Teaching Statement – Brandon Van Dyck

I am an avid teacher with a successful record instructing Harvard undergraduates. I have served as a Teaching Fellow (TF) for six Harvard lecture courses and as Head TF for two of these. I have advised seven undergraduate theses, mostly in Latin American politics. For each of the last three courses I have taught, I have received a university-wide teaching award (details below). Among the six courses I have taught, four are surveys: Introduction to Comparative Politics, The Comparative Politics of Latin America, Introduction to Political Philosophy, and the The Sophomore Tutorial in Government, the last an introduction to the four subfields of political science, organized around the theme of democracy. The other two courses explore particular facets of Latin American politics and history: The Cuban Revolution, 1956-1971: A Self-Debate, which examines the first decade of post-revolution political development in Cuba, and The Politics of Social Policy in Brazil, which describes and analyzes social policy change in Brazil from 1930 to the present. Through these experiences, I have matured as a teacher, learning to synthesize material efficiently, present key questions and arguments in a compelling manner, provide useful feedback, and – in class discussions – strike a balance between structure and spontaneity.

Leading a successful discussion section requires careful consideration and significant effort. For each of the six courses I taught, I prepared and led weekly, one-hour discussion sections (or two-hour sections in the case of The Sophomore Tutorial in Government). My weekly preparation routine consisted of two steps: I read and synthesized the course readings, and I composed a section guide, which I circulated to all my students after each discussion section. In these section guides (or ‘section notes’, as my students and I called them), I organized the course material by question, not by author. Each week, I framed the readings as different – and sometimes complementary – answers to an important, puzzling question or set of questions (e.g., Why did the developing and post-communist worlds experience a wave of democratic transitions in the 1980s and 1990s? Why did the Brazilian political system begin to produce more broad-based social policies beginning in the 1990s?). By circulating the section guides to students after class, I relieved them of the pressure to take extensive notes in class, thus freeing them to engage more fully in the discussion. The section guides also gave us the liberty to explore in depth the topics that students found most interesting; students knew that if we did not cover other topics in depth, they could consult the section guide on their own time. As discussion leader, I internalized a rule of thumb: ‘Outside the section guide, nothing. Within the section guide, everything’. I insisted on a basic structure for classroom discussion, but within this structure, I strived to make our conversations and debates as organic as possible. If students felt passionate about a topic, we explored it in depth. If students did not seem passionate about a topic, I tried to connect the topic to related events that directly affected their lives. For example, when we discussed party formation in The Sophomore Tutorial in Government, I reminded my predominantly American students that we may find parties boring, but we also have the luxury of taking a stable party system for granted. This generated a lively, contentious discussion about the benefits of the United States’ institutionalized, two-party system. In general, I strived to make learning fun for my students, incorporating relevant personal anecdotes from fieldwork and, where appropriate, finding the humor in course material.
Like section preparation and discussion-leading, providing useful feedback on essays requires considerable time and thought. As TF, I graded many hundreds of essays, midterms, and finals. In providing feedback, I followed three rules. First, I made sure to understand exactly what my students intended to argue in their essays. This step took the longest with the students who wrote least clearly – and who, consequently, would benefit most from my feedback. Second, I provided positive reinforcement by complimenting students on the strongest aspects of their work. By telling students that they wrote well, structured their argument clearly, or substantiated their claims effectively, I let them know what to continue doing, moving forward. Third, instead of simply criticizing the weak aspects of students’ essays, I showed my students – in detail – what a better paper would have done differently. If students did not write clearly, I gave them examples of more clearly written sentences. If students did not structure their argument effectively, I proposed an alternative structure. If students provided insufficient evidence for an important claim, I told them what evidence they might have cited.

In my capacity as Head TF for two large lecture courses, I developed administrative skills that supplement my pedagogical experience. Most recently, I served as the Head Teaching Fellow for *The Sophomore Tutorial in Government*, an introductory lecture course on the discipline of political science, with lectures and readings from all four subfields. The tutorial is a requirement for Harvard Government concentrators and thus one of the department’s largest courses. The tutorial’s format is unique in the department: there is one lecture per week, always given by a different professor, and section discussions last two hours instead of one. The *Sophomore Tutorial* Head TF position carries the heaviest workload of all TF posts in the Government Department. In addition to my normal TF responsibilities, I hired the other TFs in a competitive application process, led weekly staff meetings, coordinated with the professors before their lectures, provided technical assistance in lecture, devised the essay assignment questions, held course-wide workshops to prepare students for the three essay assignments, established essay-grading criteria for the teaching staff, sent out all course communications, and functioned as the ‘point person’ for all student needs and concerns, administrative and otherwise. Before the *Sophomore Tutorial*, I served as Head TF for Professor Steven Levitsky’s *Comparative Politics in Latin America*. In addition to my normal TF responsibilities, I led course-wide review sessions for the midterm and final, sent out all course communications, established essay-grading criteria for the other TFs, provided technical assistance in lecture, arranged weekly lunches between Professor Levitsky and students, helped devise essay and exam questions, and functioned as the point person for student needs and concerns.

For each of the last three courses I taught at Harvard, I received a Derek Bok award. These awards are based on official student evaluations designed by Harvard’s Committee on Undergraduate Education. Awards are given each semester to the Teaching Fellows who achieve an overall rating of 4.5 or higher on the evaluation system’s 5-point scale. For my last three courses, I scored 5 out of 5 (*The Sophomore Tutorial in Government*), 4.94 out of 5 (*The Comparative Politics of Latin America*), and 4.67 out of 5 (*The Politics of Social Policy in Brazil*). The average rating for social science Teaching Fellows during these semesters ranged from 3.95 to 4.02 out of 5.
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<tr>
<th>Course</th>
<th>My Rating</th>
<th>Avg. Rating</th>
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<tr>
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As a professor, I would be delighted to teach introductions to political science and comparative politics, courses on the politics of Latin America and large countries like Brazil and Mexico, general courses on topics including political parties and regimes/regime change, and courses on quantitative and qualitative methods. I could also present more specific, in-depth lecture courses and seminars such as *The Latin American Left in Comparative Perspective* and *Social Policy in Emerging Democracies*. For departments with a graduate program, I can teach field seminars in comparative politics and Latin American politics, courses on topics such as party formation and comparative democratization, and courses in statistics and qualitative methods and research design.

As evidence of my teaching effectiveness, I am enclosing my full evaluations for the last three courses that I have taught. On the next page, I provide some unedited selections from these evaluations.

Sincerely,

Brandon Van Dyck
I don’t even know where to start. Brandon was the smartest, most accessible, and most communicative TF I’ve ever had. The way he responded so intelligently to comments both in class and in writing made you feel like he was really paying attention to what you were saying and respected what you were saying, even if you were wrong, because he would disagree politely and then offer another way of looking at things which was incredibly enlightening and encouraging. This manner of communication forced people to not bullshit in section - which made section incredibly valuable - and encouraged people with their writing, rather than giving them a false sense of doom if their ideas ran astray. (Comparative Politics in Latin America)

Brandon is the best TF that I have had in three years at Harvard. In section, he is great at structuring debate and discussions of the readings. He captures the larger themes of the week and allows students to break down the larger ideas of the week to make sure everyone understands them. Additionally he does a great job of relating the smaller ideas from each week and tying them back to the themes of the course. He is extremely accessible outside of class, willing to meet at all hours and even multiple times to discuss assignments. His feedback on papers is incredibly detailed, breaking down his whole understanding of your paper, highlighting where he thinks you did best, and pointing out where a stronger paper might have made a different argument - which really helps one become a better writer. His section and teaching were the most informative and most enjoyable part of the whole class. (Sophomore Tutorial in Government)

Brandon is the best TF I have had at Harvard. He is thorough, funny, laidback, and he really encourages and generates discussion. His feedback on my papers was so in-depth and critical, which I really appreciated and I think he might have spent more time on his comments than I did on the paper! He was always exceptionally prepared for section and his section notes were so detailed that they could’ve been used as a cursory guide to the whole course. He was super helpful outside of class and very approachable. (Politics of Social Policy in Brazil)

Brandon Van Dyck is a dream TF! Seriously, I didn’t know Harvard could snag someone this brilliant and talented to be a TF! He is fluent in Latin American politics and history, which is no easy feat, and is one of the nicest, least pretentious, helpful, and smartest TFs I’ve had. Also, I mentioned this before, but the section notes he e-mailed out each week were pure gold. I wish I could’ve made better use of his office hours, but even though I didn’t make it to them, I learned a ton from Brandon. My only criticism would be that I’m afraid he is setting me up for disappointment with future TFs here, because I doubt many of them are as good as he is. (Comparative Politics in LA)

He was unreal; best TF I have had thus far at Harvard. (Comparative Politics in LA)

Perfect. Better than a lot of professors. (Politics of Social Policy in Brazil)