

Troy D. Mix
TEACHING PHILOSOPHY AND RESULTS

I base my approach to teaching on the idea that students learn best when they are called upon to synthesize course concepts, apply them to the solution of real-world problems, and communicate their findings. The roots of my philosophy are an impactful experience in a public administration course modeled after Harvard Business School's case study approach to instruction. My adherence to this pedagogical approach strengthened as I became a practicing planner, managed the work of graduate students on professional projects, and entered the classroom. I find the inherent practical relevance of this approach makes it particularly useful for teaching future public policy professionals. More generally, I believe learning is enhanced when students are forced to scrutinize theories, statistics, and research findings in real-world contexts.

I consistently exploit the pedagogical benefits of case studies in courses I teach, though the exact implementation varies by course format and topic. My use of case studies varies on two dimensions—whether the instructor or students generate the case scenarios and whether the cases depict specific situations or more generalized policy scenarios. In Geographic Information Systems (GIS) courses I have taught, I introduced cases in the form of labs that entailed the application of newly learned skills to policy scenarios. I also assigned term projects that required students to develop public policy scenarios and implement their own analyses.

I often seek to extend the case study approach by requiring that students engage in professional communication appropriate for the practical applications in question. While class size often precluded this option when I taught GIS, I required formal project presentations of each student in some semesters. For urban and regional analysis courses, I helped to implement assignments that asked students to prepare a series of professional memos focused on preparing demographic and economic analyses and, ultimately, projections and forecasts for a county.

I see a different role for case studies in courses that are more oriented to content than skills. Most basically, the power of example can make lectures more effective. Additionally, methods I've observed for encouraging students to critically engage with material include assigning discussion leaders for each class meeting and requiring students to engage discussion questions before class. Carefully executed activities can result in student-led discussions on the practical implications of course concepts. Outside the classroom, assignments that challenge students to consider the policy implications of scholarship can be useful tools for sharpening understanding.

Students at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign evaluated my teaching favorably. On a five-point scale ranging from "Exceptionally Low" to "Exceptionally High," I earned a mean teaching effectiveness rating of 4.45 for my two semesters as a teaching assistant for the graduate course "Urban and Regional Analysis." As a result, I twice earned placement on the "List of Teachers Ranked as Excellent by their Students." For my two semesters of teaching the upper-level undergraduate and introductory graduate course "GIS for Planners," students rated my teaching effectiveness at 4.35 and the overall course quality at 4.4.

To conclude, I view the power of example as a critical tool for instruction and take a policy-relevant approach to teaching. The concept of relevance also demands an intimate connection between my research and teaching. My research projects serve as case studies of concepts explored in courses, while also informing the development of practical examples for use in future courses I teach.