
The Teacher

Encouraging the Better Angels: On Designing the Introductory Course in American Politics*

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What do we want to accomplish by teaching? In the simplest terms, we want our students to *learn*; that is, we want them to *think*, and perhaps less importantly, to *know*. We also want them to *work*. But most of our own training is in research, not teaching; we are thus fundamentally underprepared for the activity that most of us spend most of our time doing. Though some of us are naturally better teachers than others, we all tend to muddle through individually and find our own way in the classroom; along the way we discover what techniques work best, given our personalities. Indeed, those fortunate enough to be exceptional teachers often have difficulty explaining their success to others.¹ In this regard, teaching is an art. But there may be aspects of a course's basic framework that are more or less effective in the learning process, and that in turn may apply across different universities and different individual faculty members. This article addresses that aspect of teaching and learning, by providing an account of our restructuring of the introductory American politics course at Syracuse University.

In particular, we relate our attempts to effectively harness an individualized point-incentive system in the service of the broader goals of political education, and through that system to achieve a better link between the assessment of students (manifested ultimately in a final course grade), and the achievement of those educational goals. Our version of the point-incentive system is built around a varied menu of choice that engages different methods of

learning. The process of restructuring the course was informed by our past experiences as instructors of the course—particularly our frustrations—and theories of education and learning.² Before describing this restructuring, however, a note about the authors' views toward incentives in learning is in order.

Prior to the restructuring of the course, it was our view that narrow, grade-oriented incentives in college instruction were to be avoided; that they were, at best, necessary evils to be used lightly and with great trepidation. Incentives perverted the higher goals of higher education and lowered the vision of students, causing them to look upon learning merely as piece work. It was far better, so we thought, to rely on verbal challenge, encouragement of hard work, and an infectious enthusiasm for the material, in short to invite the students to join us collectively on a wonderful search for knowledge, with each student having a felt responsibility for the learning experience of the whole.³ It was far better to encourage the angels than to play to what Benjamin Barber (1984) has called, in the context of democratic theory, the "greedy little varmints" inhabiting an overly individualized society. The certification that students had successfully participated in this process would be based on their individual displays of knowledge and critical thinking in the few exams and the occasional paper they would spend the semester preparing for and writing, and in displays of their intellects in class discussion, should they choose to engage it. There was good reason for us to think in these

grander terms about the education we were providing, and to think that we would be successful with it, for this was the way we approached our own education as college students. The problem with this approach was that too many students, so it seemed to us, were not realizing their potential. Perhaps more to the point, not enough were working sufficiently hard. And those who were working hard were often frustrated by a sense that their work was not being "counted" or credited sufficiently, relative to the other laggards.⁴ Furthermore, not enough students seemed to return the enthusiasm of the instructors for the material or for the exercises that they were asked to perform. It was time either to attempt a change or become resigned to the status quo.

We decided to face the greedy little varmints head-on, to encourage them, and to put them to work for a good cause. We wanted, in a small way through a set of changes in a course, to place their naturally narrow, careerist orientation toward learning in the service of broader educational goals. We wanted them to work harder and to love doing so. And by offering a sufficient menu of choice informed by educational theories, we wanted to instill within them habits of active learning and intellectual effort—what in a different context Tocqueville called "mores"—that would carry over into future course work. Also, through an incentive system attached to a menu of choice, we hoped to link our ultimate formal assessments of the students more directly to their learning experience.

The Introductory Course: Basic Goals

At Syracuse, as at most universities and colleges, Introduction to American National Government is a course that attracts a variety of students who arrive with a variety of purposes and goals. The course is required to have two plenary (lecture) meetings a week led by a faculty member and one subdivided discussion meeting led by a graduate student teaching assistant. Attendance is supposedly mandatory for all three sessions. There are usually about 150 students in the course.

As described above, a primary concern motivating our redesign was to more closely connect our assessment of the students to their achievement of the overall educational goals of the course. Every assessment process reflects commitments to certain goals. In our case, this primary concern involved at least six more specific concerns:

- 1) Provide ample opportunities for student success. Since this is an introductory course designed to accommodate a variety of students, we wanted the assessment of the students to do the same. We wanted to provide stimulating exercises for students with different interests and different abilities. We did not, however, want to “dumb down” the course so that everyone would succeed easily; we wanted instead to provide real opportunities for success, given different student goals and experiences.
- 2) Increase students’ engagement of the course material. We held onto the ideal that all students could read all the required reading and at least some of the suggested reading. They could also attend all of the lecture and discussion sessions. They could participate in study groups outside of class and discuss the course material with fellow students.
- 3) Increase the feedback that students receive. It is vital in an introductory course that students have several chances to improve.
- 4) Connect the main substantive themes of the course with student assessment. Each instructor has certain questions and ideas that inform his or her presentation of the course material, and the students’ success in engaging these themes should be reflected in assessment.

- 5) Connect the skills to be developed with assessment. If, for example, the main goal of the course is to enable students to express themselves in their political environment, it makes little sense to use multiple choice exams.
- 6) Use the teaching assistants in the most effective and beneficial way. At Syracuse we are fortunate to have qualified teaching assistants leading discussion sessions. However, we wanted to be sure that in our pursuit of the first five goals, we did not overburden them.

The Redesign

In the specific redesign of the course, we mixed a variety of exercise types, allowing for a maximum degree of choice, while at the same time structuring the matrix of choice in such a way that each student would have to engage at some level all of the material from the course (in other words, it was not possible to concentrate all of one’s study on the presidency, to the exclusion of Congress, at least not without a large cost in assessment). The first element in this choice is simply the amount of work a student chooses to submit. The course is graded on a cumulative point system, with the letter grade equivalent for a given range of points supplied to students at the beginning of the course (a student is thus not subjected to an end-of-the-semester adjustment based on the performance of the other students). As explained in the syllabus (available from the authors), there is a maximum possible 220 points, plus a few extra-credit points.⁵ All projects have a specified maximum point value, and each submitted project is accordingly awarded a certain number of points based on its quality. The course grade scale is based on 200 points. We expected that the phenomenon of seeing points accumulate during the semester, along with the possibility of achieving upwards of 200 points by trying many different kinds of activities (again, the maximum possible is 220, not 200), would give students a greater incentive to try many different kinds of assignments. We also thought the point system might implicitly foster a sense of a

contract in the course, under which students would feel more responsible for completing the course work (see Freie 1992).

It is also important to note here that the point equivalents for a given course grade were derived from our sense, based on past experience, of how much effort it would take to complete the projects, with the effort required for a given grade being higher in our redesigned course than in past courses. In other words, this course was designed to encourage *more work* than previous introductory courses in political science, and elsewhere.

We have included a list of the assignments, along with brief descriptions of the goals toward which each assignment is directed, in Appendix A (more detailed descriptions of the assignments are found in the syllabus). The assignments include writing projects of various types and lengths; working with the Internet and electronic discussion lists; political participation; and class participation. The need for the assignments, as a cumulative whole, to engage all topics in the course was crucial to the very concept of a menu of choice; students needed to be able to discover new interests and create comparisons between the different sections of the course. The design also needed to engage students from the beginning to the end of the course, and not to encourage, or even permit, all of their work to be done within a couple weeks’ time (a seductive path for many). Such conditions do not usually yield one’s best work, nor do they allow for learning and improvement. In a similar vein, some of the most point-laden tasks for assessment involve the direct demonstration of competency with the course material. This is necessary in order to ensure that students do the required readings, attend lectures, and so on. When designing the matrix of choice, we also attempted to encourage students to perform tasks that would stimulate self-reflection and forge connections between their work in the course and political life outside of the classroom.

Prior to restructuring, the course had two midterm exams and a comprehensive final. We cut one mid-

term and made the final less comprehensive in order to allow the individual projects to meet some of the purposes previously served by exams. Regarding the individual projects, we offered students many alternatives through which to exhibit their knowledge of the course material and their ability to interact meaningfully with it, and to demonstrate their abilities in expression. Given the point system, they viewed each project as useful, since it could lead to an increase in points. Choices also exist within each assignment. Some of the assignments are more open-ended (such as the “creative project assignment”), while others provide more specific alternatives.

We are aware that choice and flexibility also add complexity and confusion, especially in an introductory course. Thus, effective communication of the course system early on was essential; indeed, the first discussion section meeting was devoted to this purpose. In addition, the syllabus is quite detailed.

Evaluation of the Course Redesign: The Early Returns

In addition to the normal channels of ongoing informal feedback, impressions on the part of the instructor and the teaching assistants, and formal end of the semester student evaluations, there were two primary methods of evaluating the success of the course redesign: 1) At several times during the semester the instructor posed a question about the course to the students participating in the electronic discussion list; 2) At the end of the semester, the instructor led two focus groups, which included students with a variety of political perspectives, backgrounds, and reactions to the course. These students were recommended to the instructor by the teaching assistants.

In particular, we were interested to learn about the students’ subjective experience of the course; specifically, whether the point system and the menu of choice encouraged the students to work harder and to strive for excellence. We also wanted to determine whether the information provided about the course over-

whelmed or confused students. In a similar vein, we wanted to discover clues for rearranging and redesigning assignments in the future.

Student reactions to the course were for the most part positive, and indicated that our most important goals were being realized. But the statistical evidence from the formal end of the semester course evaluations contained some disturbing findings. To get a sense of how the course might have changed students’ experiences, the cumulative mean responses for three basic categories of questions were compared with the same responses from four previous offerings of the same course taught

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by the same instructor. For the redesigned course, the cumulative mean response to a set of questions (on three-point and five-point scales) designed to reveal the students’ *effort* in learning was *exactly identical* to that for the previous offerings of the course. The redesigned course did score 0.12 points higher than the previous four offerings for a set of questions (on four-point scales) designed to rate the course and instructor against an intrinsic standard, and 0.12 points higher for a set of questions (on five-point scales) designed to rate the course and instructor against other courses and instructors in the college.

Informal feedback, gossip, and information from the focus groups yielded a stronger positive impression, particularly of the usefulness of choice and of the students’ level of effort in the course. Students viewed the degree of choice as helpful to their learning, and as flexible enough

to incorporate their own styles of work and approach to the material. Some reported being taken aback at first because of the extensive syllabus but then becoming excited about the opportunity to customize the assignments. One student offered, “[The course] was good, because not everyone is interested in the same thing; some people like computers, some read the newspaper, and they can show this through their choices.” Another student added, “With the amount of choices that we had, you were able to get a better quality of work from us because we are choosing something that is more detailed to what we are interested in and to what we want to do.” Yet another student said that she welcomed the choices because of her unique personal circumstances: “It gives you a way to do things in your own style.”

The students also thought that in comparison with other courses, the features of choice and the point system increased their motivation to work hard and perform well. They liked the fact that they could actually see their own points accumulating, and they were cognizant of the connections in their behavior between rewards and motivation. Perhaps most gratifying, one student in particular commented that every effort in the course seemed worthwhile, because of the point system: “I [could] really do well in this class by doing every single assignment.” In a similar vein, another student asserted that even the less motivated students are affected by this system because each time they fail to do the work, “They know exactly how much it’s setting them back.” To reinforce this notion, another student claimed that although she is not normally an “A” student and would have been happy with a “C” going into the course, the course allowed her to feel that she could work towards an “A” (which she did achieve). One student best expressed the overall theme of these reactions: “You can get an ‘A’ if you do the work.” Also note that it was the independent impression of the instructor and the teaching assistants that the students, as a whole, worked harder than students in previous courses. This effort was reflected (it is hoped) in the higher average grade earned in this

The Teacher

course, relative to previous offerings by the same instructor.

The point-incentive system also apparently provided a subjective, psychological benefit to the students. Beyond the impact on their learning effort, students liked the exact, ongoing knowledge of their grade status and of what was required for them to reach their own goals. Consider the following three comments. "It does allow you to assess yourself as you're going through the term; you know exactly where you stand and what you have to do." "I think it's critical for a student to know that he is doing well." "This is an especially well organized class. There was never any confusion of what was expected. The grade was in our hands." Another student added that he gets "turned off from a course" when he is confused about what he needs to do to receive a certain grade.

Summary

The formal assessment of student performance is both necessary and inherently flawed. From a fairness standpoint, individual grades remain to some degree arbitrary, especially in comparison with other courses and universities. Even within a course, grades may not correspond to the qualities and accomplishments instructors most want to encourage. Perhaps one of the most promising aspects of student assessment is its use as an incentive towards certain goals. In the end, however, we are certain that it is the enthusiasm of the instructor for the material that is the most contagious for the greatest number. That basic quality most naturally leads to course environments that draw students into the material; everything else flows from it. But in the context of a large introductory course, filled with a widely varied and often skeptical population, incentives can help. By examining the goals of the course and how they relate to the structure of assessment, we have tried to improve such an introductory course, and have met with some measure of success.

Appendix A: Course Requirements and Goals

Detailed descriptions of each assignment are contained in the course syllabus, available from the authors. What follows here are brief descriptions of the assignments and the primary goals toward which each assignment is directed.

Response Papers

(reflective essay responses to questions posed by the instructor during class; up to 10 points each)

- connect lectures directly with course evaluation
- serve as practice essays for exams
- create opportunity for ongoing feedback from teaching assistants to instructor about students' comprehension of course material
- add emphasis to importance of lecture material

Exams

(short answer and essay; in class; up to 35 and 45 points, midterm and final)

- assess understanding of course material
- motivate students to read material and attend class
- assess students' ability to respond to important questions

Practical Assignment

(a letter to a political representative or a written hypothetical solution to a political problem; up to 10 points)

LETTER:

- provide experience of interacting with government on a personal level
- provide opportunity to find/express a personal political interest
- enhance political skills through letter writing and research

PROBLEM ASSIGNMENT:

- provide opportunity for government interaction in a theoretical but concrete way
- create a specific experience/example that can be used as a base for future assignments
- develop research skills

Journal

(reflective essays in three possible formats—participation in an electronic discussion, written responses to course readings, or responses to clipped print media articles; up to 30 points)

- encourage self-reflection
- stimulate interaction with a variety of political views from the media, course reading, or other students
- motivate students to read course materials
- provide opportunity for initial exploration of arguments for future development in essays, papers, or projects

ELECTRONIC JOURNAL:

- enhance computer skills
- instigate peer interaction
- introduce participation in an ongoing political forum

COURSE READING JOURNAL:

- emphasize importance of readings
- explore difficult concepts for future development in essays or exams

PRINT MEDIA JOURNAL:

- encourage critical review of current events
- connect course theories to current politics

Paper

(a longer essay of three possible types—an original idea about American politics or a critical engagement of a set of course readings, a profile of an active citizen at any level, or a portfolio of various kinds of work around a theme; up to 30 points)

- require cumulation and synthesis of course experience
- encourage the application of course material to explain an observation made from students' particular perspectives
- assess writing competency
- provide opportunity for ongoing feedback from peers and teaching assistants

Creative Project

(a documented project of three possible types—engagement in political participation for 10 hours, an exploration of democratic possibilities through the Internet, or a creative exhibit or activity; up to 20 points)

- provide opportunity to explore individual interests
- encourage creative linking of course materials to individual interests
- develop skills relevant to political participation

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION:

- supply practical experience in politics outside of classroom
- encourage political activity

Internet research:

- develop computer skills
- develop research skills
- political forum

CREATIVE EXHIBIT:

- provide opportunity for students to express themselves in nontraditional ways

Section Participation

(active participation in the formal discussion sections of the course; up to 20 points)

- encourage engagement of material and class participation
- expose students to a variety of ideas
- provide opportunities for individual expression
- establish forum for political ideas
- provide ongoing feedback from peers and teaching assistants

Notes:

*The research and experience upon which this paper is based were made possible by funding from the Dean's Office of the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, and the Center for Instructional Development, both at Syracuse University.

1. Cronin (1991) offers an exceptionally useful overview of excellent teaching, along with a set of suggestions for colleges and universities to encourage and reward it.

2. We drew on the work of Freire (1970), Gardner (1982; 1993), and Knowles (1990). For a description of these theories, see Canfield and Reeher (1996).

3. Depending on the size of the class, non-graded exercises for this purpose included in-class debates, submitted questions, one-minute papers, journals, and role playing exercises.

4. The idea that this all worked itself out in the final exams, or even later in life, did not appease them; justice could not wait. In fairness to the instructors involved, it should also be noted here that the course was already considered by most students to be a success, relative to other offerings in the college. Given the type of course, this is strong praise indeed. But we wanted more.

5. Syllabi requests should be sent directly to the authors at Department of Political Science, Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY 13244.

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The Challenge of the Large Lecture Class: Making it More Like a Small Seminar

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Large lecture classes are frequently regarded as a necessary evil.¹ Such classes have to be offered in many colleges and universities to meet high student demand with limited faculty resources, but teaching a large lecture class can be a formidable task. Lecture halls are typically large, barren, and foreboding. It is difficult to get to know students. Students may seem bored in the impersonal environment and may frequently read newspapers or even leave class in the middle of a lecture. Written work by the students seems out of the question. Lecturing is the primary technique for conducting class, perhaps along with showing a few videos. The administrative details of conducting the class can seem overwhelming.

Although the challenges of teaching a large lecture class are substantial, they are not insurmountable.

The solution is to develop innovative methods of classroom instruction that can reduce, if not eliminate, many of the difficulties inherent in the mass class. In this article, we will discuss teaching techniques we have introduced in a large lecture class in American government at Kent State University which help us make a large lecture class more like a small seminar.² We will also suggest that these techniques can be applied successfully in a broad range of courses, regardless of class size.

An Overview of the American Government Class

The American National Government class at Kent State is probably similar to introductory American government classes taught at many colleges and universities. The course

is required for all political science majors and minors, and it is an optional liberal education requirement for all Kent State students. Several sections of the course are offered each semester, with each section being taught as a separate course by various faculty members. The largest section typically enrolls between 100 and 150 students each semester, and it is this class which is the focus of this article. In an average semester, approximately 70% of the students take the course to fulfill a liberal education requirement, 25% of the students are majors or minors, and the other five percent take the course as an elective. The students are predominantly freshmen (50%) and sophomores (30%). The abilities of the students vary widely, but the average student has around a C+ grade average.

In many ways, the class is con-