

Active Learning in European Politics

by

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American Political Science Association Teaching and Learning Conference
February 9-11, 2007
Charlotte, North Carolina

Introduction

I designed a mid-level course in European Politics that incorporates simulations and presentations, with the addition of substantial team and active learning concepts, as explained in L. Dee Fink's Creating Significant Learning Experiences: An Integrated Approach to Designing College Courses. Dr. Fink has conducted extensive workshops at Winthrop University, and the institution itself seems genuinely committed to these ideas. As the Vice President stated to the faculty, instructors need to work on "rethinking and redesigning individual courses...with the acceptance that we must expect and tolerate failure in some cases;" (2006) in short, those who want to attempt experimentation would receive institutional encouragement. As students will often choose the familiar in influential measurements like course evaluations, even if tradition is not particularly transformational, this support to attempt something novel was essential.

In addition, I utilized classroom assessment tools from Thomas A. Angelo and K. Patricia Cross's text, Classroom Assessment Techniques. The assessment movement as well has been heavily promoted at my institution from the mid 1990s. Finally, critical thinking methodologies, as explained in F. W. Weaver, Ed., Promoting Inquiry in Undergraduate Learning, among others, were employed. Aside from these formal pedagogical resources, active learning methods derived from fifteen years of college level

teaching were implemented, including my experience with the Model United Nations, with its emphasis on individual preparation and responsibility, for I had long noticed how motivated students became when they transcended their personal inhibitions in a creative exercise. Moreover, I attempted at least in part to emulate a professor I had in graduate school who failed to receive tenure. In no other class in graduate school, or in undergraduate for that matter, did I receive such inspired and creative instruction. In one instance, he had our class do dramatic skits or mini-plays illustrating political theory rather than a typical mid-term examination, an original exercise that almost two decades later, I remember clearly. Like the teacher in the film *Dead Poet's Society*, his methods were unorthodox yet influential, and there was even a demonstration by substantial numbers of both undergraduates and graduates that publicly protested the denial of tenure, an almost unheard of occurrence at a socially conservative Southern university.

Teaching and Democracy

As Stanley Katz has written, professors need to realize the vital importance “of teaching undergraduates for the health of our democracy,” (2006) both in the sense of giving them the analytical skills to understand the big questions and motivating them to contribute their limited time to civic affairs as future citizens. Indeed, as Alexis de Tocqueville warned, those living in wealthy democracies would often fail to care about their larger society and neglect “self-interest, rightly understood.” Empirically supporting these predictions, Robert Putnam currently notes how voting participation has steadily fallen over time, along with activities such as Rotary Club or Parent Teacher Associations compared with generations ago. The university has traditionally been seen as a bulwark against these negative tendencies, yet increasingly, and not just at the research based

institutions, this is not the case. Katz remarks that despite the wide variation in teaching opportunities, modern doctoral programs are "...disrespectful of both the larger intellectual contours of the disciplines and [of] the needs of future teacher-scholars." Again, this situation was anticipated, as William James predicted that the change from masters-level instructors to doctoral ones as university teachers would inhibit the general sort of knowledge vital to teaching and promote narrowly trained individuals less able to effectively communicate with the learning public. Ever greater time constraints on professors also inhibit experimental or highly involved teaching. The typical lecture and often multiple choice examination method utilized by some academicians at present has negligible long-term effects on student learning. As Chickering and Gamson note, a number of studies have shown that the best sort of learning implies that students "must talk about what they are learning, write about it, relate it to past experiences, apply it to their daily lives..." (1987)

Nowhere is innovation and experimentation needed more than in global studies, as the general knowledge of Americans about the rest of the world is substantially behind the citizens of other industrialized countries. As the United States is the power that for good or ill influences world politics the most universally, this ignorance is both ironic and troubling. In a globalizing world, the necessity of understanding other cultures and their interactions is ever more essential for students. Yet, the data on the lack of such knowledge on the part of college-age young people is particularly startling. In one series of interviews in 2002, two-thirds of one college class did not know either of their state's senators while only three out of thirty-six could name just one of the countries cited in President Bush's State of the Union speech on the "Axis of Evil." More esoteric

knowledge about the benefits of proportional voting systems in Europe, or more immediately relevant information such as the European Union's commitment to parental leave is virtually non-existent. Abundant statistical information on this dismal political deficit may be found in David T. Z. Mindich's Tuned Out: Why Americans Under 40 Don't Follow the News.

Hopefully, political science courses not only educate students in terms of teaching them about other ways of doing politics, they can also provide lifetime skills and confidence to be active in this sphere. For example, a major benefit to utilizing active teaching strategies that employ presentations is that that students can develop in areas like problem-solving, influencing others, and negotiation. The ability to take apart a problem and present its essentials to a group is fundamentally important, utilized from zoning boards to Congress. Students can also learn to use technology to enhance human interaction rather than reduce it through distancing the audience from the presenters. For example, through the medium of the Internet, students can present unique material that is up to date, approachable, and free the class from the limitations of a recently published textbook.

The Plan

Fink emphasizes that planning the course in a thoughtful way is critical; the main problem for the instructor is that going from his theories to practice involves substantial time and a certain amount of guesswork. He emphasizes the imperative of initially understanding so-called "situational factors" before designing a working syllabus. These include: specific context, general context, nature of the subject, characteristics of the learners, and characteristics of the instructor. In my case, the "specific context" included

factors such as a middle division course meeting twice a week, with electronic facilities available for students and instructor. By general context, Fink means the expectations of this course, which to me implied that students would realize that the study of foreign cultures was in their interest, that Americans have much to learn in that area, even if some of the class were non-political science majors. The nature of the subject is a hard one for students, as its information seems at first inspection to be remote for American undergraduates. One way Fink suggests to address this problem is to ask, are there controversies inherent in the subject? This point would help greatly, as I myself have used the case study method, debating controversies of the day, in many of my courses. Controversy can lead to critical thinking. The learners are typical of small state college students, often balancing work and studies without the benefit of much international background. Due to registration materials being available on-line, I did notice that there were two foreign students in the class as well as several honors students: I hoped that they would help in the overall mix of learners. Finally, I considered myself as a teacher and realized that I would have to fundamentally change what I usually do in my classes. Instead of the instructor continually attempting to find the sustaining themes or energy in the course, the students would provide them instead. I learned about twenty five years ago as a private school teacher that whenever student dynamism can be employed constructively, then one has much more time/energy for other valuable things. The problem would be that students would know so much less than an experienced instructor that it would be hard for them to go much beyond the descriptive, a problem I had observed in the Model United Nations. Yet the tradeoff is that what students learn on their own or feel consequential will stay with them much longer than more sophisticated

material delivered from the podium. Learning goals, Fink's major emphasis, were challenging in comparison to my usual course expectations. In short, content was subsumed to a learning centered approach, in which the author asks a key question, "What would I like the impact of this course to be on students, 2-3 years after this course is over?" I would hope that not so much the information but the spirit of inquiry might be remembered, with the more specific idea that what is done in foreign lands is worth considering on an ongoing basis.

Designing the course based on the previous considerations is the one most overlooked area of teaching, according to Fink. Many professors for example take a large textbook and design the course around it, with for example ancillary readings brought in as needed. If one's goal is transformational learning, then the instructor has to proceed backwards from the goals desired, to design a system in which all elements combine to reinforce each other for a given end. This point of Fink's seems to me quite remarkable as some academic conventions seem counterproductive. For example, substantive term papers are required at the end of college courses in addition to a comprehensive final; is this arrangement really designed to change the student or make them follow a conventional path that the instructor themselves had to follow? I was reminded of a German graduate student who, following the accepted policy in that country of doing research papers during vacations, was aghast at how Americans had to weigh competing academic obligations. Hopefully a course can be designed in which each part helps the student grow intellectually. To this end, Fink's six interactive characteristics of significant learning are learning how to learn, caring, the human dimension, integration, application, and foundational knowledge. Then one designs

active learning strategies that fulfill these in a systematic way. There are many possible techniques, such as field trips (difficult in this case), surveys, case studies, role playing, even guided imagery!(Kurfiss, 2006) For help on deciding strategies, I used an assessment survey done at Winthrop of students, faculty, alumni, and professors of what long-term results should be expected of college courses. Communication skills were number one, followed closely by problem-solving, critical thinking, and decision-making skills. (Prus, 1996) I therefore combined group learning activities and presentations, which emphasized communication and negotiation, with creative freedom to emphasize those parts of other cultures and countries that appealed to individual students. I also planned to model excellent presentations by giving periodic lectures that emphasized Fink's ideals, as well as utilizing assessment ideas from Cross and Angelo's work. Finally, I utilized a monograph entitled The European Dream by Jeremy Rifkin that combined the human dimension with foundational knowledge. All of these approaches were integrated as much as possible, with the book for example providing information for class debate, team learning discussions, and individual learning portfolios.

The Implementation

According to Michaelsen, Fink's colleague at the University of Oklahoma, making group learning succeed involves anticipating the problems that may occur, from free-riders to lack of cooperation between members. His four guiding principles are formation/management, accountability, proper assignments, and feedback, all of which attempt to counteract problems inherent in this approach. (2006) I therefore decided on carefully distributing group members based on their background, such as familiarity with Europe or previous course work in international politics, in order to form equivalent

teams. These groups were permanent and discussed information collectively, presented to other groups, and finally competed with others in a debate. In short, long-term cohesion promoted a community of learners, doing a variety of assignments.

Accountability would proceed from the first day of the semester, so all were assessed on their understanding of the unorthodox syllabus by individual and group quizzing, a strategy that Fink recommends to build cohesion and understanding from the first meeting. These six student groups participated in the semester's activities: present one Western and one Eastern European country to the class and also simulate a European Parliament debate on a complex issue at the end of the semester. For the United Kingdom, France, and Germany, to firmly establish variations in major parliamentary systems, students attended one initial lecture for each, followed by a "muddiest point" exercise from Angelo and Cross on the supporting readings.

On the second day, the teams took individual quizzes on the supporting readings followed by group quizzes. They would use scratch-off immediate answer sheets from the Innovative Learning Assessment system from Epstein Educational Enterprises: a simple star under the correct answer is revealed by rubbing a coin. Recommended by Fink and Michaelsen, this system of "educating while evaluating" has been shown to increase student's test scores when compared to more standard methods. It also proved quite stimulating for each group, as an element of competition with other teams was motivational. After the quiz, groups were asked a question on a complex social or political issue in that particular country, a strategy that Michaelsen states is proven the most likely to promote critical thinking in team-based learning. The Rifkin work was

best utilized in this regard, as its ongoing comparisons of American versus European ways of society and culture produced such questions.

On the third day covering each country, the student groups taught the class, through their choice of presentation, role playing, simulation, or group competition, some major aspect of the country in question. I felt the specific approach should be left to each group to teach compromise while maximizing potential creativity. One group did a power-point presentation on the British health system, followed by a game show on other parts of British public policy. I also emailed current articles on each country in question every week, so the students would rely less on recapitulation of the texts, and political news that could motivate the class be incorporated in the presentations.

The main text covered six Western European countries while a shorter one covered six Eastern ones; six student groups were therefore formed that contained at least four students. Michaelsen feels that this is the absolute minimum number for a group, so there was a challenge incorporating the countries covered in the texts and how many students were in the class. Since there was not time in the semester to cover all countries equally, some groups were to be solely responsible for representing their country to the class after the three-part coverage of the first three major states, using a mixture of dramatization, presentations, and video clips--the mix would be up to them. They were also encouraged to construct and implement group quizzes, which would help ensure that students attending their presentation do the supporting textual readings. Internet sources, power-points, and outlines of their work were then required to be sent to the rest of the class via the university listserv, so there would always be written material to substantiate what was presented. Student presentations were sometimes hard to follow, and so I hoped

that this emailed material would atone for deficiencies and be accessible for the mid-term and final.

The course emphasized active learning in each of its complementary components. The use of teams to discuss complex issues, such as the merits of the French two-ballot approach as compared with the American primary system, is based on the notion that “knowledge is constructed through human inquiry...rather than standards of ultimate truth.” (Kurfiss, 1988) Presenting material to others, and attempting to make it approachable and interesting, would be of lasting interest to be the presenter and audience, if thoughtfully done. On an individual basis, all students completed a learning portfolio about The European Dream. They had to answer the following in an eight-page reaction derived from Fink’s active learning suggestions: What am I learning from this comparison of cultures? Of what value is this to me personally or as an American citizen? Do I agree or disagree with what the author is stating? What areas should I explore further? As stated earlier, the groups discuss these and other complex questions and produce combined results; the idea here is to avoid last minute consideration of these powerful themes on a purely individual level. The end of the course culminated in the debate, in which the “personalities” of each country, now imprinted upon the students, were brought to the fore in a simulation. The “resolution” before the EU Parliament was one highly critical of the United States in its Middle East policy, with an emphasis on the Iraq War. As European countries, particularly between East and West, are split on their support of the United States, the debate proved quite instructive for the students. Rifkin’s book was also useful as well, with its chapters on the differences on security interpretations on both sides of the Atlantic. I had hoped that such a dramatization

would be inspiring to the students at the end of the semester, so even timing of activities was hoped to instill the goals of the course.

Finally, assessment tools were employed at every opportunity, not only to ascertain whether assignments or presentations were clear but to allow for course corrections. Students knew that certain things might not work out, but that their input would help influence the direction of the class in future. Such suggestions would also help motivate everyone to take an interest in their own success: we became co-learners. First, assignments such as analytical memorandums from Angelo's work were conducted frequently to ascertain whether basic ideas in the readings, ones that the students would discuss, dramatize, or debate subsequently, are relatively clear. Secondly, using evaluation forms provided by Fink and Michaelsen, students periodically assessed individual contributions to the four-student groups. Third, students assessed the clarity and originality of the group presentations, including the material submitted by the listserv. Finally, at three points during the semester, after the first and second country presentations, as well as after the European Parliament debate, students evaluated the teaching effectiveness of the course as compared to traditional lecture/exam types. There was also a final evaluation for the course, mandated by my department, but especially useful after a course such as this one.

The Results

My expectations for this course were partially fulfilled, with both encouraging and depressing results. Almost all students found benefit in small group discussion of complex, usually normative issues, such as whether Americans are too dedicated to their careers as compared to Europeans. I think the students will retain some of these ideas as

their discussions often were very heated. The Rifkin text was popular in this regard, as its readability helped students think about their own beliefs and culture in relation to others. The group quizzes were fairly popular as well although some students complained on the periodic assessment instruments that a few team members had not done the reading and were unprepared for discussion. The most egregious examples of student laziness were revealed in the group evaluation forms although not the more subtle variants; I found that students had a hard time being objective about their peers unless the lack of contribution was truly reprehensible. Some students did not like group work in any respect, and felt that lecture classes were much better for learning complicated material, such as the differences between electoral systems and how such variations would result in diverse outcomes.

Team presentations, on the other hand, were more problematical, with wide variations in quality and preparation. The initial ones on the Western European countries were too long, as students often just read power-points to the class, and did not use the freedom to create for example a skit or mini-play despite repeated suggestions to attempt them. Student audience members often looked as if they were enduring the presentations, and did not take notes as they would from a professor. Most student presenters either could not or would not attempt to highlight the most intriguing material for others to learn. For example, an explanation of Spanish political history needs to have strong themes repeatedly emphasized, even if the speakers were in period costume! The most ambitious presentations were done by the best academic students, who for example made a short film dramatizing the end of communism in Poland and subsequent political developments; they had also made the second best presentation on Great Britain. One

recurring problem was that most teams had just one or two effective speakers while the others needed to do much more work in preparation. Perhaps one great difference between this class and mine twenty years earlier in graduate school was that the freedom to create is not always appreciated up by pre-occupied undergraduates, who may require a firmer hand to make them perform to their potential.

After the first six countries, and after discussions in groups about class pedagogy, we decided as a class to make the presentations shorter, more focused, and hopefully more stimulating. I also promised the students to highlight the most vital parts of each presentation, to explain which parts mattered most. For example, I gave a short lecture on the growth of right-wing parties in Eastern European states, as many of the teams mentioned their existence after the fall of communism. To quote one student evaluation, "... [it is] hard to find a fun way to be scholarly. It's tough to present in an entertaining way that will help people Learn the material." I do think the presentations became better as the class progressed, with students understanding the need to thoughtfully explain rather than recapitulate. Interaction with the class was also an issue, with most calling for more of this quality but hard for again most to incorporate successfully. The use and misuse of technology also became clearer as we progressed as well. Power-point briefings can present vital themes or recurring problems in a countries political profile, rather than lists of information sometimes culled from remote websites. Teams needed to think less of a presentation as an opportunity to fill the group with facts, and some eventually used evocative pictures as ways to get the class to understand vital themes. I learned too to make my talks less filled with details, with more emphasis on ideas to motivate, to help arrange the complexities conveyed in the readings. One firm finding

seems to be that most students liked the variety of learning experiences, from the group discussions to the debate, as long as they could understand and be reasonably motivated to take an interest in the topic at hand.

One great issue was of course the oldest assessment instrument, the exam. Students were worried that they had to learn material, however imperfectly, from their peers and then be expected to remember it on a test. Several things were therefore done to reinforce the idea that this was a course in which subject matter was subsumed to process, the main emphasis. For one, each group had to email sample test questions to the class, complementing their earlier power-points or outlines that were sent; I used many of them on the objective part of the test. Second, exemplifying Michaelsen, I used a take-home essay section that demanded an answer to a complex question, in which they could employ what was found in the texts or presentations. Third, I provided a study guide, highlighting important things from lectures, presentations, and readings. With more motivated students, for example at the graduate level, this obsession with “bottom-line” information might not have been so pressing, and tests not even utilized. However I have found that most undergraduates need tests, especially a final, to make them pay attention to any sort of learning instrument no matter how inspired during the semester. Finally, in comparison to previous times I taught the course, highly analytical questions were less possible on tests, as I had not lead the class through the complicated material.

Finally, the culminating simulation between European teams was very successful, notwithstanding that debate preparation had not been the emphasis of the course as it is in my Model United Nations course. Even if the teams did not quite understand parliamentary procedure, they enjoyed dramatizing their views and questioning others on

theirs. Instead of passively listening to presentations, often a problem earlier in the semester, this opportunity brought in everybody more completely and listening became valued as it helped prepare the students to speak themselves. Moreover, the topic of the debate encapsulated one of the main themes of the course, the comparison of worldviews within Western society, highlighted now by the war in Iraq. At the end of the semester, when most students are juggling exam preparation and term papers, I wanted an event that could sum up the semester in a way that could energize the students.

Would I do it again?

I think that the strongest component of group learning, the easiest to implement, is group discussion of normative or complex topics. Most students felt that they received something worthwhile in these encounters, even if one of the team members was not prepared. Team presentations were very uneven, as most students simply did not want to take the time to produce a truly inspiring product, like a mini-drama. Some students complained on the final course assessment that this sort of course simply took too much time, especially for out-of-class meetings. As many work long hours to pay ever-increasing tuition, one has to ask whether teaching of this sort is simply not possible at some institutions. Debates however proved popular with everyone and can be incorporated without too much preparation out-of-class.

Most evaluations were honest, and indicated for example that some students were better as researchers and others as presenters. In terms of the presentations themselves, students indicated that they were very useful training for “real life” to quote one and understood that the outward product of such efforts was less important than the collaboration getting there, as well as an ongoing commitment to improvement. In order

to be truly effective as products for the class however, the only way to ensure consistent success is for the instructor to mandate team interviews beforehand, which reduces creativity and individualization but increases the likelihood of an understandable product. I had recommended but not required such meetings. Of course, this sort of micro-management demands more time of the instructor, so next time fewer, but more effective presentations might work for both students and teacher. One of the best results of this experiment was to become in a certain way a student again, to listen and occasionally endure what others were recounting. Both in this class and in my subsequent ones, I have attempted to have the best synthesis possible of creativity, structure, and valuable guidance. Lastly, I think that with all the emphasis on public speaking, there must also be careful thought to the readings for the class, so texts or monographs need to be as approachable as possible.

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