"How Do I Effectively Cover So Much?"
Teaching Large Introductory Courses in Policy Analysis

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Abstract

Instructors teaching introductory level policy analysis courses in large formats (50+ students) face unique challenges in designing and delivering a course that is current, engaging and international. As a result, instructors often choose the traditional method for a large introductory course – primarily use a textbook, pre-assign reading for the semester and lecture most of the time. Drawing on my experience as a business professional, instructor and faculty lead for such a course, I argue that using the following techniques and methods can substantially improve student learning for large introductory courses:

1. Write a syllabus as an outline only so that topics can be changed or re-arranged and readings can be assigned as the course progresses

2. Carefully craft lecture slides that act as the primary textbook

3. Employ a topical approach to learning public policy by covering the most pressing policy issues and utilizing the most current information available

4. Assign readings from a variety of publications to build familiarity with trusted sources and keep students engaged in the reading

5. Design each class period to include a diverse mix of lecture, discussion, querying students, group thinking and short multi-media clip(s)

6. Analyze a policy in at least one other nation than the US for each policy topic covered

7. Internationalize yourself whenever possible through faculty exchange, research, service, professional work and leading study abroad courses

Learning by Doing

I came to Indiana University from the private sector without any instructional training or teaching experience at the university level. As I walked into my very first class, I wondered what I was doing here. What was IU thinking when they hired me? I naively assumed that new university instructors were prepared and well trained before being allowed into the classroom. It would only make sense since undergraduates are paying a hefty price for this instruction and their tuition is the lifeline to any academic institution. I have learned it can be quite the opposite. New university instructors are often left to "learn on the job" with little instructional training and

guidance from more senior faculty. Many may have only had one instructional training course or previously been a teaching or research assistant. I had none of the above. However, it became apparent to me over time that my training may actually be just as applicable as an academically trained researcher for teaching large introductory classes. I have counseled young adults that worked for me, delivered many oral presentations, conducted training workshops, managed people and projects, solved practical real-world problems for clients, produced polished PowerPoint presentations, synthesized complex problems into succinct conclusions and acted as an involved consumer of many teaching strategies as an undergrad and graduate student in highly rated programs. I actually had a lot more to go on than I previously thought. Armed with the unwavering support of the undergraduate director, I used the following strategies to achieve what I would argue to be effective results in the classroom.

Course by Outline

A syllabus is essentially an outline of what material is covered and when. The stereotypical syllabus assigns a couple books, establishes what days chapters will be covered and identifies when assignments are due and exams are administered. That's a perfectly fine model. I just felt an introductory policy analysis course needs to be flexible and current given the material that is covered. Policy is always in flux. The data is always changing. The policy priorities are always shifting. I decided to take this a step further. I figured I would struggle to keep students engaged if topics were less relevant, dated or stale.

My course introduces students to public policy and policy analysis on both a domestic and international level. I do this by using a topical approach - intricacies of public policy are best learned by studying actual policy. Theory and general concepts are important, but I do not let it consume more than three class periods. In fact, this is the only section where I will assign a textbook chapter. The rest of the course is left open. The topics are laid out, but the reading and the number of class periods spent on a topic are not specified. I do this to retain complete flexibility. This allows me to spend as long as it's necessary to adequately cover a topic. I can now assign reading as I go. I am not tied to any one book and can assign a new article or report that wasn't available when the semester began. I can even throw out or change the order depending on how the students are learning or current events. This keeps students engaged, the topics fresh and the instructor focused on student learning instead of keeping up with a schedule.

Lecture Slides as Textbook

The process seems to be standard when given a new course. Here's the syllabus, book(s), exercises and exams – now teach it. Fortunately, the course I teach had a history of faculty independence with varied syllabi. I reviewed the textbooks currently used. They were all well done; however, none seemed to keep up with the pace of change or the priority in topic. Some of my predecessors were not requiring a textbook, but assigning various chapters from different

textbooks. I quickly embraced that approach. However, I wanted to take it a step further. Why tie yourself to anything? Why even use any textbook chapters?

Therefore, I took the approach of creating my own textbook via PowerPoint slides. This is what I knew. A typical consulting or banking presentation (otherwise known as a "deck") was a summary and analysis of all the best research available on a topic. This deliverable would incorporate countless reports and encompass hundreds of pages of text. This is a time intensive process, but it allows you to teach without being tied to what a textbook decides to highlight. More importantly, this process forces the instructor to become much more knowledgeable in each topic he or she will be teaching. This makes for an intensive first semester, but eases each successive semester. While I add and delete topics depending on the most pressing issues, 80% of the leading issues are not going away, just the underlying data and information changes. For example, the basics of foreign affairs remain largely the same; just the topical focus might change from Venezuela to Iran to Libya depending on current events. Many problems in healthcare remain the same, but cost, access and regulations change frequently.

One important aspect of this approach is that PowerPoint slides must be well crafted in content, diversity of sources, formatting and style. This is not universal, but I have noticed many academics tend to put a lot of effort into content, but much less into whether the slide is conducive to a presentation and readable by the audience. Further, the deck must be comprehensive. However, I do not read the slides or even go over every one in class. The slide provides the graphic to explain your point or offers some summary points so students can participate instead of scrambling to write down everything you say.

Assign Readings with a Purpose

I take my power to assign reading with caution. As an instructor, you can assign whatever you like. Often times it's not given enough thought. What will my students get out of this reading? How will I evaluate their comprehension of the reading? Will students call your bluff and never read it? We often say students today do not read what we assign, but that might be their logical response to competing demands on their time.

I assign reading for two reasons: 1. To cover the topic more completely in order to complement what I examine in the lecture slides; 2. To build familiarity with trusted sources of information. For example, if the topic being covered is social security, I'm not going to assign the 250 page annual report from the Social Security Administration, another 100 page report from the Congressional Research Service and the 150 page annual report of the Australian Future Fund. This would be an exercise of futility. What I can do is extract the relevant information and graphs to create the core of my PowerPoint slides regarding solvency, function and comparison to an alternative model. I then can assign an article from the New York Times that can better explain how the system works, one from the Economist that explains why Social Security reform will be required to remain solvent and a brief report from the OECD to provide a snapshot of

other countries' social security programs. Figure 1 is a sample of the typical sources of assigned reading.

I try my best to never assign textbook chapters. At the moment, I only use one chapter from a textbook. This is not out of a lack of quality textbooks. Let's be honest, though. How many of your students will read a textbook once they graduate? Yes, some will. However, that's a heavy investment year after year to stay informed about public policy and the world. The vast majority will rely on other sources. If students leave college without knowing where to look, the problems of poor and misleading information in our policy discourse will only get worse. The fact I try to avoid assigning textbook chapters might cause some faculty to question my ability to teach. However, this is also an introductory course and a survey of many different topics. This may well be the only course some of my students take in public policy. Further, textbooks and more advanced journal articles will be used more extensively as students progress in their collegiate careers with courses that require greater depth.

Figure 1: Sample of Sources

New York Times
Washington Post
Reuters
BBC News
The Economist
Associated Press
Wall Street Journal
Bloomberg
Standard & Poors
Congressional Research Service
Congressional Budget Office
Environmental Protection Agency
Energy Information Administration
Social Security Administration
State Department
OECD
United Nations
International Monetary Fund
World Bank
Urban Institute
Brookings Institute
Tax Policy Institute

Effective Use of Class Time

As a long consumer of education and now practitioner, I believe class time is frequently wasted. I often say to my students that have trouble attending class: "All you have to do is come for 2.5 hours per week. You are probably in class no more than 15 hours per week, enjoy 3 day weekends and take long breaks between semesters. Is that too much to ask? I used to have to be at work 60 to 80 hours per week, work weekends and have no more than 3 weeks off per year." I believe that building good habits as a student are essential to a successful transition to the working world. However, maybe it is not a time issue. It could be that it is not efficient to go to class. If other instructors provide just "filler" to take up time, only talk at you, rarely evaluate what you do in class or aren't effective teachers, why come. To counter that, I make the following commitment on the first day of class: "I will try to make each minute of class meaningful. I will start on time and never let you out early. I will do my best to get your money's worth out of me."

I take this commitment seriously. The less time I waste, the more I am able to teach them. Therefore, I really try to use every minute available to me. In prepping for each class, I attempt to employ as many different teaching styles I can in each class – lecturing, group thinking, individual thinking, multi-media, class discussion, querying students, student presentations, cold-calling, etc. I require students to put namecards in front of their seats. I do this so I can call

students by their name, my TA can keep track of their participation and to allow students to get to know each other. I use different styles for two reasons: many students have short attention spans and students learn differently. I decide how much time to spend on each style of teaching based on my experience to date. For example, I have measured how long I can lecture before my first student starts to nod off. That's typically 15 minutes. Therefore, I never lecture for more than 15 minutes. Figure 2 represents a typical day in my class.

Figure 2: Sample Class Period

1:00 p.m.	Query students, mix of volunteers and cold-calling; encourage discussion and student reactions to previous comments
1:10 p.m.	Lecture
1:25 p.m.	Multi-media video clip
1:30 p.m.	Query students about the multi-media clip
1:35 p.m.	Lecture
1:50 p.m.	Small group thinking (no more than 4)
2:00 p.m.	Nominate a spokesperson from 3 groups to come forward to present findings
2:10 p.m.	Review key take-away points
2:15 p.m.	Class concludes

One strategy I often employ is forcing students to speak. I want core concepts, take-away points and conclusions to come from the students' mouths. I believe that if my students are able to articulate a concept themselves, the better chance they'll understand it and commit it to long-term memory. I call one approach "leading the witness." For any topic, I'll often make the class tell me why it's important, what are the core problems and what are some strategies to address it. It is often an open forum exercise with leading follow-up questions to get them to a clearer answer. In group work, I'll have them analyze a potential policy solution as a group and then present it to the class. When I display a graph, I first ask a student to tell me what it means. The bottom line: the more I can avoid delivering the key points the better.

Remain Current

Policy analysis is a unique field in that the information and prominent policy issues are constantly in flux. While new developments seem to frequently take place in other fields such as physics, biology or mathematics, they are typically additive and do not require a complete rethinking of the subject. A 10 year-old calculus textbook could arguably still be very appropriate for a class today.

Public policy is different. Take my former industry and employer, for example. The set of data points and conclusions made by many policy analysts couldn't be more different in 2009 than in 1999. Looking at the 1980s and 90s, financial regulation was increasingly considered cumbersome and limiting financial institutions ability to grow and compete internationally. The concerns of deposit institutions running investment houses were evaporating. The merger of Citicorp and Travelers (which owned Solomon Smith Barney) pushed the government into the eventual repeal of Glass-Steagall (PBS Frontline, 2003). The bulge bracket bank with a universal coverage model was now the model for success and other mega-banks soon followed in the form of JP Morgan and Bank of America. By December 1999, Citigroup shares were trading 17.5 times higher than 10 years earlier. This is without even taking into account the numerous stock splits that occurred during this period (Google Finance, 2011). Any paper or chapter

written at this juncture sees a strong and growing financial industry, not to mention bullish economic growth projections and fiscal surpluses by the federal government. Fast-forward to 2008 and the financial industry is in total disarray. By February 2009, Citigroup had become effectively insolvent and required a second government bailout to avoid liquidation. I can vividly recall that day at my desk watching Citigroup's stock hit $1 when only 2 years prior it was trading at $50. Economic growth is now stagnant, banks have failed, markets are down, unemployment is high and the U.S. fiscal position is poor. The policy environment could not be more different.

A similar story of change can be told in many other policy areas. Today continually seems different from yesterday, considerably different than one year ago and sometimes unrecognizable from ten years ago. Therefore, policy instruction must be exceptionally current to be effective in an introductory policy class. This is not saying covering policy in the past is not effective; you just have to include the current picture as well. Students can take a class entirely on financial regulation later. You must capture their minds and attention by making it real to them. In my experience, policy analysis in an introductory course must reflect what is current to be effective.

Internationalize Content and Yourself

Despite my many disadvantages, one advantage I have entering the classroom is credibility with students when covering an international issue. Not that I am leading authority by any means. However, my credibility is grounded in the fact that I can draw on actual experience of visiting, living and working in different systems around the world. I have found that students respond well to personal experiences that augment the data or scholarly work they just read. For example, I can speak to how different health systems work from an individual consumer perspective whether that's a highly developed system as in France or a less developed one in Guatemala. I can comment on pension systems in different countries since many of them were my clients at Citigroup. I can give examples of what poverty and inequality are like in developing countries through my personal experiences in places such as Nairobi, New Delhi, Jakarta, Cairo, Mexico City, Johannesburg or São Paulo. This approach does not replace the aggregate data and research done on the topic. It only makes it real to students and helps them to better understand different systems and living environments.

How do you internationalize? Well, content is the easiest part. An instructor just needs to first get over the fear of teaching something he or she does not know well. Every country faces different variations of the same problems. Some have dealt with problems better, others worse and many are still grappling with the issue at different levels of development. However, the problems are all the same and each country's experience has something to add to the students' understanding. Simply highlighting how a couple different countries handle the same problem for every topic covered opens the students' eyes to see that social issues can be addressed in different ways. If you do not feel comfortable highlighting different systems, bring in a guest speaker. That person might even be an international student, which can give a personal

experience that resonates well with young people. These different mechanisms to address policy problems are often times unknown to the students since they are only exposed to their experience with American government services and policy solutions limited to what US lawmakers and media discuss.

I would also argue there is a need to internationalize yourself. The simple fact that your work takes you around the globe increases your ability to teach international subjects and capture the students' attention. This can be done is so many ways. You could look to internationalize your research and attend more conferences outside of the United States. Additionally, one could spend more time abroad on personal endeavors, seek out faculty exchanges or lead a study abroad course. These could all help to better illustrate international policy.

Results

How do I know this works? It's not that it can't be evaluated. There just seems to be limited consensus on how to best measure teaching success coupled with the will and ability of the academic community to actually do it. Has anyone ever assessed my teaching? The answer is no outside of other instructors that wanted to witness my teaching style. How do my students' scores compare to other instructors? It's hard to tell. There is not a common exam and each instructor evaluates their students differently in my course. Even if there were common exams, it's difficult to determine whether students learned more or an instructor is slipping more hints for the test. How are students performing after my class versus other instructors? This is also very hard to tell since there is no measure of how much my students actually knew before they entered my class. This leaves me with student evaluations, registration data and feedback I receive from other faculty and academic advisors at the School.

I have taught nearly 800 students since arriving in Bloomington. While student evaluations are easily flawed and can vary greatly due to class size, this is one of the better measures that I have. The questions I care about are two-fold: Did you learn a lot in this class? Would you rate your instructor as outstanding? The scores I have received on these two metrics have been some of the highest for this course and ranked highly amongst other undergraduate classes at the School, both large and small. It is important to note that I believe higher average scores are harder to achieve in large required courses versus small elective courses.

Registration is the next measure I use for evaluation. Students have the choice of nine different sections of my class in the average semester. For example, this semester I teach two of the four sections in the largest format available, 100 seats. My two sections were the first two large format classrooms to fill and the only large format classes to exceed 72 students. The only other section to fill has only 57 seats and at a popular start time for students. In fact, these three sections were the only ones to exceed 75% capacity. Therefore, I feel comfortable concluding students were choosing to enroll in a completely full large class versus a considerably smaller class taught be a different instructor.

Lastly, I keep track of feedback I receive from the academic advising staff and other faculty members. This has so far been positive with the advising staff informing me that my class greatly impacts many students' decision to enroll into one of the School's degree programs. The Dean's Office and the Undergraduate Program Office have also given me positive feedback they hear from students. I have further heard positive feedback from other instructors with regards to the knowledge some of my students have when compared to others in their classes. While bad reviews are rarely shared amongst faculty, I'm left to assume the lack of negative feedback is a good sign.

The grades must be the reason, then. I do not grade as hard as I should or would like, but it is not like my students are earning all A's and B's. The average class GPA of my classes over the last two semesters was 2.9. This should be 2.0 in a classic sense. However, in the environment of grade inflation and making the consumer happy (i.e. students), this average score is far from unusually high to reason that the grades have led to better course evaluations, high registration and positive feedback.

Is This for Everyone?

This is not a research paper; it is only a snapshot of my experience as an instructor. It is certainly not for everyone. First, the instructor must be willing to devote the time it takes to be current and operate without a textbook. It requires an instructor to leave his or her specialty as there must be a willingness to cover any policy with rigor. This approach also requires dedication to make high quality slides that can adequately substitute several lengthy reports or a textbook chapter. It further requires active management of classroom time and alternating different ways of learning. Lastly, the instructor must actively interact with the class to force the students to come to the appropriate conclusions on their own.

At the end of the day, I am far from a great instructor. I have only been teaching for five semesters and seemingly learn a more effective teaching method monthly. Nevertheless, I believe the approaches and techniques discussed in this paper are worth considering for other large format policy analysis courses given the measure of success I have been able to experience to date.

Works Cited

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