Joshua A. Tucker  
Golden Dozen Award Nomination  
Teaching Philosophy  

My basic teaching philosophy is that different students in the classroom both have different goals and learn best in different ways. As someone who has only taught undergraduates at NYU in large lecture courses, addressing this requires some degree of creative thinking, which I believe my approach to teaching “Introduction to Comparative Politics” illustrates. I have three goals for this course: to give students a basic understanding of fundamental political concepts and questions; to introduce students to the myriad of interesting sub-fields of study that make up comparative politics so that they can see if there is a particular substantive area (e.g., elections and voting, ethnic conflict, etc.) about which they would like to learn more or conduct their own independent research in the future; and to teach my students about the actual process of conducting political science research. By mixing together these three goals, my hope is that the course will have something to offer all of the students taking it: those who will definitely go on to be Politics majors; those who are trying to decide in what field they should major; and those who are just interested in learning something about politics and government before they leave college.

Pedagogically, the lectures I give for each of these units become the focal points of the course, with the readings, recitations, and evaluations offering other opportunities for the students to learn about the concepts introduced in lecture. For example, in recitation I utilize a variety of different approaches, including role playing, simulations, and games. I also frequently use a teaching technique called “think, pair, share” to prepare for many of these group activities. Think, pair, share allows students who are normally reticent about participating in a group activity (or even speaking in public) a chance to develop their own thoughts in a less intimidating environment. The process works as follows. We introduce a question that might serve as a basis for a debate (or a role play activity). Students are given 5-10 minutes to come up with their own answers to the question (“think”) which they write down. They are then paired with another student to discuss their answers together (“pair”), thus allowing everyone the opportunity to speak their ideas out loud and bounce them off another person. Then when the group convenes (“share”), even the most timid students have already had a chance to think up things to say and actually say that out loud to another student. These various more interactive activities represent a second chance for students to grasp the concepts introduced in the lectures. The readings act as a third way for students to learn the most important concepts of the unit. With these different tools, then, I have a variety of ways of trying to convey information to my students: one student may pick up the distinction between a parliamentary and presidential system of government from listening to a lecture; another from working with classmates to decide whether the fictional country of Livonia would be better served by a presidential or parliamentary system of government; and still another from being able to closely read and reread academic literature on the subject.

I also approach the evaluation component of the course as yet another opportunity to tap into different ways to learn about the course matter. Some students benefit from having to look at all materials from the course simultaneously, which is why I include a final exam for my lecture classes. However, other students benefit from the opportunity to think for an extended period of
time about a particular topic, which is why I also always include a take-home essay as one of my course assignments.

In addition to the standard version of the Introduction to Comparative Politics course, I also worked with the Alexander Hamilton Institute and the Dean’s Office to develop an Honors Section for the course. The Honors Section adds extra writing and an applied policy component beyond what is found in the standard class. More specifically, the honors students hone in on three of the course’s topics, carrying out a more serious in-class debate on an applied version of each topic and then writing an essay that explores another applied aspect of the topic.

In the Politics Department, all independent research is supervised by professors assigned to precisely that task as one of their teaching requirements. I have not filled this role yet, although I look forward to doing so in the future. I have, however, contributed to independent research by undergraduates in the department in a number of other ways: exposing students to basic questions of research design in my courses; introducing them to a variety of different subject areas in an effort to find a topic that excites them enough to conduct independent research; providing additional writing training to the students in the Honors Section of Introduction to Comparative Politics; serving as informal advisors to students working on undergraduate theses in the department; serving as a discussant at conferences where undergraduates present their research; and having undergraduates work as research assistants for me.

Finally, I feel strongly that students are more likely to get excited about their course material when they have a professor who is excited about the topic. Thus I am happy to note that many of my course evaluations speak to my enthusiasm for my subject matter, and how that enthusiasm is readily apparent to my students.

Recent Course Evaluation Guide Ratings

Introduction to Comparative Politics: 4.84 Instructor rating
Introduction to Comparative Politics Honors Section: 5.0 Instructor rating
Comparative Politics of Elections and Voting: 4.78 Instructor rating