

Why I teach on Iraq in my American Government Class

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ABSTRACT: This talk is an example of internationalizing the curriculum at the micro-level, lecture by lecture.

What I do: I teach my students using situational assignments which require them to apply conventional concepts in unconventional applications. Several examples of international versions will be explained: e.g. explaining to an Iraqi student the merits of the American governmental system or comparing and contrasting the Iraqi and U.S. Constitutions.

Why I do it, Pedagogical Reasons: Situational learning provides parameters and encourages higher order thinking. Interest generates learning—it feels important because it is important. Repetition of a large, common theme facilitates continued learning and growth. True mastery requires application—and this is most evident through applications of the knowledge to a new context (e.g. What would James Madison say about the Iraqi Constitution?) The use of current, international events with focused situational assignments also allows for maximum collaborative learning through small group discussion and committee tasks.

Why I do it, Normative Reasons: Teaching on Iraq, Afghanistan or France in an American Government class accomplishes several normative goals. First, it encourages responsible citizenship among students who are citizens of a new, globalized world. Second, it encourages considerations of American political values by viewing them through the lens of others. Third, it encourages analytical sophistication. I want smart students, and I have found these unconventional situational conversations move students from passive information consumers to active thinkers and creative problem-solvers.

What it has done (Results): I have been teaching my American Government courses in this manner for four years. I have found several key developments. First, my students are better global citizens. They are engaged in the international world. Second, my students are better students. They have increased cognitive abilities, confidence, and they perceive and process information better and faster. Third, this method of teaching American Government results in a better liberal arts education. There is much more cross-fertilization and connection with other classes and other topics students encounter in their classes. Finally, I have much better assessment of student progress, many more points for continued instruction, and much more enjoyable evaluation process. Fifth, my students report higher satisfaction with the value of their class learning for life. Sixth, I have a higher satisfaction with introductory material because it is engaging and fresh every semester.