

Structuring a Mixed-Methods Course

Written by Jan Lüdert and Katriona Stewart

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JAN LÜDERT AND KATRIONA STEWART, NOV 7 2017

In summer 2017 we taught a two-week course as part of the University of British Columbia's Future Global Leaders (FGL) pre-university program. Designed for teens aged 15-18, FGL offers students the chance to live on campus, meet friends from around the world, learn leadership skills, and complete a two-week non-credit course taught by a UBC instructor.

Our course was an introduction to global politics titled "Politics, Economics and Diplomacy in a Global Context." The aim of the course was to give students the opportunity to explore various perspectives – at an individual, state/domestic and structural/systemic level – on issues relating to politics, international relations (IR), economics and diplomacy. Drawing also upon economics, geography, and sociology, our interdisciplinary approach focused on the distribution of power, authority and interests within the international system. As part of this effort, we provided an introduction to some of the key theoretical IR paradigms, including liberalism, realism, constructivism and critical theory/neo-Marxism. Throughout the two weeks, we encouraged the students to employ these theoretical tools when evaluating key threshold concepts and events. We also consistently linked these theories to other disciplines to help make sense of our ever-complicated world.

The course was divided into equal parts: half lecture (80-90 minutes), a 10 minute break, followed by 80-90 minutes of student group work on case studies. Throughout the lectures and case studies, we assigned students a range of activities to help hone their research and communication skills, including debates, simulations, panel discussions, reflections, brainstorming, one-minute papers, think-pair-share and creative presentations. To deepen student understanding of complex and competing viewpoints, we often chose activities where groups were assigned a particular perspective. Moreover, to enhance retention, and foster creativity and interaction, we would get students to create tangible artefacts such as posters and flipcharts. We also encouraged students to design campaign logos and craft powerpoint slides, which they would present to the class and/or other groups.

The course was unique in that it was delivered by the lecturer in person for four days, and also virtually – through Blackboard Collaborate – for six days. Although the instructor taught part of the course remotely, the teaching assistant was always physically present in the classroom.

For our powerpoint presentations, we used an in-built microphone AV system to show videos, play music, and to amplify student and instructor voices. During the virtual session, students could contribute and ask questions by using a microphone, or alternatively via a live chat box. The technology was fairly reliable; however, we had some connectivity issues, for which we sought support from IT services. Despite these glitches, the technology allowed us to overcome geographical constraints while providing a range of avenues for presentation and communication. The chat option worked particularly well for ESOL students, as it allowed them formulate questions at a comfortable pace.

In terms of mixed-mode delivery instruction, there are clear advantages to such an approach, especially because with increased expectations of an interconnected world our constraints are often due to geographical separation. For instance, when instructors are unable to lecture in person, a mixed-model approach can certainly retain many of the benefits of face-to-face teaching, especially if the teaching assistant remains present. Instructors can deliver critical learning content, students can interact with one another and do group work, and a TA can help facilitate discussion with the lecturer working remotely. As such, teaching portions of a class remotely enables professors to continue

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teaching while attending conferences or doing off-campus research. This is especially useful in instances when courses would otherwise have to be cancelled or postponed. A class offering mixed-mode delivery allows busy faculty to remain flexible and to balance competing commitments.

At the same time, technological challenges hindered the online teaching component. Unfortunately, we had ongoing connectivity issues that made it difficult for students to hear the online lectures (primarily due to a lag in internet connection). The general consensus amongst students was that it was harder to stay focused and easier to become distracted when taught remotely. Some remarked that they felt more detached and less involved as a result. This is not surprising as non-verbal communication is hampered and thus differs from face-to-face interactions. To mitigate this, we began to set up the system and go through systems testing ahead of time. During moments of bad connectivity we also improvised and handed class facilitation back to the TA. Indeed, as one student remarked, having the teaching assistant in the room helped students to answer or clarify the remote instructor's questions, while keeping in-class interaction alive.

Apart from careful technology planning and testing (including a hard-wired internet connection), we recommend a ratio of two-thirds online instruction (maximum), and one-third in-person teaching (minimum) to increase all forms of class engagement. If possible, particularly complex/interactive components of the course should be taught in person, or at least reiterated in a physical teaching context. In order to deal with access and connectivity issues we suggest choosing a stable platform other than Blackboard Collaborate and shift to platforms such as Uberconference, Blue Jeans or Zoom.

In sum, there are many advantages to virtual teaching: notably, you can reach a wider audience and overcome geographical constraints. However, teaching evaluations continue to emphasize the importance of in-person learning: there is no denying that as social beings, we crave face-to-face interaction.

We sought to balance these competing concerns by experimenting with a mixed-method teaching model. By ensuring that the students had time to bond with the instructor in person over the first few sessions, and by having a teaching assistant physically present in the classroom at all times, we were able to reap the benefits of virtually teaching while maintaining the personal relationship built from face-to-face interaction. Because of the small sample size, technological glitches, and the challenges of teaching a predominantly ESOL audience, it is hard to form a definitive conclusion on the merits of this approach. However, we believe that with some fine-tuning, the mixed-method model has the potential to be an effective and economical teaching approach.

(This post is number two of three related pieces on Innovating a Mixed-Mode Course in a Multicultural Classroom. Click here for installment number one.)

About the author:

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Katriona Stewart received her MA in Political Science from the University of British Columbia, and has a Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Laws from Otago University, New Zealand. She is passionate about innovative and progressive pedagogical practices, and currently works in educational program management at UBC Extended Learning.

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