

Teaching Statement

Katherine McKiernan

Web: <http://www.katherinemckiernan.com>

Teaching Philosophy

Teaching should not only focus on the material, but also on building the skills necessary to succeed outside the classroom in a variety of career paths. In order to achieve this aim, I prioritize critical analysis and encourage students to draw connections between theoretical concepts. I use real-world examples and design assignments in order to emphasize these skills.

In order to build critical analysis skills, I ask students to write down three key points from each reading I assign: (1) What was the main argument; (2) How was the argument supported; (3) Why is (or isn't) this support convincing? This strategy helps to facilitate discussion about the strengths and weaknesses of different arguments. When students come to class with a sense of their own evaluations of the readings, we can have deeper discussions on how to analyze theories and research in political science. Furthermore, this exercise sets standards for the class about how to thoughtfully engage with big ideas and how to build arguments in their own writings.

Similarly, I design class activities, writing assignments, and exams as opportunities to succinctly communicate arguments. In the classroom, I use both class debates and small group work to help students practice building arguments based on their readings and my lectures. Throughout the semester, I assign several short papers to encourage students to be thorough in their analysis of a single idea. For example, in my Introduction to Comparative Politics Class, I ask students to select a country they are interested in at the beginning of the semester. I then assign two short papers asking students to become country experts and analyze different features of their chosen case. This assignment is designed to minimize the scope of what students are researching and emphasize the importance of using evidence to support their own arguments. Many students have referred to writing these papers as their favorite part of class. Finally, during exams I often present fictional situations that combine different concepts from the course and ask students to defend a policy recommendation.

In order to help students draw connections between ideas, I ask them to present current events where they relate a current story in the news to the themes we are discussing in the class. I ask students to end these presentations with a discussion question that we can use to better apply the concepts from class to the news story they have presented. During class, I use simulations in order to help students apply their readings to real-world scenarios and I ask students to think about how they can use the research process to better understand problems in the world. I combine ideas and applications to encourage students to think about how research can help explain the world around us.

Teaching Experience

During my time at the University of North Carolina, I had the opportunity to teach my own Introduction to Comparative Politics Class and serve as a Teaching Assistant(TA) for both undergraduate and graduate level courses. In order to help maximize what students

can learn from my classes, I consult with the students about their needs throughout the semester and with my colleagues when designing exams and essay prompts.

I prepared and taught my own Introduction to Comparative Politics course. As the primary instructor, I developed my own syllabus and prepared new essay topics and exams. When designing this course, I was influenced by many of the strategies I observed as a TA. However, since my class was capped at forty-five students, I was able to include even more participation-based activities that facilitated class discussion in a lecture setting. My course is divided into three large units: Democracy and Democratization, Varieties of Non-Democracy, and Modern Topics in Comparative Politics. Within each unit, classes are centered on different theoretical concepts. During class, I use case examples, simulations, debates, and group works to understand how concepts from readings look in practice. This approach combines abstract concepts and real-world examples in order to help students understand the complexity of political systems across the world.

In addition to teaching my class, I was the teaching assistant for Introduction to Comparative Politics and Introduction to Latin American Politics. For these classes, I led three sections of twenty students each. I designed my recitation sections each week to help students engage with the content from readings and lectures. I began each class with discussion questions, presented by students, to illuminate what they found interesting or puzzling in the lectures and readings. Then, as in my own class, I used a combination of activities in order to encourage active learning. In order to help my students feel more comfortable participating and sharing their viewpoints, I worked to make sure my classroom was a safe place for students to discuss the material, ask their questions about readings and lecture, and improve their reading and studying habits. In both my own course and my recitation sections, I remind my students that it is important to engage in civil discussion so they can learn from their peers' unique viewpoints.

Finally, at the graduate level I was a teaching assistant for Game Theory I. In this course, I worked with graduate students to review key concepts from algebra and calculus. In the lab section of each lecture, I helped students develop intuitive solutions and approaches to solving different types of formal models. In addition to answering mathematical questions about how to solve formal models, I answered theoretical questions about how to use formal models in political science research.

Teaching Interests

I am interested in teaching a wide range of undergraduate and graduate level courses drawing from my own research and experience. In addition to introductory comparative politics courses, I am interested in teaching courses such as Latin American politics, distributive politics, democratization, and the political economy of development. At the graduate level, I'm interested in teaching seminars on democratization, clientelism, and decentralization. I am eager to teach and contribute to methods courses. At both the undergraduate and graduate level I can teach courses on game theory, probability theory, regression analysis, and the research process. I would also be interested in contributing to graduate methods electives including multi-level models, Bayesian statistics, and survey experiments.