 4.9 and 4.4 on a scale from one (worst) to five (best). I also served as a teaching assistant for graduate quantitative methods and undergraduate political economy courses. The learnings from my past teaching as well as my experiences as a student inform my teaching philosophy and methods.

As a teacher, I see the class room as an arena for academic development of my students and myself. I aim to enhance students' understanding of the substantive topic of a course and add to the tool box they use to make proper sense of socio-political phenomena more generally. Both goals involve developing a conceptual understanding and intuition for abstract models as well as sharpening students' ability to evaluate them in the concrete reality they observe. Pursuing these goals through interactive and oftentimes dialectic teaching methods inevitably leads to students teaching me and improving my academic practice.

In order to reach these overarching goals, my first priority is to engage my students so that they partake in shaping a course from the beginning. To that intent, I start seminars by collecting every student's expectations, background, and motivations. This does not only introduces students to me and each other, but allows me to adjust contents to their interests and backgrounds, clarify misunderstandings, and later draw on their individual expertise. Institutionalized, repeated feedback rounds throughout the semester provide me with information to adjust course, address conflicts, and improve my teaching as a whole.

Readings – typically two papers for a graduate seminar – offer a first but by no means not definitive sketch of the theoretical and empirical terrain to cover. I strive to choose readings that are diverse and complementary in their theoretical and methodological approaches. After recapitulating them, I usually focus the class's attention on the set of processes and their main actors that may explain the phenomenon under investigation. When discussing, for example, the causes of ethnic civil war, these actors are governments, ethnic elites, citizens, and the international community. We then discuss actors' constraints and opportunities that delimit their actions and the material, political, and ideological interests that motivate them. This results in a map of mechanisms, which we then pin back to the theoretical strands of the respective literature.

The map of mechanisms allows students to gauge the theoretical strengths and shortcomings of the literature covered. It also fosters their understanding of qualitative or quantitative evidence needed to test each argument. Moderating the collective reasoning about convincing empirical tests of a particular hypothesis, I put particular emphasis on theoretically grounded research designs. The result often highlights ambiguities in existing studies, for example the difficulty of much quantitative macro-level research on ethnic civil wars to cleanly distinguish between psychological, ideological, and material motivations of rebels.

Defining the research frontier, these gaps open up avenues of further research by my students. I aim to make such research part of every course to promote active learning, encourage ownership in the course, and show that political science methods can generate policy-relevant knowledge. I vary the “research space,” ranging from a short workshop to a full research paper. Feedback from classmates and myself is integral to this process. For example, in one seminar, I dedicated an extended session to gather feedback of all students on each other’s research designs. I supplemented these comments in session and in a follow-up. I deem such feedback on preliminary drafts crucial for the success of all students and for a constructive and collaborative environment.

My moderation of the discussion in class is inclusive and aims at harnessing the value of all students’ ideas and thinking. To avoid a uniform format that suits only a few, I employ interactive approaches that repeatedly change the role and setting students find themselves in. For example, I split the classroom into groups that take on the identity of different actors (e.g., “the government”). After preparing their interests, constraints, and strategies, groups ultimately “play” with each. In commenting their actions, they reveal various theoretical mechanisms. To ensure that the voices of all students are heard against tendencies of domination by a few, I often use techniques to gather all ideas, viewpoints, or questions present in the room, for example by letting students silently reflect on a question for themselves and combining all answers into a mind map. Pre-assigning short introductory summaries of weekly readings serves a similar purpose while also showing whether students understood the readings or not.

My valuation of constructive discourse and personal engagement also shapes my relation with students outside the classroom, colleagues, and the academic community. I invest to build personal relationships with my students, which often leads to conversations on and mentorship of their careers as political scientists in and outside academia. In my work with student assistants, I encourage learning by collaboratively designing challenging parts of a project, such as the drafting of a codebook or database. I regard frequent research seminars as indispensable for collaboration and exchange in the academic community. Addressing this need in Zurich, I have co-founded a political economy seminar series and hosted a bi-weekly conflict colloquium. Through these engagements as a teacher and scholar, I hope to contribute to the collective ability of all members of the academic community to generate knowledge and fulfill its role in society.