

Adjunct Faculty Mentoring Project: Classroom Observation

Instructor: Geoff Allen, Teaching Associate

Course: PS 116 (Politics of Electoral Laws) – F16

Date: 10/13/16 – First Observation

Allen: 1st Classroom Observation

For my first visit during this Fall term I observed the first 30 minutes of the seventh meeting of the course. The class had reasonably full attendance for a 5pm Thursday course.

During this visit, Geoff's lecture for the day was discussion of single member district plurality vs. list proportional representation systems of representation. He used case studies from Great Britain and France to illustrate a number of concepts and to engage his students.

I thought Geoff did a very nice job of discussing very complex concepts in an accessible way, and to get his students to think both broadly and specifically about the ramifications of these electoral systems. One of the nice things he did was to fold into the discussion the very current event of the UK referendum on EU membership. The material Geoff was working with was appropriate to an upper division course, and the approach was rigorous but not overwhelming. Geoff has worked hard to build a good course for his students, and does a very nice job in presenting the material. He knew many of his students' first names, and he was diligent in validating their contributions – which were frequent in while I was there.

I have a couple of minor suggestions for Geoff at this time though.

First, I realize that some of the material he was trying to illustrate via the use of tables in PowerPoint was extensive and the tables fairly complicated, but it might help to rethink how best to present that material in way that doesn't require his viewers to work so hard to either read or understand the data. The time spent in sorting out that material might be better spent in consideration or discussion, or in application. I know this might mean some work in reconfiguring or building new tables, rather than reproducing someone else's, but it might be worth it in terms of student learning outcomes. It is often the case that once we answer the 'why' question about a piece of our pedagogy for a class, the next step is answering the 'how' question. I'd encourage Geoff to work through this discernment when building PowerPoint slides generally, since the 'how' question often is best answered by using less on a slide than more – even if it means more slides at the end of the day.

Second, I thought at one point, as Geoff discussed strategic voting choices, that a simulation or exercise might be a great way to cement some of the ideas the class was working through. Since my visit was only a snapshot of the entirety of that day's or week's work, he might have something like this already in his plan for the course. If not, I'd encourage him to consider expanding his pedagogical portfolio beyond the standard lecture format. Students almost always enjoy experiential learning, when we can do it in

Political Science courses, and we know that this can often be the best way to cement concepts in some students' minds. Dr. Strathman is an excellent resource for this type of pedagogy, as is Dr. Smith.

Overall though, I thought Geoff did a nice job with the class I viewed, and I look forward to visiting him again later in the term.

Alison G. Keleher, PhD
Coordinator

Undergraduate Program

Cc: Personnel file, Interim Vice Chair Han, Faculty Mentor and Advisor Stoll, Graduate Advisor Coggins.

Adjunct Faculty Mentoring Project: Classroom Observation

Instructor: Geoff Allen, Teaching Associate

Course: PS 116 (Politics of Electoral Laws) – F16

Date: 11/10/16 – Second Observation

For my second visit during this Fall term I observed the first 30 minutes of the fifteenth meeting of the course. The class had almost full attendance for a 5pm Thursday course. Geoff had a particularly large challenge the day I visited, since my visit fell on the first class meeting after the recent presidential election. It says a lot that the class had almost perfect attendance on the night before a three-day weekend, since my interpretation of that turnout is that Geoff's students looked to him to explain a result which they found incomprehensible. And to Geoff's great credit (and my admiration) he did not disappoint his students. He approached a difficult subject with tact and grace, methodically working his way through the many causes which most likely contributed to the election results. Additionally, he did this by including his students in the discussion, asking them to apply the various theories they've learned in the class to date in order to explain the results. Undoubtedly he had a politically mixed class, and he was able to speak with a gentle neutrality which most likely soothed hurt feelings in many quarters. I was very, very impressed as the tenor of the room moved beyond a shocked silence and on to a productive discussion of theory applied to the real world.

In an additional demonstration of Geoff's classroom management, Geoff did a nice job of smoothly transitioning from the discussion of the election results to his planned lecture. The transition was seamless, with the students ready to move on to the new material and engaged in the topic.

While a minor factor, certainly compared to the facility with which Geoff handled a very difficult lecture, it is important to note that Geoff's PowerPoint slides were clear and well formatted, and an improvement over my last visit. I think he's considered the bigger question of why and how to use PowerPoint, and used that discernment to add value to the power available in using PowerPoint to illustrate concepts and data.

As in my earlier visit to Geoff's class I am convinced that he is a very good lecturer, and has a very fine future ahead. I encourage him to consider how he might incorporate additional learning tools into his repertoire, but for a graduate student at this stage of his career he shows enormous potential, and we are lucky to have him on staff as a Teaching Associate.

Alison G. Keleher, PhD
Coordinator

Undergraduate Program

Cc: Personnel file, Interim Vice Chair Han, Faculty Mentor and Advisor Stoll, Graduate Advisor Coggins.

Adjunct Faculty Mentoring Project: Classroom Observation

Instructor: Geoff Allen, Teaching Associate

Course: PS 6 (Introduction to Comparative Politics) – M17

Date: 7/11/17 – Summer Session A Observation

I observed the first 30 minutes of the ninth meeting of the course during Summer Session A. The class of 40 had approximately 25 students in attendance.

Geoff began the class by projecting an upcoming paper assignment he had posted on Gaucho Space, reminding students of the submission deadline and technical requirements. After this announcement, Geoff began a review of the previous day's work on various conceptions of democracy. He used well-designed slides, and asked well-crafted critical thinking questions of his students. His students, in response, answered with a wide range of well thought out answers. Impressed by both the quality of his questions, but also the strong answers his students provided, I thought Geoff preformed a brief, but effective review of the material.

Moving on to the core of his lecture for the day, Geoff launched into material examining the differences in constitutional government design. Again, he used well-designed slides that defined terms and concepts clearly and effectively, with a good ratio of text to imaging. His pacing of the material was effective, checking in with his students periodically to gauge comprehension. The material was appropriate for an introductory course, and accessible for his students.

Geoff is doing a terrific job, and so my only suggestion – which is minor – would be to consider how including images or video clips in his slides – contemporaneously to the concepts he discusses - might help to cement concepts or theories more firmly in his students' minds. Sometimes even the simplest imagery can help to illustrate ideas in ways that help students remember and even process concepts.

This minor suggestion notwithstanding, Geoff is one of our most accomplished and thoughtful lecturers, and far beyond where we might expect a Teaching Associate to be at this point in his career. I look forward to his continued development, and to visiting his class again in a few weeks.

Alison G. Keleher, PhD
Coordinator

Undergraduate Program

Cc: Personnel file, Vice Chair Han, Faculty Mentor Professor Bruhn, and Graduate Advisor Digeser.

Adjunct Faculty Mentoring Project: Classroom Observation

Instructor: Geoff Allen, Teaching Associate

Course: PS 6 (Introduction to Comparative Politics) – M17

Date: 7/24/17 – Summer Session A Observation

I observed the first 30 minutes of the sixteenth meeting of the course during Summer Session A. The class of 36 had approximately 20 students in attendance.

As I joined the class, Geoff had begun by projecting an upcoming paper assignment he had posted on Gaucho Space, reminding students of the submission deadline and technical requirements. After this announcement, and a request for questions, Geoff began a review of the previous day's work on political culture. I thought Geoff preformed a brief, but effective review of the material and responded to questions clearly and well.

Continuing on the topic of political culture, Geoff used good slides, defined terms clearly, and periodically checked in with his students to gauge comprehension. The material was appropriate for an introductory course, and accessible for his students. After finishing the unit on political culture, Geoff began a lecture on ethnic and regional identity, which was well in progress by the time I left the class.

Overall, I continue to be impressed with Geoff's clear, well-organized, and effective lecture style. His pacing is perfect, and he pitches the material at a level appropriate for an introductory course, while still maintaining sufficient rigor. He generally makes good use of slides, although I found some of his slides in this lecture a bit hard to read from the back of the room. I'd encourage Geoff to think of his slides a little bit like speaking to a large group of people, in other words, the message needs to get all the way out to the cheap seats. That can mean simple fixes in this case, such as using more color to make typefaces "pop" (rather than black and white) and to avoid text-heavy definitional slides. In the latter case, more slides with fewer concepts, with some images thrown in, will usually do the trick.

It also might help, especially with an introductory course, to consider how best to reach students more closely to where they "live." By that, I mean considering asking a few more questions in areas that help both engage students and which create meaningful conceptual anchors. An example of this from the material in the lecture I observed might be to ask students to think of – and provide – examples of ethnic or regional identity with which they are familiar, in either real life or film or literature. This might sound a bit like "dumbing down" an important foundational concept, but if your students don't have an anchor for a concept, all subsequent material risks being lost in the swirl of ideas in your students' heads. Moreover, once students create an anchor, it is much easier to for them to learn related complex concepts.

Geoff continues to be one of our more thoughtful and gifted lecturers, and at this point my suggestions speak to the challenges we all face in trying to communicate material, and should not be taken as indicia of any fundamental or significant problems in his classroom presentation.

Given that this might be the first time Geoff has taught an introductory course, or even this particular course, he is doing a terrific job, and is a valued addition to our teaching faculty. His teaching skills are impressive, and far beyond what we might expect to see from an instructor at this stage of his career.

Alison G. Keleher, PhD
Coordinator

Undergraduate Program

Cc: Personnel file, Vice Chair Han, Faculty Mentor Professor Bruhn, and Graduate Advisor Digeser.

Adjunct Faculty Mentoring Project: Classroom Observation

Instructor: Geoff Allen, Teaching Associate

Course: PS 105 (Theory of Comparative Politics) – M17

Date: 8/16/17 – Summer Session B Observation

I observed approximately the first 30 minutes of the seventh meeting of the course during Summer Session A. The class of 25 had approximately full attendance.

As I joined the class about ten minutes into the class, Geoff was well in to a lecture examining different theories on the development of state structures. Geoff used slides effectively to visually support his lecture, taking pains to define and explain terms and concept as he went. I especially appreciated the historical framework he used during his lecture to build context for his students, and which appeared to be a continuation of material he had discussed in an earlier, recent, lecture. Additionally, Geoff was careful to check in periodically with his students to gauge comprehension. The material was appropriate for an upper division course, and yet was accessible for his students. Geoff's students appeared engaged, asked well-considered questions, and there appeared to be very little personal tech use for non-course purposes.

One of my minor suggestions in past observations has been to encourage Geoff to further refine his use of slides by reducing the amount of text, increasing text size and/or visual clarity, and to consider using more images. During this visit, I found all of his slides clear and illustrative, and a strong addition to his presentation.

Additionally, I want to applaud Geoff's work on this particular course – the first time he has taught it, and the first time we have offered it in a long time. Either condition could be daunting to any instructor, much less one with only a couple of courses under their belt. In observing Geoff's lecture, I had to keep reminding myself of both of those facts, since he seemed so clearly comfortable in his mastery of the material and in its delivery. I was further impressed at how Geoff was able to present abstract theories in a way which appeared to reify the concepts for the students, taking them out of an ancient and historical context, and bringing them closer to the lived experience of his students. No easy feat that, especially for a class new to an instructor's repertoire.

Overall, I continue to be impressed by Geoff's classroom work. He is thoughtful in both design and delivery, and has become a strong member of our instructional team. Due to his continued demonstration of excellence in the classroom after this visit, and during the visits performed during his two previous instructional quarters, his observation requirement under the Adjunct Mentoring Program will now drop to only one visit per term, provided his work stays consistently strong.

Alison G. Keleher, PhD
Coordinator

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Cc: Personnel file, Vice Chair Han, Faculty Mentor Professor Bruhn, and Graduate Advisor Digeser.