

Taking Politics Online

Written by Dylan Kissane

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Living in France means taking vacation in August and, indeed, I am looking forward to a couple of weeks of rest and respite before, inevitably, the Fall semester rolls around. Vacation in August, though, means hard work in July to ensure that all courses are updated and ready to go on Day 1 of the new semester. Thus, even if the students are not on campus, the work continues apace ahead of those long, hot August days that are creeping up ever so quickly.

The POL 210 course does not run as a face-to-face course this Fall but it will be offered as an e-learning course via CEFAM's online delivery platform. POL 210 was the first CEFAM course to be offered online and over the last couple of years I've had a number of students choose the online option, and for various reasons. Some had done poorly during a face-to-face semester and wanted to catch up on the class and improve their grade over their summer vacation, others found that they had a semester schedule that made taking POL 210 face-to-face difficult to manage and elected to move online, while others still preferred the flexibility that an online course offers – particularly the flexibility to avoid 8am lectures on a Monday morning.

Since launching the course it has stayed somewhat the same. Assignments have changed around and I've pushed students to take on different topics and themes, but the course was largely similar. This year, though, I've made some big changes to the course structure and I hope they'll deliver a better learning experience for the student as well as making it easier for the students to see how each of the sections fit together in this broad survey course in IR.

The previous iteration of the online course was presented in 20 'lessons' that the students worked through at their own pace. Each lesson had some essential reading from a textbook, a pre-recorded lecture from me, and some 'prompt' material that the students would react to either by email, in a discussion forum or in an office hour with me should they wish. These prompts would take the form of a YouTube video, a letter or extract from a text, a news report or an MP3 of some interviews I collected with colleagues and friends working at NATO, the UN, MGIMO or elsewhere in the international sphere. The students were also required to complete quizzes on all of their readings, make a five minute video on a subject I assigned and write a long research paper on one of the five questions I assigned.

This time around I began the process of renewing the course by going back to basics and asking myself, 'what do I want students to learn in each section of the course?' and 'what is the most effective way to assess that they have learnt this?'. With these two questions in mind, I divided the course into five sections:

- **Introduction to International Politics:** the goal of this section is to get the student interested in the field and open them up to the different themes they'll encounter in the sections ahead. No assessment is directly related to this section.
- **Theories of International Politics:** the goal of this section is to ensure students have a rudimentary grasp of three major approaches to international politics (realism/neorealism, liberalism, constructivism) and how these theories are applied. The students are tested by writing a critique of one of the six theories touched on in the reading and in the lectures in this section.
- **Topics in International Politics:** the goal of this section is to offer a survey of international politics across eleven topics in the field. These range from things like international justice to the place of the Global South to terrorism and human rights. For each topic there is reading to complete and a lecture to review. In

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addition, each topic has a writing prompt for students to respond to in approximately 250 words within a journal that I will assess.

- **International Politics in Film:** the goal of this section is to allow students the opportunity to identify the world of international politics and themes within IR within broader popular culture. I have nominated 20 films ranging from *The Great Dictator* and *Casablanca* in the 1940s through to *Syriana* and *Zero Dark Thirty* more recently. Students need to pick a film then identify and analyse how a particular theme in international politics is depicted, and how close to reality that depiction is, in an essay.
- **Quizzes:** the goal of this section is to ensure that the reading is completed. I am aware that a bright student who reads the news and has a grasp of politics might be able to fake an average grade in the journal assignment by writing cogent, well-structured text. The quizzes test the specific readings the students were assigned to ensure that this is an unattractive option.

Finally, the students must complete a research paper based, as previously, on one of a range of questions I have listed.

I believe this structure will make it easier for the students to understand why they are studying each section of the course and the closer link between assessment and the sections will, I hope, encourage better responses.

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