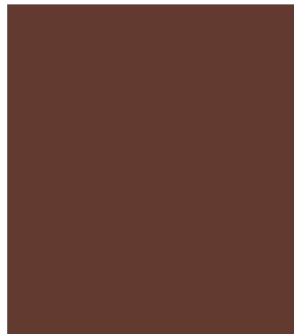


# Teaching the Tough Topics

a  
presentation by  
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## First... A Little Background

- I have a JD and PhD.
- I teach Political Science and Law.
- Teaching at universities and law schools in the US since 2004.
- Taught at four institutions of higher learning in the US.
- My teaching touches on contentious and emotional topics.
- Ex. race, sex, LGBT rights, religious freedom, the rights of criminal defendants, reproductive rights, and firearms rights.



## What Have I Learned?

- My student reviews almost never contain criticisms of me for partisanship or political ideological bias.
- My reviews have never criticized me for showing bias against students for their beliefs or identities.
- I have achieved this by using the following techniques when I design and teach my courses.



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# Set the Proper Tone

- Learning is a journey.
- You are the students' guide on the journey.
- Students will benefit from the journey because they will either:
  - End it with greater confidence in their beliefs, or
  - End it with new beliefs based on better information.





## Never Evaluate Student Opinions

- Assure students that they will not be evaluated based on their opinions.
- Stick to grading them on:
  - Their knowledge of facts and demonstrated skills.
  - Participation in class activities.



## Encourage Respectful Communication

- Assure students that
  - Disagreement with others' opinions is ok.
  - They will not be mocked for their opinions or questions.
- Demand that they show respect for each other in class.
- Encourage them to be respectful to each other outside of class.
- Keep cool when the unexpected happens.



## No Idea or Concept is Beyond Question

- Make sure that students understand that no idea or concept is beyond challenging.
- Questioning an idea or viewpoint is not an attack against the person's character or intelligence.





Dealing with Students Who  
Challenge Your Presentations



- Here is how I handle it:
  - If I can readily demonstrate that the student's comment is mistaken or incomplete in some way, I do so, and use it as a teaching opportunity.
    - I try never to do this in a demeaning way. Never talk down!
  - If I don't have a ready answer to the student's comment, I study the issue outside of class, and I address the issue via announcement to the class or in a later lecture.
    - This assures students that they are being taken seriously.
  - If a student becomes argumentative, I generally don't use class time to argue with them if the argument will seriously derail the lesson plan.
    - I ask them to meet with me at a separate meeting or via email/Zoom, to discuss the issue.

- I am not interested in what students believe.
- My interest is in whether they can demonstrate knowledge of facts and mastery of skills.





## Teach Students About Evaluating the Quality and Credibility of Sources

- Examples:
  - I post videos about how the media select what to cover.
  - I tell students about framing and priming.
  - I give students sources that categorize different media sources by type, ideological stance, and accuracy.
  - I discuss the differences between types of sources
    - Ex. Wikipedia, scholarly articles, newspapers, blogs.



## Example of How I Talk About A Tough Issue: Affirmative Action

- I talk about the history of race discrimination and segregation in the U.S.
- I talk about the history of the idea of affirmative action.
- I talk about different views of fairness and equality.
- I ask whether you can remedy the effects of centuries of race-based discrimination without taking race into account.
- I discuss the case law on the subject.
- I constantly reassure the students that I merely want them to have the facts, think about the issue, and then formulate their own opinions.



Thank You for Your  
Attention  
&  
Good Luck