

The Interplay of Teaching and Learning:

REFLECTIONS ON TEACHING AS A COLLABORATIVE PROCESS



Stephanie Kerr | Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Lethbridge
Sydney Rolfe | Undergraduate Student, Department of Political Science, University of Lethbridge

For the past two years, I have been conducting a pilot project study examining explicit instruction of critical thinking skills within the context of discipline-specific course content. Weeks of job action and a brief return to online teaching have undoubtedly impacted the results of the pilot. Yet, one of the highlights of the

project for me (as both a researcher and as a teacher) has been my ongoing discussions with the research assistant, Sydney Rolfe, about the nature of teaching. In my role as project lead, much of the quality of my data and the success of the pilot project is dependent on Sydney and I having a shared understanding of

what it is we are trying to accomplish.

However, we wanted to take this opportunity to shine a light on a facet of the nature of teaching that is often overlooked or undervalued—the collaborative nature of learning.

Sydney: I have always understood learning in a traditional sense, with the respective roles of the instructor and student rigid and clear. This thought process has been challenged head-on by the perspectives I have been exposed to in my role as a teaching and research assistant, that I never have experienced as an undergraduate student. I now have a better understanding of the value and benefits of approaching learning as a collaborative process between teacher and student.

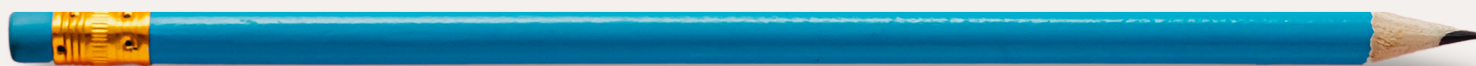
My field is comparative politics. I often tell my introductory class, if you think political science is not for you—and it may not be—give me a chance, and I am sure I can still find something in this course that will be relevant and interesting to you. It is this belief that underpins my interest in learning about teaching. Yes, I am utterly fascinated by my field, but I am also interested in how we learn about it. How do we make connections? What is it about a particular concept or topic that speaks to us? What makes it interesting and relevant? So, for me, a starting point in my interest in learning about teaching has been, how do we make these connections? How do we make it a skill, an everyday practice? How do we turn these connections into something that will be relevant for students beyond the particular content of the course? Working with Sydney has helped me think about these connections as a much more collaborative process.

Learning About Teaching

Recognizing the collaborative nature of teaching means recognizing that we are, at once, learners and teachers. As we teach, grade, and give feedback, we are given the opportunity to learn about ourselves and about the material. In seeking to help others understand, we have to make visible to ourselves the often hidden connections we have made between concepts and ideas—why exactly does that make sense to us? How can we effectively convey that? Needing to elucidate those connections, in order to help students uncover them, forces us to refine our own understanding of course materials.

Sydney: One of my greatest takeaways from this experience was realizing the collaborative nature of learning as both a student and as a teaching assistant. I found that the learning process was just as much about me learning from the students and my peers as much as it was about providing feedback and grading on assignments. I was exposed to many diverse perspectives on each assignment where some of which challenged my own understandings of the class content. The different interpretations allowed me to critically think about how I graded as a teaching assistant, but also aided in refining my analytical thought processes as a student.

Grading allows us the opportunity to see how others may have made (or failed to make) connections and, as such, allows us to see new patterns and links in the material itself. At the same time, seeing where students have failed to make the anticipated connections gives us a chance to examine how we



taught the material. Is there something I could have made clearer in laying out the conceptualization? Are there any pre-existing pieces of knowledge or bias that maybe made that connection seem more natural to me when it may not have been the case for the student? Encouraging students to elaborate on their thinking process can help me learn how to better help students not only understand the concepts themselves, but how they connect to and relate to one another. It can also help me learn how to better teach them to develop the critical thinking skills they need to build their skills as learners. Seeing teaching as a collaborative process means that if I am mindful and open to my students, they can help teach me how to be a better teacher.

Not only does this help Sydney and I develop our understanding of our own material of study, and as researchers, but it teaches us how to sharpen our own skills as learners—in our own writing and research.

Sydney: As a student, the role I assumed as a teaching assistant was incredibly important to my own academic work in ways that I had not expected. Through grading, I was able to reflect on my own learning processes as it required me to reframe the way I understood assignment rubrics and academic expectations. Prior to grading, I relied on rubrics as a guide for beginning my assignments and as a last-minute checklist before I submitted my work. As a teaching assistant, I had to become more critical of what the rubric was seeking and deepen my understanding of the expectations that were assigned with it. The process of grading others' work cemented the importance of understanding criteria and utilizing it as a map while completing my own assignments. I believe that this shift became a tool to more effectively and efficiently approach my own studies and work as a student.

As noted, the analysis of the data gathered during the project is ongoing. It will be measurable and replicable. Working with Sydney and asking her—as the project progressed—to reflect on her own experiences, and what that has meant for her as both a learner and a teacher, has prompted and required me to do the same.

Her insights into where students may be underperforming and what patterns she sees—as someone who did not design the course and, as such, may be somewhat blindfolded to its assumptions or maybe even missteps—have been valuable for me as both a researcher and a teacher. It has been an important reminder that as a teacher, I am still a learner. Not in the sense of being junior or senior faculty, but more in the sense that my goal is to remain a learner. As a researcher, I recognize there is always so much more to learn about my field of study—why should the same not hold true for my teaching?

I ask my students to actively think about their learning. Collaborating with Sydney and working through the project design, implementation, and data collection, has required me to actively think about my teaching, both in terms of what I am trying to do every week in the classroom, as well as in bringing Sydney into the project with me. The project was designed before Sydney joined on. Learning about learning—or teaching—is not something which very many undergraduate students have the opportunity to be exposed to. It is, however, at the very heart of what the pilot study sought to explore—the role of thinking explicitly about our learning as we learn. This meant that familiarizing Sydney with the projects and its intentions, along with going back and forth with her over assignment feedback—and the meaning and aims behind the assignment criteria and the learning outcomes, gave both Sydney and I a chance to

practice the very skill set we were seeking to develop in our students. Yet rather than asking one another to reflect on the assignments or projects individually, we had the opportunity to do so in a way that was much more of a conversation. Yes, we reflected on our teaching, as well as our own understandings and learning processes, but we did not do so in isolation. Instead, by bouncing our reflections, insights, concerns, and difficulties off one another, we were able to reflect on our roles as teachers and learners in what has felt like a much broader, and hopefully, more effective sense.

Sydney: The transfer of knowledge is often a one-directional flow between teacher and student. However, learning requires a collaborative effort and mutual willingness to grow and think outside of the box. As a student, I was able to learn through my role as a teaching assistant. This would not have been accessible had I not had this opportunity while pursuing my undergraduate degree.

Collaborating with Sydney has been, for me, a strong reminder that learning—regardless of the discipline—is a social project. For me, this means my roles as teacher, researcher, and learner are very much interconnected. The interplay between teacher and learner, and between teaching and learning, is far more dynamic. If I want to be a more effective teacher, I need to reflect critically on my teaching. I need to recognize just how much I can learn when I am, as Sydney says, willing to collaborate, grow, and create spaces for my understandings and assumptions about teaching to be challenged, to be willing to think outside the box. If I want to be an effective teacher, I need to recognize that I am still learning and will strive to continue to learn about my teaching in the same way I would my home discipline. I need to be open to seeing my teaching as a collaborative process to hear

what my students can teach me and what I can learn through teaching them.

