Conducting a Distance Education Course When You Are the Distant One

Steven D. Roper, *Eastern Illinois University*

There has been a great deal of discussion in *PS: Political Science & Politics* concerning the development, use, and evaluation of distance education courses delivered via the Internet (Young 1998; Botsch and Botsch 2001; Pollock and Wilson 2002). While the literature in this new area of teaching instruction varies in terms of its focus and recommendations, one common assumption is that the delivery of the distance education course is accomplished while the faculty member is on campus. For example, Young (1998) does an excellent job of describing how university resources can be utilized in the gradual process of incorporating technology to develop a "cyberclass." The analysis of Botsch and Botsch (2001) concerning outcomes in online and traditional courses was based on online courses offered during the regular semester as part of the normal teaching load.

It is often assumed that a diverse student body that is physically separated from the faculty member and the classroom creates the "distance" in distance education. Over the years, I have taught distance education courses composed of students from Asia, the Middle East, and American military personnel stationed throughout the world. Indeed, students from my University are generally a minority of the online student body. I developed an introductory international relations distance education course based on the assumption that students would often be far removed from the University. Like many of my colleagues, I have offered my international relations course as part of my normal teaching load. So, the course was designed based on my ability to conduct it from my office with access to technology and our technology staff.

Steven D. Roper *is associate professor of political science at Eastern Illinois University. His research focuses on parliamentary politics and regime types in East Europe and the former Soviet Union. He is the author of* Romania: The Unfinished Revolution *(Routledge 2000). His articles have appeared in various journals including* Comparative Politics, Party Politics, *and the* Journal of Legislative Studies.

However during the summer of 2003, I was the distant one. I was awarded a Fulbright Senior Specialist Grant to the former Soviet Republic of Moldova to work on political science curriculum reform. This award coincided with a distance education course that I was to teach that summer. The first two weeks of the course would have to be conducted while I was in Moldova. As I prepared for the trip and the course, it became obvious that I would have to adapt the course that I had previously offered. As more faculty offer distance education courses, we will see a greater need to re-conceptualize courses based on the fact that faculty may not be at their university. While my comments are based on my experience of offering a distance education course while abroad, I believe that they are relevant for anyone teaching a course outside of their university. In this piece, I offer a few suggestions to consider as you prepare to offer what I term a "distant distance education course."

More of the Same Problems . . . Only Worse

The first and most important problems to confront are the normal ones that many of us have encountered in distance education courses. Problems such as technology, emailing, and missing assignments become even more difficult when conducting the course outside of the university. For those offering a distant distance education course while in the United States, these problems may not be much more severe. However, for those offering a course while in a foreign country, these problems can become obstacles if not dealt with prior to the start of the course. In my case, Moldova probably presents one of the more extreme challenges. In terms of technology and email, Internet service is extremely slow, and Internet cafes rudimentary at best and electricity intermittent. However, my suggestions should prepare any faculty, no matter the circumstances.

In order to convey some of my limitations, I will first provide you a brief overview of the course. My course homepage is linked to my University homepage. The course homepage has a pdf-version of the syllabus, a listing of the software requirements for the course, a link to the companion site for the textbook (I used Goldstein's *International Relations,* 5th edition which has an excellent companion site), and a link to the WebCT portion of the course that includes the chatroom as well as the online exams and, most importantly, the lecture materials. I developed the materials using RealProducer which synchs audio and PowerPoint presentations. The PowerPoints open in Real Player, and as you speak, you move the PowerPoints for the student. I post the lectures on the course homepage, and students stream the audio PowerPoints. The students are evaluated based on three multiple-choice exams, three short essay assignments (using questions developed by the textbook companion site), as well as participation in the chatroom. Generally, the course has gone very well, but in preparation for delivering the course from Moldova, I learned a few valuable lessons that apply to all distance education courses.

Choose Your Media Wisely

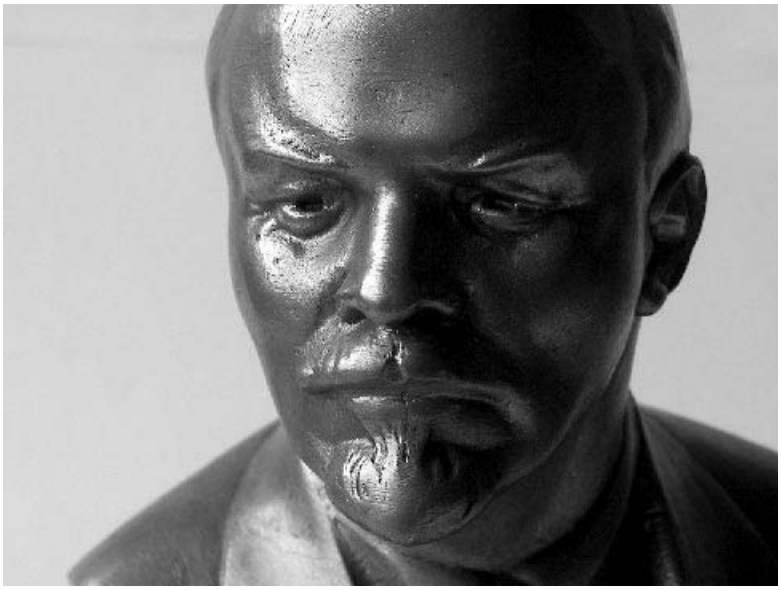
I decided to use the audio PowerPoints because streaming video is often much too slow for the bandwidth that most students have. However, I found that many students even have problems streaming these PowerPoints. Therefore before going to Moldova, I burned a CD with the lectures and mailed every student a copy. Therefore, students did not have to stream the video and could easily open and view the lectures. This proved very effective, and few students reported problems. However, a couple of students reported that the CDs that they had received were defective. Mailing out new CDs from Moldova was not time efficient. Therefore, before leaving the States I left a few extra CDs with our Department administrative assistant, and when students reported their problems, I was able to email the administrative assistant to mail out new copies. So, one lesson that I learned is that if you are going to use media that requires some bandwidth, it is very effective to burn the material onto a CD and make sure to leave some extra copies back home.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096504004718 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Problems with Communication

Anyone who has taught a distance education course has learned one important truth: Answering emails and communicating in chatrooms takes an extraordinary amount of time. Emails and the chatroom are the primary method of communication and therefore an extremely important component of any online course. For most instructors of online courses, the problem is constant bombardment with student emails which necessitates a strategy of when and how to answer such emails. However when abroad, especially in a country such as Moldova, the problem is just the opposite. It is often very difficult to access to your email account. This is not necessarily a problem due to the connection in the host country (although in Moldova this was a significant issue), but is often because universities schedule computer maintenance and server shutdowns at night (which is daytime in many foreign locations). This means that there can be days in which you are unable to communicate with your students. This is frustrating for students and, of course, frustrating for faculty who cannot retrieve and answer messages.

The only way to deal with this problem is to make sure upfront that students know that you will not be at the university while teaching the course and that there may be occasions in which you will be incommunicado. Realistically, instructors cannot solve these technology-linked communication problems. All we can do is be honest and clear with students that these problems may arise and that you will attempt to answer them as soon as possible. Checking email remotely is one issue to which faculty should give some thought. Before traveling, make sure that your university offers some form of remote access to their system. I believe that using accounts like Hotmail or Yahoo is a poor substitute due to their limited storage space which causes emails to bounce back with alarming regularity. If students are going to be emailing assignments, make sure that the remote service allows you to view attachments. My University only recently upgraded the remote email software to allow for viewing and downloading attached files. If your university does not allow for this, then students must cut and paste assignments into the body of the email. Finally, before traveling make sure you know how to set-up files and create a listserv in the remote account and generally understand how the account operates. This may seem obvious, but when my University changed the software, one of the features that I did not know about until I was in Moldova was that each time I closed the account my trashcan was emptied. Since there are many times that I need to retrieve a trashed email, this was an unpleasant learning experience for me, and one that I could have avoided had I examined the remote account in more detail.



When in Moldova . . . Roper's use of images of his surroundings, including statues of Vladimir Lenin, brought real world examples into his distance education classroom.

Be Flexible

Even the most rule-oriented and strict faculty member (of which I would consider myself) learns quickly that distance education requires different rules and degrees of flexibility. The loss of direct contact with students as well as the need to use technology for all assignments means that the relationship between the faculty member and the student is somewhat different. I structure and teach my online course as closely to my traditional class as possible in order to provide the online student the same quality of education and to maintain my expectations and rules. However, because all assignments must be submitted electronically, I have learned to be more flexible on deadlines and to create a more flexible syllabus. When students complain that they received a zero for a submitted assignment, I ask them to re-submit the assignment and double check when the text was created (this is possible by clicking on the properties box of a Word document). In addition, I allow students to take the exams at their leisure so as to avoid schedule conflicts. This becomes even more important when seven or eight time zones removed from the student.

I think that academic standards can be set very high while at the same time recognizing the limitations of using technology for communication as well as delivery of assignments and exams. One extra burden that I encountered while abroad is the limitation of using the telephone to clear-up matters. I encourage distance education students to call me at my office to discuss their issues or concerns. However when abroad, the telephone is generally not an efficient or viable method of communication. Therefore, instructors must be even more flexible and understanding of students' concerns given that email and the chatroom are probably the only way of communicating important matters.

The Advantages of Distant Distance Education

While there are significant challenges in offering a distant distance education course, there are also some pedagogical advantages. If you are teaching the course abroad, your international experiences can provide important, real world lessons for students. For those teaching in the United States, you can supplement a state and local, public administration, or American government course.

While in Moldova, I served as an election observer for the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and conducted my own research in the capital as well as in the breakaway region of Transnistria. In order to translate these personal experiences into a teaching experience, I took digital photos of voters entering a polling station as well as of the remaining statutes of Lenin in front of the Transnistrian parliament. I then developed text with the photos and uploaded them to my homepage. The students in my course were able to see what I was doing in

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096504004718 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Moldova, and I used the photos and experiences to provide some real world examples for the students. This created debate about the role of international organizations such as the OSCE and about notions of sovereignty and self-determination. I was fortunate because my course occurred while I was on a research trip; however even if you are on vacation (especially outside of the United States), photos, stories, and real world experiences can liven-up a distance education course and, more importantly, demonstrate the relevance of politics and the political science profession.

Concluding Comments

I was initially concerned about offering my distance education course while in Moldova. Having been to the country on numerous occasions, I knew that there would be a number of teaching obstacles that I had not encountered while offering my course at my home University. As in any course, the key to success is preparation. Because distance education is only as successful as the technology, you must ensure that you carefully consider the technology that you will use and that you will have access to while away from your office. Especially while abroad, you cannot call or visit the technology staff for assistance, and email is always a poor substitute. Realize also that whatever frustrations you may be having with Internet connectivity or emails bouncing are just the same for the students. Most important, maintain academic standards while allowing for the different environment in which the course occurs.

Finally, try to use the experience away from the university to your advantage. Documenting your activities either through text or with photos enhances the class. Whether you take photos of a cheese market in Amsterdam or the Golden Gate Bridge, there are probably some political lessons that can be drawn and used in your course. The experiences provide you another way to connect to the students and for them to connect to the material. While the techniques, problems, and advantages of a distant distance education course are unlike those of other courses, the goal, to provide students a broad understanding about political behavior and institutions, is the same. Instructors of distance education courses just have to be a bit more creative in fulfilling these goals.

Note

*The author would like to thank the Public Affairs Office of the U.S. Embassy in Moldova for providing a Fulbright Senior Specialist Grant during the summer of 2003.

References

Botsch, Carol S., and Robert E. Botsch. 2001. "Audiences and Outcomes in Online and Traditional American Government Classes: A Comparative Two-Year Case Study." *PS: Political Science and Politics* 34 (March): 135–41.

Goldstein, Joshua S. 2003. *International Relations*, 5th ed. New York: HarperCollins.

Pollock, Phillip H. III, and Bruce M. Wilson. 2002. "Evaluating the Impact of Internet Technology: Preliminary Evidence from American National Government Classes." *PS: Political Science and Politics* 35 (September): 561–6.

Young, Jerome. 1998. "Computers and Teaching: Evolution of a Cyberclass." *PS: Political Science and Politics* 31 (September): 568–73.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096504004718 Published online by Cambridge University Press

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096504004718 Published online by Cambridge University Press