

Daniel R. Cahoy Philosophy of Teaching

I have the amazing opportunity – and challenge – to teach constitutional law, legal rules and principles, as well as the very structure of the international community to undergraduate students who live in a primarily quantitative world. Business law is not a major at Smeal, and for that reason, many of our students initially see it as an ancillary requirement to their chosen field of study. Some have a high degree of trepidation about law classes (or lawyers!). But it is important that I reach them, because business law is the part of our curriculum that provides what the Carnegie Foundation¹ has termed the critical “liberal learning” component of a business education. My job is to connect with the full range of business students, regardless of major, to help them become better businesspeople as well as more engaged global citizens. I do this through a teaching philosophy that takes elements of constructionist, experiential and humanism theory to emphasize four outcomes: *critical thinking, equity and diversity, engagement and real-world experiences*.

In my courses, I stress my commitment to *critical thinking* from the outset by telling students that my objective is never to tell them what to think, but rather to help them think for themselves. That is obviously extremely important when the class topics relate to law and politics. Moreover, for students more accustomed to mathematical problem sets with clear “right answers,” they must shift their perspective. I teach critical thinking by providing logical or legal reasoning methodologies that students must use to analyze issues. Importantly, I demand that students take a position. Equally important, I often set up assignments such as class debates that require students to take a position opposite to their true opinion, which enhances their ability to see other perspectives.

Although *equity and diversity* have become an increasingly important part of the public conversation, they have always been integral to my business law instruction. Certainly, this extends to course content related to subjects like anti-discrimination law. But it also includes the diversity of perspectives I try to include on fundamental legal issues. My students from outside the United States are a particularly important source of diverse views, and I encourage them to share and feel comfortable providing a critical analysis of U.S. politics and culture. Additionally, students have a great diversity of learning styles and abilities. I design my courses with a variety of assessment tools to ensure that students can learn in the way that best suits their talents.

Student *engagement* is a significant hurdle in the business school due to large class sizes. Therefore, a critical pillar of my teaching philosophy is my mission to create and employ new ways of encouraging participation and active learning. In my experience, the lecture format has its limits. Rather than fully rely on it, I try to find ways for students to play a role in what they are learning. For example, in advanced classes, we hold mock business negotiations, research databases to landscape innovation whitespace, and of course discuss cases and articles through a relaxed Socratic method. In addition, I work to engage students outside of the classroom. Some of the most extensive opportunities I have had in this regard involved the three times I have co-led a study abroad class in Florence, Italy. My students and I traveled to the cradle of invention at Da Vinci’s birthplace, visited a farm that produces the region’s finest cheeses, and climbed the 463 steps of the Duomo. The experiences have been life changing. I believe that only by one-on-one engagement can one truly appreciate whether one’s teaching is actually effective.

Another important aspect of my teaching is the emphasis on current, *real-world learning* and experiences. The fact that the impact of law is ubiquitous and subject to constantly shifting sands provides a strong incentive to keep my material updated. In-the-news content typically underlies a lot of what I discuss in a given year. In the Spring of 2020, not surprisingly, our conversations on innovation and employment law featured COVID-19 issues and new rules. Although I am the co-author of a major, national business law textbook, I know that I cannot rest on material we wrote even a year ago.

Finally, I would be remiss if I did not note how much of my teaching depends on the fact that learning is a two-way street. My research is heavily influenced by content that I develop for class, and vice versa. I am a better scholar and individual because of my interaction with Penn State students. This is the great gift that we experience as faculty at a major research institution.

¹ Colby, Anne, Ehrlich, T., Sullivan, W.M & Dolle, J.R.. (2011). *Rethinking Undergraduate Business Education*. Carnegie Foundation: Stanford CA.