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Before we begin: Wake Up!

Robert Frost said, "I am not a teacher but an awakener." Like Frost, I believe the highest calling of teaching is to wake people up. We spend so much of our lives asleep, preoccupied with the latest thing – the latest reality tv, cd, dvd, mtv, dsm, csm, webchat, text or instant message, instafix -- that we remain unaware of what's really important. There is so much going on in the world that deserves our attention. Helping to make people mindful and aware is the ultimate goal of this course: I hope that each student will strive to become an awakener.

Teaching Philosophy: It's not about the "A"

Be the teacher ... If you grew up with the idea that 'teachers teach and students learn,' then my approach is likely to be disorienting at first, if not frustrating. You'll soon get the hang of it, though. Good teachers are foremost good students; we wouldn't have a passion for our teaching if we didn't have a drive to understand. At the same time, ***good students always have something to teach.*** I come to the classroom every day expecting to learn, and I'm rarely disappointed. Typically the students who do best in my classes are those who are willing to engage in a discussion about important issues and question some of our long-held beliefs and assumptions.

Stop making sense ... Our media is filled with bloggers and talkers quick to tell us how the world really is. Rarely are their opinions insightful. In these courses ***questions are more important than answers.*** We should all strive to see the world with the mind of a beginner -- an alert, inquisitive attitude.

Fail ... We've worked so hard to become competent and unassailable that we quiver at the notion of uncertainty – or worse -- being wrong. Our minds become petrified, rooted in the known ground, comfortable within the limits of our clay pots. Being a beginner means ***taking chances, moving beyond the bounds of comfort and complacency that define our acceptance in society.*** Every failure leads to enlightenment. To never fail is to never strive.

See. With clarity, see the world for all of its possibilities. Few things in the world are as they seem. Be aware of the blinders, biases and experiences that keep us from seeing the world, as Blake wrote, "in a grain of sand."

Have the courage to ask the stupid question. No question is more profound than the one that remains unasked. Our world is full of what some refer to as "conventional wisdom": the ideas that everyone accepts, the responses that everyone makes with the certainty and precision of a symphony, and the mass cheering of a nation at a ball game or a bomb strike all deserve to be confronted with the simple, stupid question. In this course, students will be challenged to ask penetrating questions that move the class toward a deeper understanding of the world around us.

Goals and Expectations

Take the initiative. I want each student to get the most out of this course. Those who want help simply need to ask for it early enough to make a difference – before projects are due and before their grades slip too low to be recovered. I'm available to help students and have lots of flexibility to work with students with different needs and abilities. I am available before and after school. Students can also reach me through email (krogers@lghs.net -- please begin the subject line with "STUDENT").

Strive to understand the material. I expect each student to work to the best of his or her ability. My goal is to help students achieve their potential. ***Students who strive to understand the material, who are conscientious, and demonstrate good effort will be rewarded with new insight and understanding.***

Be mindful of others. The world is brutal enough as it is. Maturity and respect are essential. In the classroom I expect that all students will behave in a mature manner and treat each person in the classroom with respect. The subjects that we will be discussing are contemporary and sometimes people get carried away with their ideas. However, this class requires students to use a thoughtful, reasoned approach when addressing hot-button issues. Students who show disrespect to others will be dismissed from the classroom and may receive additional disciplinary action.

Get involved. During this course I'll use question-based discussions extensively (what we call the *Socratic method*) along with some lecture, group presentations, simulations and the occasional film to explore a wide range of issues. The course is very fluid – its focus may shift dramatically as current events unfold that present us with important issues. The upshot of all this is that ***participation is vital to student success in this course***: this means that students should be active discussants who can demonstrate knowledge of current events and how they apply to what we're learning.

About Your Instructor

This is my eleventh year teaching at Los Gatos. I love teaching here because of the terrific enthusiasm among the students as well as the generous support from parents and the community. Los Gatos also benefits from having some of the most dedicated and gifted teachers in education. And as hard as we work, we also have fun. Where else will you find teachers willing to place their authority – not to mention their dignity – on the line in front of the whole town to raise money for charity and get a few cheap laughs at the Fractured Follies?

I come to the subjects I teach – Government, AP Comparative Politics, and Economics – not so much as an educator, but rather as a practitioner. My knowledge of these fields is informed by a wide range of experiences, including six years in the military, performing search and rescue, intelligence, and drug enforcement for the Coast Guard; teaching and research in International Security and Development Studies at the University of Oslo's Peace Research Institute (PRIO); over a decade of consulting with federal, state and local government agencies on public policies related to education, labor, and poverty; and international travels that include developing countries like Mexico, Guatemala, Cuba and Egypt. I have a passion for these subjects because I believe that we all affect the people around us – near and far – and it's important for each of us to understand how we are both affected by and affect others in the world.

I am biased ... so are you. One of the key objectives for this course is that we learn to recognize the bias inherent in the points of view being offered and the limits they impose on a clear understanding of the situation. Bias and limited perspectives are apparent in every medium -- whether on TV, in newspapers or magazines, the internet, individual blogs, or in the classroom. My approach to teaching may differ from others. I firmly believe that **Social Studies without controversy is nothing more than indoctrination**. All of us come with experience and knowledge that skew our individual points of view. Intellectual honesty demands that I be matter-of-fact and upfront about my viewpoints rather than hide behind a veil of "objectivity." This does not mean that I present only one point of view in class, nor does it mean that I present opinions as facts. Indeed, students will be exposed to a wide range of viewpoints in this course, and they will be exposed to different ways of interpreting facts, including demographic and polling data. Rather than ramming my point of view down students' throats, ***I see that the inevitable disagreements we have are an opportunity to learn from one another***. Respecting points of view while engaging people in thoughtful discussion help us avoid simplistic solutions.