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Ryan D. Enos

Political Science

WHEN RYAN ENOS TOOK A YEAR OFF FROM his work as a teaching assistant in political science—a fellowship was supporting his research on the relationship between a neighborhood’s racial makeup and residents’ likelihood of voting—he ended up finding another way to reach his chief pedagogical goal. Collaborating with his mentor, Professor Lynn Vavrick, on a research seminar for undergraduates, Ryan showed them how to geocode data and how to create Google maps—in other words, they learned the basic tools for producing knowledge themselves.

While Ryan was teaching at a Chicago high school, a friend shared with him an old teaching adage—“I want to give them fishing poles, instead of fish”—and this has become a foundation of his teaching philosophy. Recognizing that most of his students will not become political scientists, Ryan nevertheless believes they can go beyond learning the substance of the discipline to examining the questions—and the ways of answering them—that drive the discipline.” As he sees it, “analytical thinking is important to any career, and it is important to citizens in a democratic society.”

To accomplish his goals, he also uses examples from his research in class. In one class, he showed a Google Earth virtual flight over the Los Angeles freeway system to invite students to consider the

impact freeway construction had on neighborhoods and the current lifestyles in areas adjacent to freeways. In a class on the 2008 presidential election, he sent students in groups to two polling places on Election Day to collect and analyze data.

Teaching is a combination of science and art, Ryan says. The science can be as simple as repeating key points and writing on the white board while talking so students can access information in different modalities. “Art in teaching, like most art, involves passion,” he says, and “wonder is a crucial ingredient in passion. I try to provoke wonder in my students by asking the same questions that provoke wonder in me. Why do U.S. cities look so different than cities in other parts of the world? Why, if people want to live in integrated neighborhoods, is segregation so persistent?

Ryan is also a promising young researcher, his mentor Professor Vavreck says, and researchers at top ten schools have shown an interest in his work. With his PhD nearly in hand, Ryan is a visiting fellow this year at Harvard University’s Institute for Quantitative Social Science, and this fall, he will remain at Harvard as an assistant professor of government.

ABOVE: Ryan Enos in his office at Harvard. *Graduate Quarterly* readers may remember him from the Winter 2009 article “Political Change, Economic Challenge.”