Changing Things Up: Critical Thinking, Information Literacy, & Technology in a Comparative Politics Classroom

Dr. Jennifer L. Epley
Department of Social Sciences, Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi

"DOUBLE WHAMMY" CHALLENGE

Comparative politics courses at the introductory level usually use a country case approach. Most textbooks available for purchase are organized by countries, not by research questions, concepts, or theories. A common approach is to have an introduction; chapters on Great Britain, the United States, Germany, Russia, China, India, and Mexico; and a conclusion. Books try to avoid confusion by covering the same topics under each country. Examples include political institutions, political economy, leadership, and political behavior.

Based on experience, I have found that undergraduate students get confused and overwhelmed by this traditional approach. American undergraduate students often know very little about political science (especially the field of comparative politics) or much about countries other than the United States. They can easily get lost in the "new language" of the discipline and the "new information" of international geography, cultures, governments, and economies. A student once told me it was like a "double-whammy" for learning.

Added to this "double-whammy" for learning is the special challenge for instructors to effectively and efficiently incorporate technology into the classroom to facilitate critical thinking and information literacy.

CONTEXT

Course type: Upper-level political science course, but introductory for the sub-discipline of Comparative Politics

Majors: Mainly for political science majors; some from history, economics, and other academic disciplines

Class size ranges: 20-35 students

COURSE REDESIGN

Key Changes:

• Emphasize a theoretical approach throughout the course and weave in comparative country data as needed.
• Include more technological tools to improve students’ abilities to find, synthesize, verify, and present information.

Main Goals:

A. Students will shift from overly focusing on memorizing or recording country information to understanding and analyzing comparative contexts.
B. Students will learn to ask the "right" kinds of political science questions no matter what country or set of countries they are studying and develop the ability to make insightful comparisons.

Learning Objectives:

1. Identify what information (theory and data) is needed to understand a research puzzle,
2. Understand how to organize that information or understand how others have organized such information,
3. Evaluate resources for accuracy and completeness, and
4. Know how to share information.

NEW TEXTBOOK

Changing emphasis to theory & application:

PART ONE. INTRODUCTION
Ch. 1. Issues in Comparative Politics
Ch. 2. Comparing Political Systems

PART TWO. SYSTEM, PROCESS, AND POLICY
Ch. 3. Political Culture & Socialization
Ch. 4. Interest Articulation
Ch. 5. Interest Aggregation & Political Parties
Ch. 6. Government and Policymaking
Ch. 7. Public Policy

EXAMPLE ASSIGNMENTS

Problem Sets: In pairs or groups of three, students will work together to complete in-class problem sets. These "Data Days" will involve online searches and group work to replicate tables and figures from the textbook, but for different countries. We will also have "Debriefing Days" where groups will discuss the positives and negatives of their approaches and findings.

Infographic: In groups of three, students will produce an educational infographic to demonstrate their skills and knowledge in Comparative Politics and new technology.

PLUS NEW RUBRICS: Critical Thinking VALUE Rubric and Information Literacy VALUE Rubric from the Association of American Colleges and Universities (http://www.aacu.org/value/ or value@aacu.org)