Teaching the Unfamiliar to a Crowd

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ABSTRACT The experience both of being exposed to unfamiliar systems and places and of being an anonymous face in a large class can be not just alienating for undergraduates, but antithetical to effective learning. We propose a number of active learning strategies designed to help students fully master the material presented even in very large classes in comparative politics and international relations, while also improving students’ attendance and interest and developing critical thinking, reading, and writing skills, without overburdening the instructor. Among these strategies are Team-Based Learning, interactive approaches such as debates and simulations, and low-stakes assignments such as “minute writing.”

Teaching about politics in faraway places to undergraduates with minimal prior familiarity poses inherent challenges. Students may find it difficult to process details of political systems dramatically different in institutional forms, dominant cleavages, and political cultures than their own, let alone to move beyond just acquiring facts. When those undergraduates are in large classes, as is common especially for “gateway” classes, the challenges are the all the greater. Nudging students through the transition into realms unfamiliar is easier when each student can be mentored and assisted individually; large classes generally prohibit such one-on-one guidance and increase the temptation for nervous, incompletely committed, or simply poorly prepared students to “tune out.” Even those making a serious effort may become lost in strange-sounding names and details, feel intimidated by the more worldly (or merely more wordy) few in the class, and fall back on preconceived stereotypes or imperfect parallels with what they already know.

Careful attention to course design can mitigate these concerns. We explore the literature on instructional and learning styles, coupled with our own experiences, to focus on the intersection of teaching about “foreign” regions and cultures (in the United States or elsewhere) and teaching large classes. This article focuses primarily on Team-Based Learning (TBL) as a strategy for mitigating the challenges of teaching the unfamiliar in large classes, not only because of its effectiveness, but also because the pedagogical political science literature to date has remained largely silent on this topic. While TBL is a complete approach to course design and implementation, its component strategies—particularly its emphasis on interactive approaches and critical but low-stakes applied assignments—are especially relevant for large classes in comparative or international politics. Moreover, the approach can enhance any course even without a full-scale transition to TBL.

The challenges of teaching large classes across disciplines are well documented in the literature (Carbone and Greenberg 1998; Cooper and Robinson 2000; Heppner 2007; Doyle 2008). A sense of anonymity among students in large classes is common (Heppner 2007) and can compound the instructor’s challenge of sparking a desire to learn more about diverse polities and cultures. In addition, feelings of disconnect between instructors and large rooms full of students tend to make students feel less accountable for their own learning (Doyle 2008). Finally, for many instructors, the sheer number of students in large classes poses pedagogical dilemmas, wherein they perceive breaking from the traditional lecture approach to be too time consuming and costly, yet they are not satisfied with their students’ learning outcomes. TBL and its component strategies alleviate many of these challenges by incorporating a higher proportion of active engagement, including in the large classroom.

Even if some proportion of students are driven primarily by general education requirements, the average student in a class on international politics generally is keen to learn about new political systems and cultures. Student-centered active learning may be the most useful approach for moving beyond acquisition of information (Omelicheva and Avdeyeva 2008; Prince 2004): students apply and extend upon what they have read or learned in lectures.
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fostering real familiarity with the material as well as critical reading and thinking skills (Smith 2008, 2). Ideally, students read assigned texts or other materials before coming to class (and are compelled by the structure of the course and assessments actually to do so), then answer questions, complete exercises, participate in simulations, or otherwise engage with the material during class time. Students will ultimately learn and retain more from an effective balance among approaches, yet active learning remains scarce, especially in large introductory courses (Archer and Miller 2011; Felder and Brent 1996; Lane 2008, 57–9).

STRATEGIES FOR EFFECTIVE TEACHING AND LEARNING

A general description of TBL and how it may be especially helpful for large, internationally focused classes follows. In addition, we briefly review the component active learning strategies that an instructor can implement immediately in the classroom without a radical revision of the course design.

Team-Based Learning

TBL offers a particularly effective way of both facilitating students’ grasp of new and challenging material and making large classes effective learning environments. TBL is not simply using groups on an ad hoc basis; it requires consistent, meaningful use of carefully constructed, semester-long teams. The professor’s role, in turn, shifts from “dispenser of knowledge” to more of an instructional facilitator and guide, (Lane 2008, 55). Similar to other

Learning takes on an added social dimension, as students are accountable to one another; attendance, participation, and preparation tend to rise dramatically in consequence. With TBL, “students’ social and intellectual experiences of the classroom become interlocked and amplified” (Sweet and Pelton-Sweet 2008, 30).

instructional approaches, like the flipped classroom, a method that uses technology to push lecture outside of class time, TBL allows instructors to push course content into out-of-class preparation, leaving class time for offering “expert feedback,” applying concepts, and solving problems (Richardson 2012, 6). The general TBL sequence begins with student preparation outside of class, assessed at intervals through individual and group readiness assessment tests (RATs), typically 10-question multiple-choice tests designed by the instructor. The instructor provides further details and context through short lectures and pushes students to a deeper understanding of the relevant concepts through applied exercises, usually completed in teams.

Teams, each with between five and seven students, are the cornerstone of TBL. Ideally they should be formed on the first day of class to maximize diversity. A common strategy is to identify those traits most germane—related, for instance, to prior coursework in the discipline or subfield, demographic traits, or even “anxiety about the course topic” (Sweet and Pelton-Sweet 2008, 37)—and organize students according to these traits in the first class, without advance warning (lest groups of friends try to game the system). For example, in an introductory international relations course, an instructor might ask students to line up according to the number of political science classes they have completed, the number of times they have traveled internationally, or even how comfortable or anxious they feel about the course material. After the students have formed a line based on these characteristics, the students count off from that queue in the number of the teams to be formed. Students then sit together and work in those teams for the duration of the course; if the course uses Blackboard or another course management application, each team might have its own online discussion forum, as well. To facilitate class administration, it helps to prepare a folder for each team, including any handouts for that day, any graded work to be returned, and a sign-in sheet (because attendance matters especially inasmuch as students should not be credited for team work in which they were not there to participate).

Michaelaens (2004a, 28) identifies the four core principles of TBL: (1) teams must be carefully formed and properly managed; (2) students must be accountable for both individual and team work; (3) group assignments must “promote both learning and team development”; and (4) students must “have frequent and timely performance feedback.” Occhipinti (2003, 69) outlines the key assumptions and benefits of the approach (which he terms “cooperative team learning”), from promoting active rather than passive learning to requiring that students reflect on and articulate their own perspectives. Students’ performance—measured in grades or in mastery of the subject matter—generally improves significantly with a team-based approach, because students learn from multiple sources and modes (Felder and Brent 1996). Learn-
observation mechanisms are taken up (Kamei et al. 2012; Koles et al. 2010; Parmelee and Michaelsen 2010).

The RAT, a rigorous multiple-choice quiz, exemplifies this mixture of individual and team accountability and reward. RAT questions should require not just factual recall, but integration and analysis, to foster and engage critical reading and thinking skills. Ideally, students read the material assigned for a unit on their own, then take the RAT before any in-class discussion of that material. Many times, RATs can replace other accountability mechanisms, such as pop quizzes, often used by instructors. That said, we have found the format to be equally effective mid-unit, as the distribution of reading may require. The RAT includes two stages: first, students complete the purposely difficult test individually; next, they complete it in teams, using a specially designed scratch card (see figure 1). The scratch card makes taking the plunge in settling on an answer all the more momentous, but also allows immediate feedback when scratching reveals a star (correct) or a blank (incorrect), plus permits partial credit for second and third choice answers. Nearly all students perform better on the team RAT—without any intervention from you at all—most of the students learned something from their peers. Such strategies will not pre empt all negative feedback, but most students will quickly see that they really do learn more, and more seamlessly, from the interactive, applied, active approach of TBL than from a more standard format.

It is also important to emphasize that student pushback on TBL (which does not always occur) is not from aversion to group work. As most instructors can attest, what turns off many, if not most, students from group work is unreliable team members or logistical difficulties in meeting outside of class. In our experience, TBL does not suffer from these problems. The free-riding problem is solved by maintaining permanent groups and providing within-group feedback on performance. Within-group peer pressure encourages everyone to do the reading and come to class prepared. In addition, TBL emphasizes group activities within the classroom rather than outside.

Active Learning Approaches

Although TBL as developed by Michaelsen and others is intended as a comprehensive approach, it can still be quite effective when partially integrated into a course. Even using team
more sparingly, and having team work count for a smaller proportion of students’ grades, can convey the core benefits of making students accountable to their teams, disrupting the anonymity of a large class, and providing a ready structure for in-class applications of material read individually at home—that is, for active rather than passive learning. Moreover, even full-on use of TBL does not exclude either some time devoted to lectures or inclusion of other assignments or assessment tools. The precise balance of tools and assessments is at the instructor’s discretion. We describe some of these active learning strategies that are ideal for TBL classrooms, but can be easily incorporated ad hoc into large classes, such as debates, simulations and “low-stakes assignments.”

Debates are an ideal vehicle for getting students to engage multiple sides of an argument rigorously and consider new perspectives. In our classes, debates focus on a specific contestable statement (for example, “The US should expand foreign aid to 1% of gross domestic product” or “NATO should withdraw from Afghanistan immediately”) and take one of two forms: “on the spot” debates that take place in one class period and rely on general preparation such as that week’s assigned reading or a “prepped” debate, which can count for a large portion of the final grade (up to 30% in our classes), and can require teams to prepare extensive briefing books outside the classroom, over several weeks. Both of these formats are useful for breaking down anonymity in the classroom by requiring students to interact with one another and speak in class. By incorporating well-organized debates into large classes, not only do students have a shared experience to draw on during subsequent classes, but debates also enhance the development of critical thinking and civic engagement, core values of political science education (Boeckelman et al. 2008).

Debates can work in large classes and small. In one semester in which debates provided extra credit, 56 students out of just more than 200 volunteered for a prepped debate. In this case, the course had three debate days, and a second classroom was used to conduct a second simultaneous debate with a guest faculty member.

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Low-stakes activities structured around current events may be especially germane for classes on international themes. These activities force students to notice newly encountered countries or concepts in the news, emphasizing both the extent to which these are in the students’ usual ambit, however much previously disregarded, and the real-world relevance of what they are learning.

extent. Including a range of quick, easily graded, individual assignments presses students to keep up with the reading, alerts the instructor to students who are not responding to relatively simple prompts appropriately, and allows students to try out ideas and test their comprehension when they have little to lose, rather than merely hoping for the best at exam time. Two strategies are especially appropriate for international politics classes: very brief in-class writing assignments and the use of current events.

Large class sizes tend to deter professors from assigning writing, thus giving students little chance either to practice academic writing or to articulate creative, on-the-spot responses. Assigning microwriting assignments (“minute papers” or “half-page responses” etc.) is an easy solution. These extremely short writing assignments may fall at the start, middle, or end of the class. Although graded (cursorily), they do not carry much weight—the low risk encourages students to be bold in their responses, really testing their grasp of the material. Possible prompts include having students identify the most important thing they learned in the previous class, the assigned reading, or a relevant newspaper article, video clip, or transcript of a speech, and ask students individually to complete a microwriting assign-
can still be used, they no longer serve as the central (or sole) mechanism for student learning. Second, all the activities force students to think critically and generally to take an explicit position on an issue. A microwriting exercise might ask students to identify the most politically legitimate state in a region and justify their choice. In a debate, rather than just be asked to discuss foreign aid or their opinion of it, they are required to make a specific choice and then develop an argument in support of that selection. Similarly, in simulations, the teams must make explicit choices at decision points. Third, most of the techniques compel students to approach a given issue from different perspectives by examining counterarguments (debates) or playing new roles (simulations). Fourth, most of the techniques require students to write either in preparation or reflection. Writing is central to the development of critical thinking skills and something that sadly is often neglected because class size; the techniques presented here offer challenging, but easily evaluated assignments feasible even for very large classes. Fifth, most of the techniques emphasize student-to-student interactions. Finally, most of the techniques carefully orchestrate some combination of individual preparation, collective discussion and extension, and individual reflection. That combination eases students’ approach to unfamiliar places and perspectives, allows for continuing assessment, and makes for a dynamic and effective class.

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NOTES
1. TBL as used here refers not to a generic concept, but to a specific pedagogical approach. For details beyond the general strategies sketched here, see especially Michaelsen et al. 2004a or the resources available at [http://teambasedlearning.apsc.ubc.ca/].
2. The most important part of the team RAT is the immediate feedback provided by the card. Individual instructors, departments or teaching centers can purchase RAT scratch off cards, called IF-ATs (Immediate Feedback Assessment Technique) in bulk through EpsteinEducation.com. At our university, the teaching and learning center buys the scratch cards in bulk and distributes them free to the more than 100 faculty and graduate students using this technique. Enterprising instructors have created their own immediate feedback cards that use mechanisms other than the scratch off.
3. A briefing book is a formal, collectively produced document in which the team lays out arguments and evidence for a proposition, a counterargument and evidence against the proposition, and a response to the counterargument. The briefing book, which is evenly divided between arguments for and against the proposition, is graded independently of the oral debate and accounts for 50% of the final debate grade.

REFERENCES


