

TEACHING PHILOSOPHY & APPROACH

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Teaching Objectives

My main teaching goal is to enable socially transformative learning. Towards this end, much of my teaching aims to enable students to recognize the importance and challenges of peacebuilding in contexts affected by conflict and violence. I do this by guiding them to analyse complex conflict scenarios and help them to discover a range of theoretical and evidence-based strategies and tools for positively intervening in conflict in order to transform its root causes and strengthen peace and reconciliation among those affected. I encourage my students to care about injustices that affect communities, to understand the multiple forms and root causes of discrimination and violence, and to see the importance of their own role in breaking cycles of conflict and violence in society.

I believe that education should be inspiring, challenging, empowering and meaningful both intellectually and emotionally. I thus try to create learning spaces which are transformative in terms of creating opportunities for students to reflect upon and discuss their own identities, mindsets, behaviours, values and choices, and which are transformative for society in terms of getting students to think critically about societal issues and their role as citizens and professionals in leading and supporting change where needed.

To support my teaching, I draw on international and domestic examples to illustrate theoretical and practical issues. I also use historical and contemporary media and technology to bring course content to life.

Pedagogies and Methods

To enable students' learning, I use a range of pedagogies in my courses including constructivist, experiential, democratic, inquiry-based, collaborative, critical and reflexive approaches. As much as possible, I use student-centred, participatory and active learning methods. In this way, I engage students at different levels of conceptualisation, reflection, synthesis and application.

I find that students learn best when they play an active role in the learning process, using their existing knowledge and skills to engage in new experiences through doing and then reflecting on their experience to clarify new knowledge and link it to wider processes, concepts and principles. I intentionally structure my courses to engage students in learning actively and collaboratively. I may spark student engagement with a new topic through quick polls, think-pair-share, brainstorming, purposive games, visual methods, jigsaw, or World Café. I may then have students form small groups to analyse case examples and/or engage in a debate about the strengths and limitations of a given theoretical stance, strategy or practice. A flipped classroom enables class time to be used for this kind of sharing, interaction, discussion and group work. I then help clarify and synthesize key ideas, concepts and debates. Building on students' participation and ideas in this way heightens their attention and engagement in class, opens up an exchange of perspectives, insights and questions, and often strengthens relationships and personalised learning within the group.

Individualised Instruction and Respect for Equity, Inclusion and Diversity

I really enjoy teaching and highly value the diversity of my students. I regard it as a privilege to play a role in supporting my students' individual development, as well as their relationships with each other. When teaching at Cambridge, the system of individual tutoring enabled me to get to know

each student personally and convinced me of the value of tailoring my support as much as possible students' individual needs and goals.

A student's life experience often shapes the way they listen, construct meaning and make connections in the classroom. Many of my students are the direct survivors of violence, war, displacement and/or systemic inequalities and human rights abuses. Many are dealing with the legacies of trauma in their lives. Many feel underrepresented and frustrated by national and international politics, especially those who feel socially disadvantaged, disabled and marginalised. My role is to be an ally. I never assume that our experiences have been the same or that we share the same degree of privilege or insight into an issue. There is always more to the story, and these different perspectives are needed for meaning-making in the classroom.

To create a supportive space for exploring sensitive topics, I engage the class in reflecting on diversity and intersectionality. We then co-create ground rules for inclusive, open and respectful classroom discussion. I will flag up potential triggers when dealing with a difficult text or film and emphasize the importance of self-care for students who feel affected by the content. In these ways, I make an effort to scaffold 'safe' spaces as well as 'brave' spaces in the classroom. I also encourage students to integrate autoethnographic reflection in their assignments to cultivate their own voice.

An Example of How I Enable Active and Collaborative Learning

In preparation for teaching about controversial issues, I often use a Hot/Cold spectrum exercise (using physical or digital participation) to poll students on a range of contemporary and perennial controversies as a basis for recognizing and discussing how certain issues are controversial for some whilst not for others. I use the inevitable variation in attitudes to help students explore culturally and historically situated systems of values and ethics, as well as diverse socioeconomic and political perspectives on the issues and their perceived risks and benefits. I underline that without a diversity of perspectives we cannot understand any phenomenon adequately. As we wrap up discussion, I summarize key concepts clearly and give further examples to illustrate. I then assign students in small groups to discuss a current controversial topic in their community/society, tasking them to research and outline some of the key arguments and perspectives on either side of the issue. This may be followed up with a debate or a simple presentation of the issues, as well as reflections on the working process of the group itself.

Going deeper, the class will be given a range of conflict analysis tools to identify and discuss the interests and needs of different actors and stakeholders in the case, to envision alternative scenarios for conflict resolution and transformation, and to consider possible entry points for positive social action. These small-group case analyses become a foundation for understanding different conflict and peacebuilding theories and comparing and contrasting their implications in real-world practice. I also try to role-model real-world decision-making and reflection processes that international organisation and NGOs typically have to address and which students will also encounter in their fieldwork. Here I am able to share my own field experiences, drawing on common challenges, questions and approaches that arise in conflict and peace research, policy and practice.

Depending upon the size of the group, we may incorporate drama-based techniques like role-play or Theatre of the Oppressed to enable students to step into different roles and perspectives and to understand the choices and agency (or lack thereof) that may define certain issues. By exploring the topic collaboratively in this way, students develop a deeper appreciation of the complexities of controversial issues, including the influence of different worldviews, perspectives, narratives, interests and communication strategies on how problems and their potential outcomes are framed.

As a final assessment, I may require students to write an essay that explores a controversial issue or conflict scenario using the theories and tools introduced, or I may invite students to write a reflection piece on how and why their own position on a controversial issue has changed. Combining such activities in the learning process encourages students to approach these difficult topics with a sense of curiosity, critical thinking, empathy, reflexivity, ethical awareness and personal engagement – qualities that are necessary to the maintenance of pluralistic and democratic societies, and which lie at the core of peacebuilding work.

Success Criteria and Continued Professional Development

I want students to know that I care about their learning success. For this reason, I am explicit about the success criteria for each of my courses and I make myself available for clarifications and consultation with students should they need it. I also make an effort to mentor students in their projects by highlighting strong points of their work and by posing questions about areas that could be developed further.

I use a combination of assessment approaches (quizzes, dialogue, self-reflection exercises, case study analyses, essays) to evaluate students' discrete knowledge and higher-order critical thinking and ethical reflection skills. For formative feedback, I systematically use the 'sandwich' technique and for summative feedback I often use rubrics. In this way, I encourage students to think through what will make their work more complete and coherent from both academic and applied perspectives.

As a university teacher and trainer, I feel I have done a good job when students show eagerness to come to class and engage, when they actively pose questions and share their views, knowledge and reflections, and when they demonstrate their ability to explain, apply and critique concepts raised in class in their own words, making connections to other issues and situations.

I also make use of opportunities provided by the university to continue developing my professional skills as a university teacher and researcher, for example, employing creative use of online technologies for teaching.

I always learn from my students as well, and I continue to evolve in my teaching approach / style as I receive feedback from the class. Each year, I welcome mid-term and final evaluations of my course content and instructional approach, which I use to improve my curriculum and teaching methods. I have often had the joy of hearing students say that my course was one of the most interesting they had all year. Students also seek my advice on how they can continue their studies and career in my field, which I take as a sign that they have found meaning and direction in this work.