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Teaching Political Communication: Five Lessons From the Field and Beyond¹

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“Teaching political communication is, above all else, an opportunity.” These are the opening words of a forthcoming book, *Teaching Political Communication*, which we are honored to be editing for the [Elgar Guides to Teaching](#) series (Coe & Zulli, in press). Those words ring true, we hope, for the many individuals fortunate enough to teach political communication in any of its myriad forms. Political communication offers a wonderful array of content to teach and learn.

It is also evident, however, that the varied and meaningful opportunities inherent to teaching political communication exist amid a host of dramatic changes and challenges—many of which have become more acute in recent decades. Consider, for example, the rise of social media and the fragmentation of audiences for political content. These transitions have fundamentally reshaped not only the flows of (mis)information among politicians, media, and the public, but in many ways have altered the practice of democracy itself (Dimitrova & Matthes, 2018; Van Aelst et al., 2017; Scacco & Coe, 2021). The rapid uptake of artificial intelligence (AI) in recent elections (not to mention in classrooms) suggests that yet another layer of uncertainty in political communication flows is on the horizon (Schneier & Sanders, 2024).

Meanwhile, teachers across the globe who endeavor to provide an honest and accurate accounting of political realities face ever-growing challenges (Goldberg & Whaley, 2024). *Scholars at Risk* chronicles attacks on academics worldwide. Their [2024 report](#) revealed just how dire the present situation is: Of the 179 countries they analyzed, academic freedom was expanding in only ten. Scholars are facing lawsuits, legislative overreach, financial constraints, and worse—including the destruction of universities in some areas (Gretzinger & Hicks, 2024;

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Scholars at Risk, 2024; Schwartz, 2024). In many instances, those in power have co-opted worthy principles such as free speech to attack the academy and stifle dissent (Vivian, 2023; Young, 2025). There is little indication that such challenges will abate in the near future.

From our vantage point as editors of *Teaching Political Communication*, we have had the chance to observe the varied and productive ways that instructors are navigating these very real changes and challenges. In what follows, we briefly distill five key lessons that we have gleaned from the more than 40 authors who are contributing to the book.

Lesson 1: Political Communication Teaching Takes Many Forms

The first lesson we can glean from this volume is that there is a remarkable breadth of venues, approaches, and formats for teaching political communication. Certainly, political communication instruction primarily occurs in college classrooms, as evidenced by the many authors who identify first and foremost as political communication researchers and teachers at universities. However, there are growing efforts to extend this instruction outside the college classroom. For example, political communication instruction happens in public high schools through commitments to anti-racist and inclusive pedagogy, through university centers that partner with local and international organizations to promote sound journalistic and democratic practices, through campus engagement where students can apply and showcase their learning to broader audiences, in international contexts where various socio-political realities inform specific modes of instruction, and in online environments where political communication scholars and teachers share their understandings with those entering the field.

Political communication instructors are also incorporating a range of pedagogical approaches and formats to respond to the challenges of teaching in the present moment. These approaches include adopting feminist/gendered and Black pedagogical lenses, examining both mainstream and “outsider” political rhetoric, emphasizing political listening, fostering empathy and sense-making, and recognizing the affective reactions that result from discussing political and politicized topics. Many instructors are also opting for experiential learning and community/campus-based engagement to make the implications of political communication more palpable for their students. Ultimately, the chapters in this book illustrate how effective political communication teaching includes extending instruction to myriad venues and incorporating various approaches to reach diverse audiences.

Lesson 2: Systems and Structures Play a Crucial Role

Political communication scholars are well-versed in the important role that socio-political systems and structures can play in shaping behavior, so it is perhaps unsurprising that the chapters in this volume underscore the influence of these broader forces in teaching as well. At the most general level, it bears mention that institutional structures inform how teachers go about their work. A large online class, for instance, has different possibilities and constraints

than does a small in-person class. Many of the approaches and assignments described in the book would seem to be most easily employed in an in-person course with a smallish student population (e.g., 20-30), where features such as discussion, presentation, active listening, and direct observation are more smoothly facilitated. Still, adaptation is possible. In several cases, an activity that was originally designed for in-person instruction was eventually used in an online course as well.

The influence of systems and structures in political communication teaching takes many more specific forms as well. One chapter in the volume, for example, stresses the patriarchal system on which the United States was founded, building from there to illustrate the utility of helping students apply a gendered lens in analyzing various aspects of political communication. Another chapter highlights how scholars seeking to network and educate the public about their research via social media not only have to work within the affordances of major platforms but also have to navigate the (sometimes opaque) structures of the broader “scholarly ecosystem.” In one way or another, nearly every chapter reflects the importance of systems and structures.

Lesson 3: Dialogue is Foundational to Learning

Dialogue and civil discussions undergird the majority of approaches and assignments discussed in this volume. Some of the biggest challenges to teaching political communication right now are partisanship, polarization—real and perceived, ideological and affective—and the politicization of topics, such as diversity, equity, inclusion, gender, and sexuality. In the current political climate, some students are hesitant about and even resistant to engaging in political discussions. Accordingly, a central focus for the political communication instructors in this volume is teaching students how to have open, respectful, and productive conversations about politics, regardless of the topic. This includes researching multiple perspectives about a given topic, listening to understand, asking questions, considering others’ perspectives, taking turns, acknowledging students’ lived experiences, and allowing space for difficult conversations.

We see this dialogic commitment in many of the assignments in this book. For example, in one chapter detailing a course on political listening, the authors describe hosting “guest listening sessions” where campus administrators and other professionals are invited to class to listen to students and simulate the importance of listening for decision-making. In another example, an author outlines a guide for facilitating successful deliberative dialogues, which includes allowing students to choose the topic, requiring pre-dialogue preparation (e.g., reading briefing materials), assigning some students to the role of “observer,” and requiring post-dialogue reflections about the process and possibilities for dialogue. These are just two examples, but the book contains many others that center on the importance and skills of political dialogue.

Lesson 4: Creative Possibilities are Everywhere

A fourth lesson we can learn from the authors in this book is that the range of creative possibilities in political communication courses is nearly endless. It is clear from the contributions that political communication instructors are aware that students can benefit from interactive, practical, experiential, technology-integrated, and fun instruction. Traditional, lecture-based instruction still has its place, but many instructors are opting for approaches and assignments that allow students to “learn through doing” and be creative in the process. For example, to teach about the relationship between media technology and political communication, one author describes an activity where students are required to research a topic and produce information on that topic using a single medium (e.g., books vs. newspapers vs. social media). In doing so, students become familiar with the limitations and opportunities of various media formats, while thinking through the practicalities of strategic communication in changing communication environments. Other examples of creative outputs described in the book include political memes to teach about global political communication, infographics and visual timelines to teach about the history of information gatekeeping or the evolution of political campaigning, political advertisements to teach about strategic communication, and wiki-pages to teach about misinformation and digital literacy.

Thinking broadly, the willingness of political communication scholars and instructors to share their insights in this book demonstrates that other instructors should not feel solely responsible for coming up with creative lessons and assignments. The political communication discipline is full of generous and creative instructors who are dedicated to student learning—whether their own students or those elsewhere. We encourage readers to take advantage of these insights, and pay it forward when opportunities arise.

Lesson 5: Challenges Present Opportunities

We began this essay by identifying the teaching of political communication as, above all else, an opportunity. The chapters in this book reveal the encouraging reality that, amid so many recent changes and challenges, political communication instructors are still finding numerous opportunities to help students learn. In many ways, the broader challenges of the political moment—the rise in affective polarization, for example, or the resurgence of extremism and authoritarianism—help students more easily recognize the applicability of course concepts. Whether it be polling public opinion, deliberating contentious policies, analyzing political memes, assessing bias in news coverage, identifying and debunking misinformation, designing campaign ads, or simulating an election season, the stakes are clearer than ever.

More localized challenges can also present opportunities. For example, one of the contributions to the book describes how administrative constraints and other forms of pushback encouraged teachers to redouble their social justice efforts in the classroom. Another chapter discusses how initial language barriers in having U.S. students analyze political content from countries in the

Global South created an opportunity to consider what information can be conveyed via visuals alone. Yet another chapter illustrates that what might begin as a deeply challenging moments in a class can—through the use of strategies such as naming silence and space-making—turn into productive moments of student growth and community building. In these cases and many others, challenges produced opportunities that students and teachers alike were able to benefit from. This is a good reminder for all of us that now is not the time to shy from challenges. In fact, it is exactly the moment in which our best efforts as teachers of political communication are most needed.

These five lessons are not the whole story, of course, but they represent key considerations that we hope prove valuable. We also hope they encourage interested readers to seek the fuller picture by reading *Teaching Political Communication* once it is published in late 2025 or early 2026. As work on the book unfolded, we were struck by the number of times we heard some variant on the theme of scholars needing more venues to think together about how to teach political communication. We are pleased to see that some of these venues—including this welcome forum in *Political Communication Report*—are now emerging.

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