Teaching Philosophy

While the transference of information is a corner stone of teaching, I believe an equally important aspect of teaching is the fostering of critical thinking in students. There are times when a lecture format is the most appropriate forum for providing background information. However, my experience has been that students are more engaged and learn more when they are challenged to think critically about the subject matter and what is being taught that day. While some students will take the initiative and critically reflect on what is being taught, many more are willing to take the information at face value without critically assessing what they are learning. I believe there are several elements important to fostering critical thinking in students:

- Learning environment where students feel safe engaging the material, each other, and me
- Learning environment that values the experiences and diversity of students
- Time to critically reflect and write
- Gaining insight into assumptions of material, self, and social context

In order to maximize students' learning experiences I believe it is important to foster a learning environment where students feel comfortable exploring different perspectives. I try to achieve this with several methods. I will talk with students at the beginning of the semester about the importance of exploring other perspectives, even if you personally disagree with the perspective, and jointly develop ground rules for class discussions. Making participation part of a student's grade demonstrates that I do truly value their insights and want to encourage their contributions. Finally, by utilizing more small group activities early in the semester and then moving to larger class discussions as a rapport develops in the class I am able to increase the chances that more students will actively participate.

I believe that I can learn a great deal from the variety of experiences that students have had and that they can also serve as teachers for their fellow students. While some undergraduates have been exposed to a rich and diverse community growing up, others have not had the opportunity to thoughtfully interact with people of different economic, religious, ethnic, or gender diversity. Having an understanding of the diversity in America and the world allows students to be more effective in the critical analysis of what they learn in class and in the future. However, I also believe it is important for students to spend time engaging in the material in a manner that gives them more time to critically reflect than interactive settings provide.

When I taught as a graduate student instructor for Natural Resource & Environmental Conflict Theory, students were given case studies of different natural resource conflicts throughout the semester to foster critical analysis. These written assignments involved students reading the real life case studies in order for them to get the background information on the conflict; then apply what they had learned in the class. Earlier in the semester the case studies focus on the students learning how to analyze conflicts, allowing students to work with different conflict analysis frameworks. Later in the semester students must move beyond solely analysis and design possible conflict resolution options. The case studies are carefully picked in order to force the students to engage in diverse cases that involve a diversity of natural resource issues, locations, and cultural settings. This ensures that students can not respond to the assignments by regurgitating what they had learned, but must critically analyze each case and critically reflect on what will and will not work in the variety of scenarios.

In other classes such as Environmental Politics: Race, Class, & Gender and Civil Court Mediation I have used structured and unstructured methods to help students understand the assumptions of others and their own assumptions. An example of a structured method is having

students fill in a handout that asks them to list five groups with which they identify. This serves as a starting point for exploring the different norms and assumptions of these groups and ourselves. This typically serves as a good way for students to begin thinking about what they are learning in the class and how it integrates and conflicts with different sets of assumptions. Unstructured methods have been focusing discussion on a reading and asking students: what assumptions are driving the author, what are the interests of the parties in this conflict, would these arguments hold up outside of the United States?

I have been fortunate to teach in settings where the typical class size rarely exceeded 30 students. This smaller number of students has made it much easier for me to directly engage with students and foster an environment where students become more comfortable engaging with me and other students as the semester progresses. However, I realize that in some cases, class size can exceed 30. While it does become much more difficult to build rapport with students in larger classes, as you can see in my class syllabus, I have added in a variety of teaching techniques in order to foster student to student engagement and active learning.

My goal of students being able to critically reflect on what they learn is driven partly by the subject matter: decision making, negotiations, conflict resolution, organizational theory, and environmental policy. All are influenced by cultural norms and thus requires students to understand the underlying assumptions of what they are learning and how their underlying assumptions play into what they are learning. What works in Washington, D.C. may or may not work in Montana or in Niger, West Africa. Given the dynamic and changing world that we exist in today, students studying these subject matters must be able to move beyond rote regurgitation of facts and theories and be able to critically assess how they can apply what they have learned.

The other reason I believe it is important for students to become critical learners is that I believe this process of challenging new ideas and then challenging old ideas and assumptions helps students integrate the material more thoroughly. During critical analysis students must evaluate and grapple with the material and make a decision about how and where the new information fits into their existing mental tapestry. This process of constructing new frameworks or re-constructing old frameworks will help students deepen their understanding of the material and increase their mental access to the information throughout the semester.