

Teaching Political Science Online at the Introductory, Major, and Graduate Levels: Designing and Delivering Courses for Student Engagement and Success

Ross C. Alexander (roscalex@iue.edu) ■ Indiana University East
Lilia G. Alexander (lgalexan@iue.edu) ■ Indiana University East

ABSTRACT

This research highlights several best practices and innovative approaches in the online teaching of political science courses at the introductory, major, and graduate levels, based upon the extensive online teaching and curriculum development experience of the authors at multiple institutions, utilizing various learning management systems. In many instances, online courses in political science are better or more appropriate options compared to traditional, face-to-face courses due to the level of innovation and flexibility available to instructors and students. Therefore, political science faculty should embrace rather than resist online teaching and learning.

INTRODUCTION

Well-intentioned, innovative, and conscientious professors and instructors in all disciplines, including political science, work diligently to design assignments, assessments, projects, papers, and discussions that actively and substantively engage their students, which is an ongoing process and challenge. In all delivery modalities—traditional (face-to-face), hybrid/blended, and online—the notion or definition of “quality” from a teaching and learning perspective has evolved from the lecture as the primary teaching tool to a multi-faceted approach whereby instructors employ integrated methods, strategies, and techniques to better engage students. The latter approach often involves the use of technology, of varying forms of sophistication. Perhaps the greatest challenge for faculty members in this evolution of student engagement is teaching online. While some instructors were early adopters who embraced online teaching, and have been doing so successfully for over 15 years, others have been more resistant or hesitant.

Scholars of online teaching and learning (Schmidt, Hodge & Tschida, 2013; Mueller, Mandernach & Sanderson, 2013; LaPrade, Gilpatrick & Perkins, 2014; Bolliger and Wasilik, 2009; Kearns, 2012; Freeman and Tremblay, 2013) concur that, in order to be effective, instructors teaching online must actively and intentionally develop their online teaching skills. Additionally, acquiring, developing, and maintaining those skills may take more time and effort in the online environment compared to the traditional environment. Importantly but not surprisingly, there tends not to be one-best method for developing online teaching skills (Schmidt, Hodge & Tschida, 2013). Rather, instructors learn best and become better online instructors through actually teaching online, intentionally developing their skills and approaches, and through reflection and improvement (LaPrade, Gilpatrick & Perkins, 2014; Kearns, 2012; Bolliger and Wasilik, 2009). While some institutions that offer online courses and degree programs require instructors to complete an online teaching orientation prior to teaching in the modality for the first time, others do not. Additionally, some of these orientation programs or modules are lengthy and well-developed, while others are more perfunctory in nature. Simply, there is wide variation across the academy with regard to preparation for online teaching. Just as

new teaching assistants or instructors oftentimes have precious little training before teaching at the university level in the traditional environment, online instructors that are new to the modality sometimes lack proper training.

Those who teach online know that frequent and reliable student feedback is key to assessment and learning. Oftentimes, the lack of human interaction or connection can cause students to “drift” from the class. Therefore, instructors must structure assignments and assessment to effectively and actively engage students to keep them involved in class. Scholars note that student engagement, interest, and success in online courses depends in large part on the ability to instructors and course developers to design assessments, assignments, and projects that are interactive, substantive, genuine, and frequent; providing detailed feedback on progress and performance (Kearns, 2012; Espasa and Meneses, 2010; Park and Mills, 2014; Rhoades and Rhoades, 2013; Sorensen, 2014; Tsai, 2013). Interestingly, faculty in the traditional, classroom environment can face similar challenges in the online environment. For instance, large class size can have a negative effect upon student success and engagement (Sorensen, 2014; Rabe-Hemp, Woolen & Humiston, 2009). However, while challenges remain, online program development and delivery has become pervasive, even within the natural sciences, mathematics, and foreign language (Sun, 2014).

So what about political science? How do instructors and course designers best develop and deliver courses to effectively engage students? Very little has been written regarding the teaching of political science in the online environment, or even in the hybrid/blended environment. LaForge, et al. (2015); McCarthy and Anderson (2000); Bliuc, Ellis, Goodyear, and Piggott (2010); Beck (2010); and Goldsmith and Goldsmith (2010) have addressed the notion either directly or tangentially, noting many of the same challenges and opportunities as the scholars mentioned above. How should political science faculty members teaching online structure and deliver their courses compared to others throughout the social sciences or humanities? Should consideration or differentiation be given to the level or type of course—introductory, major-level, or graduate?

This research will attempt to answer the aforementioned questions based upon the extensive online teaching experience, course development experience, and curriculum development experience of the authors—at the graduate and undergraduate levels, across multiple institutions, utilizing multiple learning management systems (LMS), from both a faculty member and administrator perspective, over the past 12 years. The authors will communicate several best practices and techniques—developed through extensive experience teaching online, academy-wide standards, formal and informal student feedback, peer review and feedback, and supervisory feedback—for designing and teaching political science courses from the introductory level through the graduate level.

Presently, the authors serve at regional campus (approximately 4,700 students) of a large, Big Ten, research institution that is heavily invested in online education, with over 50% of the institution’s credit hours derived from online courses. Over 60% of all students take at least one online course per semester. Students can choose from roughly 12 completely online degree programs and hail from 46 U.S. states and over a 17 foreign countries. The growth pattern and trajectory for the university is almost exclusively online. The political science major was established in 2012 as a completely online degree program and has grown quickly, now boasting over 50 majors, with three (3) full-time faculty members and several adjunct faculty members.

There are several widely held best practices or instructional techniques for online teaching and learning, regardless of discipline. Tools and strategies available to instructors are

largely limited or facilitated by the LMS available. LMS adoption is an institutional decision and there is a relatively high degree of uniformity and commonality across platforms, which include: Blackboard, Canvas, eCollege, D2L, and Angel, among others. Regardless of LMS, most online courses include such tools as threaded discussions; interactive assignments; quizzes and examinations; wikis; blogs; access to videos, links, and multimedia; peer-review; document and link sharing; and file uploads, among others. Instructors can use all or any of these available tools depending upon the course, personal familiarity and preference, and course level. What follows is a description of several approaches to teaching political science online, using the abovementioned tools in an integrated fashion, to best engage students and facilitate active learning, across several levels.

TEACHING INTRODUCTORY POLITICAL SCIENCE COURSES ONLINE

The authors possess extensive experience teaching several introductory, online political science courses at several institutions. Here, introductory courses include those typically general education courses commonly taught in most political science programs, including: American National Government, Introduction to Political Theory, Introduction to Political Science, Introduction to International Relations, and Introduction to Comparative Politics. Different institutions may have slightly different titles, but most political science curricula across the academy have very similar courses. As mentioned above, threaded discussions, interactive assignments, blog posts, multimedia presentations, file uploads, and videos are utilized throughout all of these introductory courses (as they would in most other well-designed, online courses in the social sciences or humanities) and represent academy-wide best practices and relatively standard approaches for student engagement. However, the authors employ several approaches and strategies that are unique to each individual political science course that distinguish them from other courses across disciplines. This article highlights one assignment from each course that illustrates the advantages of online delivery in facilitating active learning and engagement. Such assignments, when utilized as part of well-structured, designed, and delivered online courses, offer the students an enjoyable and invigorating experience (Kearns, 2012; Tsai, 2013), which could potentially result in the positive and consistent recruitment of majors to the political science program and overall retention and graduation rates for the institution.

First, for example, in American National Government, the authors utilize an assignment (with threaded discussion) that requires students to access and complete the official American Citizenship Exam and report their score to the class, with a detailed reflection of their experience, their score, and their personal assessment of their performance. First by posting their initial reflection based upon their individual scores and second by responding to the reflections of the classmates (both required), the assignment allows students to gauge and evaluate their baseline knowledge (or lack thereof) of basic American principles. This exercise is an effective springboard into the course, its content, and purpose, which, among other purposes, is to encourage and develop citizenship and civic knowledge. Additionally, this exercise can serve as an effective course pre-test for assessment purposes, which can be utilized as a post-test towards the end of the course. Students tend to enjoy the assignment immensely (despite being embarrassed regarding their score on the exam, in many cases) and genuinely understand the intent and purpose of framing the issue as a larger discussion. In many cases, this may be the only political science course students take at the university, in addition to potentially being the

first online course students attempt and complete. As such, course design and delivery are of the utmost importance.

Second, an Introduction to Political Theory course, despite its general education and lower-division nature, may require significant critical thinking and analytical skills, in addition to the reading and examination of relatively abstract and higher-order readings, such as Aristotle, Plato, or Aquinas. To address these complex readings and develop critical thinking skills, one approach that the authors employ in this course is the reading reaction. Shorter than a formal essay or paper, the reading reaction involves the critical assessment and review of a required reading or readings, such as an excerpt from Aristotle's *Politics*. Presented and uploaded in Word format, and approximately 500-750 words in length, the reading reaction does not require the integration of outside sources, but does require APA formatting, proper citations, and the formulation of complex thoughts and arguments. The authors provide detailed feedback, allowing students to improve their writing and analytical skills that will be of vital importance in upper-division, major-level courses. Additionally, best facilitated in the online environment, students can provide peer-review and feedback, prior to formal submission for grading. Most LMSs possess a peer-review or feedback function that allows the process to occur much quicker than in a traditional, face-to-face course (Park and Mills, 2014).

Third, Introduction to Political Science courses can have several purposes and be taught myriad ways. Most approaches involve a cursory overview of each sub-discipline within political science and an emphasis on the development of research and writing skills. In this course, in the online environment, the authors require the submission of a topic proposal, detailed outline, and annotated bibliography for a formal research paper, similar to what may be found in a face-to-face course. However, in the online environment, instructors can embed a university Librarian and Library resources within the class to aid in the research and writing process. Doing so can assist students in accessing, locating, and utilizing academic, scholarly, peer-reviewed sources, guided by an expert, in the appropriate environment, improving research and writing skills that will benefit students as they progress to major-level courses. This process is much easier facilitated in the online environment compared to the traditional face-to-face environment.

Fourth and finally, in both Introduction to International Relations and Introduction to Comparative Politics, students are in many cases exposed to international topics for the first time, not only in a college classroom but perhaps within their lives. The authors feel a tremendous obligation and responsibility to frame these international issues appropriately and in the proper context, including the use of international sources, tying back to the American perspective, where appropriate, for comparative purposes. In these two internationally focused courses, the selection of a sound and engaging textbook is perhaps most important of all introductory courses highlighted here. The authors have found the comparative tables of international rankings of nations on various indicators and topics, borrowed from organizations such as the United Nations, World Health Organization, Pew Research Center, and Amnesty International, among others to be incredibly useful to engage students to think about and question the myth of "American exceptionalism" through the critical analysis of international indices and rankings regarding education, public health, incarceration rates, quality of life, etc....The authors then utilize the blog tool within the LMS to allow and empower students to critically assess their reaction to these indices and rankings from a comparative perspective, with an additional requirement of peer-review and reaction. This has consistently been a powerful teaching and learning approach in the online environment in these two courses.

In sum, as with all effective online courses, design, delivery, and instruction are integral to student learning, experience, enjoyment, and success (Kearns, 2012; Bolliger and Wasilik, 2009). This is especially true with political science courses, given the nature of the topics addressed and taught. If structured and delivered in an intentional, consistent, and well-designed manner, these introductory courses can be a fertile recruiting ground for political science majors and minors. At the very least, these general education courses can contribute to the liberal arts foundation that is the cornerstone of most core curricula.

TEACHING MAJOR-LEVEL POLITICAL SCIENCE COURSES ONLINE

Similar to the introductory courses addressed previously, successful major-level political science courses are well-designed and delivered, providing a consistent experience for students, integrating and utilizing many of the tools previously mentioned, including threaded discussions, blogs, peer-review, interactive assignments, videos, and traditional assignments. The authors have taught dozens of online, major-level political science courses for many years at multiple institutions; too many to individually highlight here. Rather, this section will highlight three different major-level courses that utilize some unique pedagogical approaches best-utilized in the online environment that are typically found in most political science curricula—State and Local Government, American Political Theory, and Senior Seminar/Capstone.

In State and Local Government, the authors utilize two assignments that work well in the online environment and engage students with the material. First, students are required to give two presentations, one on a local government policy and one on a state government policy, using some sort of interactive presentation software (i.e. PowerPoint or Prezi). Both presentations must be narrated, incorporate multiple peer-reviewed sources, and be structured as if presented to a public body such as a city council or state legislative committee. Students are typically quite creative and gain presentation experience similar to what they would experience as practitioners of public administration presenting to a policymaking body or board. Second, students are required to “attend” a meeting of a state or local public body and offer an analysis of the proceedings and issues addressed. Here, the students must access, view, and analyze a public meeting that is either recorded or streamed live on a public website. Then, as part of their analysis, students embed highlights from the video not only to prove attendance but also to share with classmates. Both assignments have proven valuable to the course over a number of years.

American Political Theory is a much different type of course, both with regard to content and delivery, dealing with many more historical versus contemporary themes and issues. As a reading and writing-intensive course, many assignments are quite traditional and include threaded discussions, formal papers, and essay-based exams. However, one assignment that works well in the online version of this course and has proven beneficial over time is a mock “Constitutional Convention” debate. In this assignment, students are divided into teams of five to seven. Using the primary sources as a guide, they must represent the various factions and sub-factions found in the debate over the ratification of the U.S. Constitution—including the Federalists v. Anti-Federalists. First, students write and submit a relatively brief position paper outlining their particular argument. Then, they record and upload a video bolstering their written justification. Finally, they watch the videos of their “opponents” and offer a rebuttal to the various arguments. This can all be accomplished in an asynchronous manner, with different team members fulfilling different writing and speaking roles. The assignment allows the students to interact with the material and their classmates in a variety of manners and roles.

The content and structure of an online Senior Seminar/Capstone course is similar to the face-to-face, traditional version of the course, with an abundance of research, writing, and perhaps a capstone paper or thesis. However, the online version of the course allows for some assignments and approaches that are beneficial for both students and instructors. Over the years, in both face-to-face and online versions of this course, the authors have required the submission of a formal research paper that integrates some level of original research and quantitative, statistical analysis using SPSS or another statistical software package. Unlike the traditional, classroom version of the course, the online version allows for SPSS, for example, to be embedded in the LMS and for the statistical analysis to be better integrated into the final paper and course, making it smoother and easier from both a teaching and learning perspective. The technology allows students to interact more closely with the instructor on various phases and drafts of the paper, facilitating better and more substantive feedback. The authors have found that students are more comfortable with the use of the statistical package in the online version of the course versus the face-to-face version, although the package can be similarly utilized in hybrid sections of the course or even traditional sections that utilize the LMS.

In sum, the techniques, strategies, and assignments utilized in these upper-division, major-level courses engage the students in a “deeper” or more substantive fashion, from both critical thinking and analytical perspectives. As political science majors, for the most part, students in these courses should be exposed to and expect a higher level of sophistication and more challenging assignments to best engage with the material, an active learning process well-facilitated by the online environment (Bliuc, Ellis, Goodyear & Piggott, 2009; McCarthy and Anderson, 2000).

TEACHING GRADUATE-LEVEL POLITICAL SCIENCE COURSES ONLINE

At the graduate level, the authors’ experience is limited to several years of online teaching, course development, and curriculum development in MPA programs at multiple institutions. In the discipline of political science, MPA programs tend to be the most pervasive and successful online graduate degree programs, as they cater to working professionals who desire and need the flexibility of the online option. In addition to several completely online programs, many MPA programs offer selected online courses and/or hybrid/blended courses (Beck, 2010; Freeman and Tremblay, 2013). Most MPA programs have similar core curricula, so the courses highlighted here are those found in just about every MPA program across the nation. Two of these common courses that lend themselves well to relatively unique approaches or assignments in the online environment are Public Budgeting and Public Personnel Administration.

An assignment of relevance and importance to online teaching and learning in Public Budgeting is the budget analysis, where the students are required to locate, analyze, and assess an operating budget of a public agency. In the online environment, students can provide a link or links to the chosen budget and upload them with the submission of the analysis, which follows a standard set of criteria and guidelines. The analysis, report, and supporting and relevant links can be shared with peers (students) and the instructor for discussion purposes, resulting in an impactful teaching and learning exercise that is much more difficult and onerous in the traditional, face-to-face environment. For years, in the past, the authors struggled when students would submit large, lengthy, heavy budgets with the assignment that made discussion (and grading) difficult. In the online environment, the assignment is streamlined, well-coordinated, and discussion-friendly. This technology-assisted and enabled approach and assignment, first

employed in the online section, can be co-opted or utilized in traditional, face-to-face and hybrid sections of the course as well, as long as an LMS is utilized by the instructor. In many cases, instructors utilize or retro-fit assignments developed in their traditional courses to the online environment, with varying degrees of success. However, the opposite can be true as well, with approaches and assignments that are developed successfully in the online environment first, being applied to face-to-face modalities.

In Public Personnel Administration, the authors employ and utilize an assignment that is perhaps better suited to the online environment than all those highlighted in this research. In this course, students are required to analyze various job descriptions from federal, state, and local government websites and job boards using a standard set of criteria, providing detailed feedback. Then, students are required to write an original job description for a professional or managerial position in a public agency. Again, the technology allows students to access, evaluate, and upload links to real job postings for analysis, discussion, and review, a process that is difficult and time consuming at best in the face-to-face environment. The online approach empowers students to be more actively engaged in the application of the material and relevant techniques and strategies—most importantly those that they will be using as professional public administrators.

The link sharing and document sharing (with peer review) aspects and features of online courses at the graduate level are of particular relevance and importance to students because they allow for active learning, practitioner-based assignments and exercises for pre-service and in-service public service professionals. These types of assignments can be accomplished in traditional, face-to-face courses as well, but not as easily or substantively, due largely to technology and time limitations and constraints. At the graduate level, well-designed and well-delivered online courses are a valuable tool for both professors and students, allowing for innovation and flexibility (Bliuc, Ellis, Goodyear & Piggott, 2010; LaPrade, Gilpatrick & Perkins, 2014; Schmidt, Hodge & Tschida, 2013).

STUDENT PERFORMANCE

As the literature indicates, student performance in either face-to-face, traditional courses or online courses depends largely upon the level of engagement; the quality, type, and consistency of feedback; amount of peer-to-peer and student-to-instructor interaction, and course design and delivery, among other factors (LaPrade, Gilpatrick & Perkins, 2014; Sun, 2014; Tsai, 2010; Espasa and Meneses, 2009; Rabe-Hemp and Humiston, 2009; and Kearns, 2012). In the experience of the authors, student performance in online, hybrid, or face-to-face courses, using similar or the same assignments in many courses, is consistent, with few observable or significant differences. It can be difficult to draw exact comparisons or generalize across all courses over time because the authors appropriately utilize many different types of assignments depending upon the structure of the course—primarily online versus face-to-face. However, presented below is a comparison of student performance on several assignments in three courses which have been consistently-assigned across all course structures—face-to-face, hybrid, and online—one at the introductory or general-education level, one at the major-level, and one at the graduate level over a several-year period. Each course was taught multiple times per year and often several times per semester, including summers, to several hundred students over the time period studied, using the same basic evaluative rubric.

Course One: Introduction to Political Science
Assignment: Annotated Bibliography
Years Studied: 2005-2014

Course Delivery Method	# of sections	Mean Score on Assignment
Face-to-face/traditional	10	80.8
Hybrid	11	79.7
Online	8	80.2

Course Two: Senior Seminar in Political Science
Assignment: Capstone Paper
Years Studied: 2004-2014

Course Delivery Method	# of sections	Mean Score on Assignment
Face-to-face/traditional	8	78.5
Hybrid	10	79.1
Online	7	79.5

Course Three: Public Budgeting (graduate)
Assignment: Budget Analysis
Years Studied: 2004-2014

Course Delivery Method	# of sections	Mean Score on Assignment
Face-to-face/traditional	3	87.4
Hybrid	6	88.1
Online	4	87.8

While not a perfect tool or approach, a trend emerges—in the experience of the authors, over an approximately 10-year period, there was little variation among student scores on the studied assignments in the three examined courses. Interestingly, based upon the extensive experience of the authors, the distribution of final grades in online courses tends to differ from that of face-to-face or traditional courses, especially at the undergraduate level. Rather than having a distribution whereby the majority of final course grades are in the “C” to “B” range, with fewer grades of “A” or “F”, as would be expected in traditional courses, the grade distribution in online courses reflects an over-representation of grades of “A” and “D” or “F” and an under-representation of mid-range grades. The authors cannot authoritatively determine the exact reasons for this differentiation in final grade distribution between traditional and online modalities at the undergraduate level, but it represents an interesting finding that should spur further examination and discussion. At the graduate level, final grade distributions are similar in both modalities. Additionally, the authors have observed no differentiation in the withdrawal rates between traditional and online courses at either the undergraduate or graduate level.

CONCLUSION

This essay has highlighted best practices for online teaching and course design of political science courses at the introductory, major, and graduate levels, based on the extensive experience of the authors across multiple institutions and learning management systems. Course success, from both the instructional and learner perspective, in both traditional and online courses, depends in large part upon the teaching strategies of the professor and the learning preferences of the student. The authors contend that, in some cases, the online option or approach is better than the face-to-face option for certain assignments and entire courses in the discipline of political science. Furthermore, the discipline lends itself well to innovations facilitated by online instruction. The authors understand and acknowledge that there are myriad institutional, school, departmental, program, and political barriers, decisions, and obstacles that may limit or constrain the adoption, integration, and usage of the online approach within political science curricula. However, an open-mindedness and willingness to engage students using new methodologies, modalities, and approaches should be a priority of all committed and conscientious instructors—and the online option may be ideal for many. Due to the relative dearth of scholarship on the matter, further research is required.

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