

Launching a New Online Course

Written by Dylan Kissane

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DYLAN KISSANE, SEP 3 2013

This morning marked the launch of the POL 210 course at CEFAM for the Fall 2013 semester. While the course itself is offered year round, in the Fall it is only available to students as an online module. While the face-to-face course remains the most popular choice for CEFAM students, the online course has attracted a small group of nine students for coming semester, some of whom I met today.

I say 'some of whom' as not all of the nine who were obligated to attend the morning launch/explanation session arrived as required. One was excused – he is in London working on an internship in corporate finance and taking the course at a distance – but of the other 8 only 2 made the effort to attend. This is not a good start for a course that relies largely on a student's own motivation to complete in the scant three months available this semester. While I have reserved space in my schedule each week to work with the POL 210 students and while it will be possible to catch up on what was missed this morning, it doesn't suggest to me that all of the students enrolled in the course will be approaching it with the best possible mindset.

I have not previously help a launch/explanation session for the online version of POL 210 but I thought it was warranted this year as the course itself has been re-designed. New assignments have been introduced and some old assignments refreshed to better serve the pedagogical goals of the course. The course now revolves around four main themes with an associated assignment.

Theme one, naturally for this professor, is international relations theory. Students consider realism, structural realism, constructivism and three strands of liberal theory and write a critical paper outlining the strengths and weaknesses of one of the theories the course engages with.

Theme two is topics in international politics. Here I have nominated eleven topics in contemporary international politics – everything from inequality in the Global South to terrorism to human rights to the environment – and provided a lecture, readings and a prompt question for each topic. Students are required to work their way through the lectures and readings and keep a journal responding to the prompt questions and weighing in at somewhere approaching 3000 words by the end of the course.

Theme three is research in international politics. I have nominated five questions of which the students must respond to one in a research paper that – at 4000 words – is long, complex and will require significant research on the part of the students. I add to the difficulty by requiring only English language sources be used in supporting the claims and arguments made, a requirement that would pose little problem for a native English speaker in the US, the UK or Australia, but which further tests the skills of my majority ESL class.

Finally, theme four is international politics in film. I have wanted to introduce a film series into the face-to-face POL 210 course for the last couple of semesters but I haven't yet come up with a way to avoid making the class into a glorified movie watching course in the process. This semester I will be testing a new film-based assignment in the online course wherein students choose from a selection of films spanning every decade from the 1940s to the 2010s and write about how their chosen film illustrates, either well or poorly, a particular issue in international politics. With selections that include *Casablanca*, *Independence Day*, *Wag the Dog*, *Dr Strangelove* and *Zero Dark Thirty*, I hope there is something that every student in the course can enjoy working on, even if most of them don't seem to enjoy

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the idea of meeting with me on a Tuesday morning to launch the course.

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