Teaching with Technology II Track Summary: How and Why We Use Technology

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Blended learning describes the integration of computer-assisted teaching techniques with traditional approaches. Participants in the Teaching and Technology II Track considered several technology-driven means that contribute to effective learning to uncover a provocative array of blending processes. Presentations and discussion revolved around a variety of factors brought together by technology: traditional and modern views on technology and society, blogging and customary writing assignments, tech-savvy and conventional faculty, and multi-national faculty and students in a single classroom. Participants left the conference invigorated by the demonstrated possibilities, mindful of the challenges posed by cost and tradition, and focused on the successful use of technology to deliver the desired end—more effective teaching.

Summary of Presentations

Pamela Katz developed a web site to increase understanding of the state court role in the legal system. Cases which include summaries, learning activities, and webcasts for a comprehensive learning experience are linked topically from New York state courts to the U.S. Supreme Court. The model is applicable to other states due to its procedural focus.

M. Victoria Pérez-Ríos constructed a guided bulletin board-based tutorial that teaches U.S. Constitution basics to freshmen via active learning. Each step combines mutually reinforcing lectures with exercises. Students discuss their findings in class and online.

Brett S. Sharp uses iPods to study politics in music. Students download and play songs such as those used for campaigns and those based on civil rights, anti-war, and environmental movements while viewing the projected lyrics. Advantages are high student participation, a feeling of political efficacy, and a vivid lasting impression.

José Angel Gutiérrez and Joshua Been use census data and GIS software to help students understand the political implications of Latino voting power growth in Texas counties. Students use maps and tables to project trends and study relationships between demographics and voting.

Bruce Pencek developed a media based program to cultivate student information literacy. Students analyze unfiltered audio and video broadcasts to determine source credibility. The audio visual element is supplemented with readings, activities, and outlines.

Robert H. Webking drew on Plato's Republic to explore the primacy of images in knowledge obtainment. Technology by its conveyance of pictures, data, and other simulations can help students move from understanding objects to concepts. Much discussion ensued as the presentation is at the crux of the debate over technology as instruction or entertainment.

Gerald M. DiGiusto used blogging to enhance conventional world politics instruction. Additionally, the merits of individual student blogs are contrasted with a group blog. The latter was more manageable as DiGuisto did not have to check a number of separate web pages. Advantages of blogs were high participation and peer-to-peer and student-professor-interaction.

Tomas Karasek and Anja Hennig developed a tri-national course (Czech Republic, Germany, and Poland) in comparative foreign policy integrating online modules with face-to-face workshops. Students were divided into multinational groups to enhance the cross-cultural aspect; they acquired empirical knowledge, social skills across cultures, and multimedia competency.

Richard Vengroff and James Robert Bourbeau compared traditional, online, and hybrid versions of a comparative politics course. The hybrid course had higher student satisfaction and participation than the other two with the notation that the hybrid course was composed of honors students and the online component was in addition to regular class hours. Participation was higher in the strictly online class than in the traditional class, but student satisfaction was slightly higher in the traditional class than in the online class. Grades were similar across all three.

Rosa Gomez Dierks promoted the need for technology leaders, cooperation teams or e-communities, and mentor-apprentice dyads to share, sustain, and increase technological knowledge in academia. The Teaching and Learning Conference is a bright step forward.

Joachim Karl Rennstich advocated methods to incorporate global voices into the classroom. Cell phones, laptops, and webcams can provide historically inaccessible information to students and foster research collaboration among diverse communities.

Conclusions and Future Steps

The Technology II Track broke new ground regarding the use and assessment of technology and reiterated obstacles expounded upon last year. Technology enables student interaction with information in accessible, immediate, and familiar formats, increasing classroom preparedness and discussion. It enhances and extends the learning process, while the academic mediates learning and guides students through the labyrinth of available information and tools.

The use of technology has costs. First, it may distract from the core objective of learning, especially upon occasions when it fails or is used as a crutch. Second, implementation requires time and resources; these commitments may decrease over time as familiarity and aptitude increase. Finally, as technology brings some students into the classroom, it leaves out others.

Additional steps are needed to advance the use of technology and determine its role in the political science classroom. Practically, copyright issues must be clarified, and a forum is needed to archive proven technologies and provide peer review for emerging uses. APSA may be the ideal organization to undertake this role. Pedagogically, there must be an assessment of specific technologies to achieve discrete objectives and a determination of whether technological skill is a legitimate goal for political science departments. Track participants agreed that technological skills can help provide quality courses and prepare students for a technology driven world. However, they must be systematic and discipline directed.

Assessment/Learning Outcomes I Track Summary

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Assessment is of increasing importance for political science faculty and departments across the discipline. One indicator of this relevance is the diversity of backgrounds of the 24 presenters and participants in our track, ranging from graduate students to full professors and deans, housed in institutions of higher learning ranging from community colleges to Ivy League universities, and

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belonging to departments ranging in size from 40 majors to over 1,100. Some attended because they wanted to share their enthusiasm for assessment, while others were interested in learning more about a process they were forced into by administrators, legislatures, or accreditation agencies. The group discussed many different aspects of assessment, including designing measurements for classroom and program assessment as well as some of the problems linked to assessment. We proposed the following summary conclusions:

1. Assessment is an integral part of teaching and learning.

Assessment focuses on finding out what students have learned. While not all departments and faculty members may value imposed assessment activities, most can agree that measuring student learning is important. Politicians, accreditation requirements, and university administrators put increasing value and weight on assessing what has been achieved and to determine the value of public and private investment in education. Consequently, more college and university faculty are taking a proactive approach to assure that the discipline will identify what is important to assess and what measures and practices are most useful in defining student achievement. Assessment allows faculty to verify what students learn; consequently, it will facilitate informed decisions about curricula and programs.

2. Learning objectives are the building blocks of assessment activity.

Before assessment can take place, it is critical to set out the learning objectives for the particular courses and groupings of courses. These objectives are best stated in terms of learner objectives, such as increase in knowledge or skills. Assessment links learning objectives with learning outcomes to see whether students have acquired the skills and knowledge they are taught. This is true for classroom and program assessment alike, and both levels of assessment are closely linked: We teach programmatic objectives through our courses and, often, we use course work to measure the extent to which students have achieved programmatic goals.

3. Political scientists have the skills to conduct meaningful assessment.

The political science quantitative and qualitative toolbox includes case studies, scoring rubrics, surveys, content analyses of portfolios, rating scales, reflective essays, standardized achievement tests, and focus groups. This toolbox fully equips faculty in the discipline to conduct meaningful assessment that can demonstrate the value of the discipline as part of students' educational experience.

4. Assessment can be beneficial.

By analyzing what the students have and have not learned, instructors and programs can improve curricula and teaching methods, thereby improving students' learning. Since program assessment is a collaborative undertaking, the endeavor can stimulate new conversations and partnerships among departmental faculty members and with other units on campus, such as assessment or teaching and learning centers. Assessment results can be used to demonstrate the unique contribution our discipline makes for higher education. They might also be used to leverage additional resources for political science departments and faculty. For individual faculty members, assessment provides another opportunity to engage in research by practicing the scholarship of teaching and learning.

5. Assessment is not without challenges.

The assessment process requires resources and time, and often these are not readily available. Moreover, oftentimes faculty members find it difficult to agree on what is to be assessed, and how. If assessment produces improved student learning, that ought rightly to lead to higher student grades—and to the perception of grade inflation. In addition, faculty members often fear a general loss of autonomy, particularly if assessment is imposed from the outside. Finally there is the Big Fear: What if we measure student learning and find that there is none? Will we lose students, administrative support, and funding as a result? And what of the individual faculty whose courses are found to be ineffective? Will they suffer punitive consequences? Given these fears, departments may be tempted to devise assessment measures that are designed to cover up problems, rather than reveal them. If assessment is to be effective, it must not be punitive—but that principle may be hard to maintain in practice.

6. Next steps.

Our track members concluded that assessment is becoming a part of the academic endeavor that will gain in importance. Consequently, the track suggests that APSA continue to facilitate and take a more visible leadership role in assisting faculty members in their assessment efforts, both at the level of classroom instruction as well as at the programmatic level. APSA could become more engaged in the national discussion on assessment, help develop testing instruments that are germane to the discipline and could be obtained at low cost to faculty and departments, and take a leadership role in coordinating resources and training for assessment in the profession. It is essential that assessment demonstrate the unique contribution political science makes to the undergraduate curriculum. Despite the problems inherent in assessment, it is thus of fundamental importance to the discipline.

Assessment/Learning Outcomes II Track Summary

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At the third annual APSA Teaching and Learning Conference, attendees in the Assessment/Learning Outcomes II session engaged in vigorous discussion over how best to integrate assessment with learning. The participants reflected a good mix of both community college and university perspectives, yet found that the necessity for efficacious assessment cuts across the discipline; concerted efforts should be made to encourage and enhance learning and consequently, assessment. Key themes that emerged from the track are reviewed below.

Fostering a Measurable Assessment Culture

Conference participants acknowledged the challenges of fostering a measurable assessment culture within the political science discipline. A recurring idea was that if political science does not govern its own discipline with respect to assessment, someone else would. To this end, APSA should take the lead in providing resources to departments and faculty interested in developing assessment programs. Some of these resources may include an APSA web site where members can access examples of "best" and "worst" practices posted by other members, sample department programs' missions and learning objectives, and utilize a test question databank. Assessment need not be difficult or threatening. In most instances, it can be

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