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Civic Engagement in the Online Classroom

Posted [October 4, 2012](#) at 1:56 pm by [Dr. Judithanne Scourfield-McLauchlan](#)



Karla helping me with online course development

My first online class went “live” this semester: American National Government.

This is my first online class. And this is the first online course that our Department has offered (the Department of History and Politics, which includes History, Political Science, Philosophy, and Art History)

During Summer A I video recorded all of my lectures for the course.

Each Unit of material has a video lecture (with accompanying PowerPoint and lecture outline) assigned readings and study guide, a unit quiz, and other recommended materials (books, articles, websites, videos, etc)

My biggest concern when moving this important course about American government to an online format was how to retain the civic engagement components — and the experiential learning components — that I believe deepen students' understanding of and appreciation for the course content.

I thought I would give you an update by discussing 2 requirements for my online course — the civics project assignment and the simulations.

The Civics Project Assignment

I developed a new Civics Project Assignment for this course. Students will complete 5 civics assignments during the course of the semester. For the assignment, students will participate in an activity, selecting from a menu of options, write a reflection paper about the activity, and participate in a Discussion Board for each project (posting a description of their activity and responding to at least one classmate's activity).

Students participated in a broad array of civics projects for the first assignment — attended City Council meetings, visited State Representatives in their District offices, attended neighborhood association meetings, volunteered for a community agency, visited a courthouse, wrote letters to the editor, volunteered for a presidential campaign, registered new voters... Some watched the Florida Supreme Court oral argument online, listened to the US Supreme Court oral argument online, or watched one of the Sunday morning talk shows (up to 2 of the assignments can be online), but I was able to meet many of my students in person when they came to the Republican National Convention Watch Party that I moderated on campus.

I was quite pleased with the creativity that students demonstrated in their projects and also with the quality of their reflection papers. Even though this was only the first civics project assignment, it seems as if the project is achieving the goals of increasing students' knowledge and getting them out from behind the computer and in to the community, learning about politics from the front lines.

Many of my students said that they “got out of their comfort zone” for their assignment, which is exactly what I was hoping.

The student who attended a neighborhood association meeting in Orlando seemed a bit surprised when he concluded that “the meeting showed that you really can make a difference if you put enough effort into something.”

I think that the Discussion Board posting (which is not something I have used with my in-person courses) also increased interaction between and among the students on this Civics Project beyond what we would have been able to devote during class time.

That is to say, I think that students learned more from each other, and about each others' projects in this online forum than if we were in lecture hall together.

Every student was required to post about his/her project and to post about another student's project. I am sure we would not have been able to achieve 100% participation in this regard while in class and still have covered all of the lecture material for that day.

Our First Simulation, using Elluminate!

Another aspect of my course that I did not want to give up — the simulations. I have found that students really enjoy the role-playing experience, and students consistently report that they learn more about the subject of that lecture as a result of their participation in the simulation.

I have very much appreciated the expertise and the support of the Distance Learning team in developing this online course. I was especially pleased when the Instructional Designer working with me on this course — Karla Kmetz — explained to me that I could keep the simulation for Unit 4, Civil Liberties, if I used Elluminate live.

Elluminate allows all of us to be together, virtually, at the same time. I had the video on — so students could see me — but for all of the other participants, we could hear their voices only. We posted instructions on how to use Elluminate in the assignment folder on Blackboard (our online course management system), but I wanted to run the simulation in Poynter Library, with Karla at my side, in case there were any issues. Karla also gave a mini instruction session before we got started.



Developing the live simulation for the online course

This simulation is a mock City Council Meeting. The Council is meeting to decide whether to grant permit to the Nazi Party to march through a predominantly Jewish neighborhood (of Holocaust survivors). The facts are based loosely on the case in Skokie, IL. Some students are on the City Council, some students represent the leadership of the Nazi Party, other students are residents in the neighborhood, attorneys for the ACLU, etc.

Usually I run this simulation in a room other than our classroom and have the set-up mirror a city council chamber as closely as possible.

I was wondering how this simulation would translate into an online forum where we could not even see each other.



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I was so pleasantly surprised! It was amazing! In many ways, I think we had a better quality simulation than when I run this in person.

I was able to prompt students using the online chat tool — to give them suggestions and feedback and to answer their questions — in a way that was not disruptive to the class. (Usually I sit back and take notes, and I have been reluctant to interrupt the simulation to provide suggestions.)



Feeling good about the online course we developed

I was very pleased with how the students jumped right into their roles and the (greater) extent to which they integrated the cases and concepts from the Civil Liberties lecture in their presentations/questions.

Of course, I understood that many students would not be able to participate in the simulation at a particular date/time. I scheduled this simulation during a Friday lunch hour. We had enough students participate so that we could run the simulation. The students who could not participate on that Friday will watch the simulation (it is posted on Blackboard, so they can watch it at their convenience) and write a reflection paper.

The Distance Learning team also maintains a blog. [Check out their post about our simulation and the Elluminate software.](#)

Support for Online Course Development

The USFSP administration has encouraged faculty to consider developing online courses in an attempt to meet scheduling needs of students. Resources have been offered to faculty to assist in this effort.

For example, earlier this spring I participated in a faculty development workshop series offered by our Distance Learning team to learn how to develop a good online course (one that could be certified by Quality Matters).

About the blogger



Dr. Scourfield McLauchlan is an Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of South Florida St. Petersburg, where she teaches courses in American Government and Public Law. Her latest book, *Congressional Participation as Amicus Curiae before the U.S. Supreme Court*, explores how Members of Congress attempt to influence Supreme Court decision-making in specific cases. In addition to her scholarly activities, Professor McLauchlan has extensive experience in American government and politics. McLauchlan worked at the US Supreme Court, the US Senate Judiciary Committee, the US Department of Justice, and the White House. A veteran of several presidential campaigns, she has managed statewide operations across the US, from Portland, Maine to Portland, Oregon. During the 2010-11 academic year Dr. McLauchlan was a Fulbright Scholar in Moldova.