

Bringing It All Back Home

Written by Dylan Kissane

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DYLAN KISSANE, NOV 17 2014

With just three weeks remaining in the Fall semester and with my *Issues in International Politics* class kicking off in January, I've just finished the review and refresh of the course that I move through each year. Some things remain the same, some things have been dropped, and others have been tweaked based on feedback from students and my own ideas.

I've added one new class session for the Spring, spinning off what has previously been a 20 minute section on the levels of analysis in international relations into a full 90 minute session. I'm hoping that this will better set up the four following classes on IR theory and will enable the students to have a better grasp of the differences between certain approaches to theorizing IR.

I've been happy with the use of a film in the course as a means of highlighting international political issues but I've decided against using *Syriana* this semester. It's not a bad film but my business-focused students do end up concentrating on the international oil market instead of the politics underlying that market. I'm using the film *An African Election* instead this Spring, teaming it up with a revitalized class on The Global South that I hope will deliver a one-two punch about a part of the world I have spent relatively less time on in the past.

As mentioned previously, I have dropped the self-designed simulation that worked reasonably well and I'm replacing it with Statecraft, an online simulation out of the US. This looks really promising to me and I hope that the two class sections in Spring will take to the game as I know I would offer that same sort of opportunity.

And finally, I have introduced a new assignment I call 'Day in the World' which asks students to track global news on a certain day in the semester and then present a short oral presentation linking stories and events from nine different regions with a master, global narrative. It's based on a successful assignment that is completed in one of the finance classes here at CEFAM and I am hopeful it will crossover just as successfully to the international politics classroom.

But perhaps the biggest change for this semester is in the background of the course and in how it will be presented to students. For the first time I will take the course homepage off the university intranet and, instead, host it myself. I'm centralizing the courses with the rest of my online platform, and for three primary reasons.

First, the intranet at CEFAM lacks the features that I need. For example, a 'course homepage' on the intranet consists of a folder where I can store documents (Word, PPT, Excel, PDFs...) as well as post links to external resources. It is limited in terms of the space I am allotted for the course – I have run into trouble before for uploading too much video content, for example – and it assigns long URLs that are not memorable for the student. An example? The course homepage on the intranet has a 128 character URL which is impossible to remember and takes at least four mouse clicks to even navigate to from the intranet homepage.

The alternative I have built is a typical website that allows all sorts of content and has few real restrictions on the size of the files stored or the bandwidth. The course homepage is the course code followed by dot-com (pols210.com) making it easy to remember for students, and easy to reproduce on course handouts in class. The videos are embedded in the site meaning students do not click a link and depart the course homepage to see course material. It's also far more visually appealing than the list of links and files in a folder that the intranet offers, and I hope this

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means more engagement on the part of the students.

Second, and drawing on the extra space I have to work with, I can offer students more than what I can on the intranet. For the coming semester all of the lectures in the course will be recorded and uploaded to the website shortly after the lesson. I'm hoping that these recordings will help students to catch up on missed lessons, to review more effectively for exams, and to avoid panicking in class should they not understand something the first time around. With no real restrictions on space or bandwidth, I can load these up to the new course homepage quickly and easily and students can access them any time.

Thirdly, as I have written about before, I am a big fan of open access to educational resources. I have previously made slides available via bePress but this semester I'll be making the entire course available on my site: slides, worksheets, grading rubrics, example assignments, audio of the lectures, videos – the works. The more that we share what we do, the more likely it is that what we share can be modified and improved for our own students and for students in other schools.

I have tested the new site with a few selected students and responded to their feedback, and as of this afternoon I am opening the site for wider beta testing here at CEFAM and by anyone else interested in sharing their opinion. Almost certainly there are going to be errors and places where I can improve the site, but I am also sure that, come the Spring, it will provide real value to the students for the semester to come.

I'm excited to bringing my course 'home' to my platform and to be offering more to the students who take the course in the next semester. While I'll have to wait to see how successful the minor and major 'tweaks' to the course will be, I'm confident that it's a step forward for *Issues in International Politics* and the students at CEFAM.

About the author:

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