OBJECTIVES
In describing the complexities of teaching a course on Middle East Politics, Shanna Kirschner notes that teachers confront two intertwined issues: first, that students often enter courses with deeply ingrained “stereotypes, biases, and inaccurate information,” and, second, that “many students do not express these beliefs for fear of offending or contradicting others” (2012, 753). My experiences as a teacher for a variety of classes suggest that Kirschner’s claim is broadly applicable: many students have entered my courses with misinformation and underlying prejudices. My primary goal as a teacher is not to disabuse students of falsehood and usher them into the simple and singular domain of truth, but rather to aid students in finding their own scholarly voice. For example, in teaching Y311 (Democracy and National Security), my hope was never to convince students of the normative value of restrictions on civil liberties in post-9/11 America; instead, my objectives were to furnish students with an analytic framework through which to articulate their thoughts and to arm them with an appreciation of alternative theories.

Creating a safe, inviting space wherein students know they can express their thoughts, however crude or unpopular, is necessary for students to grow into strong, empathetic scholars. I am aware that as a person who presents as brown, Muslim, heterosexual, middle-class and male, the classroom spaces available to me are different than those available to many of my colleagues. Given this, I use several techniques to help all my students feel secure. First, I strive to model good behavior: I make eye contact with students when they speak; I never interrupt students, engage in side conversations, or raise my voice. I am deeply conscious of gendered and sexualized language and typically employ gender neutral or feminine pronouns and avoid assumptions of heterosexuality. I am relentlessly enthusiastic about the material under consideration. Student evaluations indicate that my efforts to foster a positive space have been successful: for each of my courses last year over 80% of students stated they would encourage others to take classes with me (well above departmental and university means), and students’ comments generally affirmed this—e.g., a student in my Human Rights in the Muslim World (I-304) course notes: “The learning environment is amazing. He treats us like equals and is very accessible as a professor.”

I employ three additional strategies to facilitate student growth. Specifically, as discussed below, I use a diverse array of course materials and evaluation strategies to accommodate people with different learning styles and abilities: to this end, I incorporate video clips, short films, documentaries, and occasional powerpoint lectures in my courses to ensure that visual learners have opportunities to excel. I have found that this brings out the best of all students, as evident in my evaluations wherein over 90% of students affirmed that I “motivated” them “to do their best work” for each of my three courses last year; indeed, for two of my three courses over the past year every single one of my students (100%) shared that they were motivated to do their best work. Third, by placing students in conversation with thinkers of diverse viewpoints, in assigned readings and in-class media, I hope to demonstrate the danger of stereotypes while also helping students develop an empathetic, savvy perspective that values different perspectives. Students appreciate that they encounter very different thinkers: a student from my I-304 course (Spring 2015) writes, “I honestly found all the readings really interesting and engaging. I appreciated how you paired adjacent/opposing viewpoints on the issues together so that our understanding of an issue was more comprehensive.” Fourth, and finally, I structure classes such that all students have the opportunity to speak: to accomplish this I invite shy or quiet students to read or paraphrase their free writes early in group conversations, I encourage people who have not participated in a classroom discussion to share their views, I insist that only one person can speak at a time, and I only rarely engage students in terms of “right and wrong” to ensure that students who feel marginalized or insecure in college classrooms, often students from underrepresented groups, feel safe sharing their perspectives.
My primary goals as a teacher are: first, to afford students substantive information on the topics at hand; second, to foster an awareness of and learn the limits of relevant theories; third, to help students become more discerning consumers of mass media, and; fourth, to work with students to unpack the assumptions that inform their opinions such that they become more critically aware thinkers and writers. My hope and belief is that these four goals will help students identify and develop their own scholarly voice.

METHODS
I have developed several strategies in pursuit of these broad goals. First, in my experience it has been crucial that my syllabi are equal parts challenging and plausible. As such, I assign theoretical texts alongside media that has more informational content, often news media articles, blogs, films, and short videos. This strategy is noted and valued by students, e.g., from my I-210 (Fall 2014) evaluations, “I definitely liked your inclusion of “Dr. Strangelove” and “Years of Living Dangerously” into the coursework, though, and then devising activities to make those relevant to what was being discussed in class.” Moreover, drawing on Gaughan’s approach, my syllabi traverse “contact zones”—that is, I intentionally engage controversial issues in the hopes of keeping students invested in conversations by identifying immediate, salient stakes. For example, for my Democracy in the Muslim MENA course (Y200), in one class period we discussed two challenging academic articles and a short essay from Foreign Policy that explore gender in Muslim democracies, and watched the second half of a My Country, My Country; a documentary on the 2005 Iraqi elections. Finally, I clearly state in the syllabus—and again in class sessions—the learning goals, objectives, and evaluation methods of our course. Students have recognized this facet of my course-persona: in response to the question “how clearly were course learning goals and objectives communicated to you,” over 90% of my students over the past year responded either “clearly” or “very clearly”—significantly higher than departmental and university averages.

In addition to being attentive to the complexities of designing a useful syllabus, I am dedicated to creating a safe, student-centered learning environment and consider the production of this space both a normative good and also an instrumental goal towards my broader objectives. Specifically, I am invested in creating classroom spaces that allow students to consistently interact with one another every time we meet, such that students can better appreciate others’ views and also forge their own voice. To do this I begin roughly half of my classes with a brief, graded free write exercise, which not only ensures that students read the assign texts, but, more importantly, affords them a chance to collect their thoughts and safely develop an observation that they can later contribute to a conversation. An example of effective free writes was when a shy student, I’ll call her Anne, shared that she felt uncomfortable speaking in public. After a long conversation in office hours we agreed that she would read her free write out to the class several times a month for one month, and that if her anxieties continued we would find new ways for her to contribute. Within weeks Anne had grown as a student-scholar: she regularly ventured outside of her free writes and consistently contributed to conversations with her peers. I have found that with students like Anne it has been important for me to communicate my excitement about the subject and my care for each student—as suggested by research (Patrick, Hinsely, and Kemper (2000)). In addition to the example of Anne, student evaluations indicate that my students feel safe and comfortable: a student from my I-304 (Spring 2015) shared: “Ahmed did a wonderful job creating a very safe environment in which to discuss tough issues and really encouraged a group dynamic that was conducive to learning and collaboration.” Finally, to help students develop a scholarly voice that travels outside of our classroom, I create different classroom contexts. For example, I routinely break classrooms into small groups, thereby allowing students to tackle particularly thorny issues in an intimate setting, and
then ask groups to share their insights with the whole class afterwards. In short, my readings on teaching and experiences as an instructor inform my sense that in order to help students develop their scholarly voice I must consistently employ several, diverse pedagogical strategies while always attending to the specific needs of individual students and specific cohorts.

**ASSESSMENT**

Because there are as many learning styles and abilities as there are students, I create varied opportunities for students to demonstrate their growth as scholars. For example, in addition to providing classes with a useful structure and students with an easy portal to conversations, free writes, reading responses, and class participation are crucial tools in how I evaluate students’ performance in my class. Alongside these three techniques for assessment, I use exams, papers, and group work (for what Occhipinti (2003) dubs “cooperative learning”) to afford students diverse opportunities to critically engage course materials and develop their own thoughts.

In the spirit of creating a respectful, collaborative classroom I invite students to share their evaluations of me over the course of the semester. I am always available for students to voice their concerns about our course—from texts to course policies to how in-class dynamics. Alongside this informal process, I have found it very useful to conduct anonymous mid-term feedback in my courses: this allows me to make sure that I am meeting students’ expectations without exceeding their capacities and to recalibrate the course as needed, including changing readings, adjusting class sessions to include more or less lecture, videos, group work, and so on. In other words, I am committed to each group I work with having a voice in their learning experience.