Bringing the World Into the Classroom: POS302-L—The Race and Ethnicity Seminar Discussion List

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Last spring I invited a crowd of over 300 faculty, students, and administrators from around the world to spend the semester with the 18 students enrolled in my race, ethnicity, and social inequality seminar. They read and commented on the students' work, submitted papers of their own for the students to read, and commented on each other's work as well. It was a truly remarkable experience made possible through the use of POS302-L, an Internet discussion list created for the seminar on the Illinois State University RS6000 computer.

A "Best Seller" Race and Ethnicity Course

I have taught the race and ethnicity seminar four times over the past four years, the last two times using the POS302-L discussion list. The course normally enrolls approximately 20 students consisting primarily of junior and senior political science majors and a few masters degree students. The course was somewhat unusual in that it was structured around a reading list of 24 recently published books on race, ethnicity, and social welfare policy. The books represented a broad spectrum of ideological orientation, and most had been best sellers or had elicited significant national attention. Each student was assigned to review four books and to write a final seminar paper. Teams of three or four students would then lead entire class-period discussions of the books they had reviewed.

I chose the "best seller" approach because I had enjoyed reading these books, and I wanted to share the experience with my students. I excuse this self-indulgence with the hope that the approach will foster life-long habits of reading "real" books, i.e., books not written for a captive student audience.

The best-seller strategy proved conducive to other objectives I had set for the course as well. I was interested in having the students understand the public debate over race and ethnicity in America and to refine their capacities to formulate and express their views about these controversial subjects. As a set, the books were used to engage students in examining how different assumptions about American society, values, and conflicting race and class interests shaped each author's interpretation of events and proposed social agendas.

The course attracted students of unusually diverse cultural background and ideological orientation, providing both the students and the instructor with a continual and almost subconscious lesson on cultural diversity not unrelated to the general goals of the course. The students seemed receptive to the course format: they enjoyed the freedom to express their views, the accessibility of the readings, and the challenge of confronting controversial issues. The format provided for a maximum of student in-class participation; more often than not there was not enough time for either the instructor or students to get in all they wanted to say.

Creating the POS302-L Discussion List

The POS302-L discussion list was created for the spring 1994 section of the course, a small honors section that enrolled three students, as an open public forum for distributing and discussing book reviews related to race, ethnicity, and social inequality. The small class size provided a fortuitous opportunity for identifying technical problems that might arise with the discussion list. Conversely, the discussion list proved fortuitous for the small class setting; the discussion list

would provide a broader range of input into class discussions, and the subscribers could "cover" some of the books that could not be assigned to the three students.

The general purposes of the list were to provide a public audience for the students' writing assignments and to provide a source of external insights and opinions on the course subject matter. I anticipated that the open public forum might prove inhibiting. To some extent, I hoped that it would, and that students would gain an appreciation of the complexities of public debate about racial and ethnic matters. And I hoped that the competitive challenge of the public forum would inspire careful writing and thoughtful analysis.

What Happened

I created POS302-L in the late fall of 1993, "posting" an open invitation on several other discussion lists.[1] By the beginning of the spring 1994 semester, over 150 subscribers had joined the list. Each received an automatic "welcome" message containing a schedule of the books and describing the rules for the discussion. The books were scheduled for overlapping two-week periods. The messages sent to POS302-L were to consist of either book reviews or commentaries on book reviews. To avoid excessive message traffic and to maintain a serious tone to the discussion, I asked that only people who had read a particular book comment on the reviews of that book.

By the end of the spring 1995 semester, the list had approximately 340 subscribers. Most of the subscribers appeared to be university faculty and graduate students, including an entire class of bilingual education doctoral students at New York University. Approximately 50 subscribers had nonacademic Inter-

net addresses (such as America On-line or CompuServe), and 40 had non-U.S. addresses.

Most of the guests were "lurk-ers" (in Internet jargon), and did not participate in reviewing or com-menting on the books. Students and subscribers have submitted 95 reviews of 42 books since the list was created, with Illinois State stu-dents accounting for approximately 80% of the reviews.[2] On average, the students received approxi-mately one comment from other subscribers for each review they sent to the list in the 1995 course, down from three comments per re-view the previous year. Some of these are posted to the list, others directly to the original reviewer.

Subscriber commentaries can range from a few lines of praise or agreement to three- or four-page critiques of the reviewer's or book author's position—the more lengthy commentaries are most often elic-ited by the more conservative of the students' reviews. In general, the tone of these exchanges was cordial and polite. We have had few instances of Internet "flaming" on the list, and the most heated exchanges have taken place in other Internet forums to which re-views have been cross-posted.

It was the presence of the audi-ence rather than their contributions that had the greatest impact on the course, particularly on the struc-ture of the class discussions. In my previous classes, we discussed the books after each student had writ-ten their reviews. Now, much more time was spent going over in ad-vance how the students would ana-lyze and critique each book. The effect was to focus the energy of the class more on what the stu-dents were doing than on what the instructor was trying to teach them.

It is my general impression that the discussion list format encour-ages better writing. The students wrote excellent reviews, but they were good students who might have done so anyway. Twelve of 14 students who completed a sup-plemental evaluation of the spring 1995 course indicated that the dis-cussion list encouraged them to write better essays; 6 of the 14 in-dicated that the list affected what

they said in their reviews. Gram-matical errors seem to be fewer than in papers for other courses I teach, and students are much more likely to exchange drafts of their papers with each other and the in-structor.

Overall, my own experience sug-gests that Internet instructional ap-plications offer as many conse-quences for the instructor as for the students. I was acutely aware of this as I prepared the first read-ing list for the discussion list, knowing that many might disagree with my reading selections.

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When I last taught the course, I asked the students to recommend additional readings for the next se-mester. The most frequently rec-ommended work was Rush Lim-baugh's *The Way Things Ought To Be*, and I included it on my book order for the spring 1994 semester. I soon had misgivings. First, I actu-ally read the book and found it even less serious than I anticipated. But now I had to consider my audi-ence. Did I want to be known to the whole world as the guy who assigned Rush? I expected that I would have to defend my choice of many of the other readings on the list. Mr. Limbaugh, I decided, could defend himself.

Another risk for the instructor is that an external audience might be the source of ideas that undermine the instructor's authority in the class. It is difficult enough to be impartial when grading student es-says on controversial topics, partic-ularly because the students are more sensitive to the possibility of instructor bias, but the task be-comes even more complex in eval-

uating reviews that have elicited high praise from professors at other universities. Students who have received unsolicited second opin-ions on their work find themselves "empowered" when it comes time to discuss their grades.

Managing A Discussion List

Managing a discussion list re-quires some technological support and expertise beyond a basic knowledge of e-mail. Before one attempts to manage an Internet-wide discussion list, I recommend experimenting with an on-campus discussion list, perhaps with just the students in a single course. The POS302-L list was not a moderated list. All messages sent to the list address were automatically sent to all the subscribers. During the first trial run of the course, this resulted in excessive message traffic as con-fused subscribers replied to mes-sages that were inadvertently sent to the list. To correct this, the list-server software was reconfigured for the spring 1995 semester so that replies to messages were automati-cally sent back to the original sender. This had the effect of sub-stantially reducing the exchange of comments on the list. A moderated discussion list, where the list owner screens each message before it is sent out to all the subscribers would probably have worked better.

Implications for Other Instructional Applications

The POS302-L was ideally suited to the somewhat unusual circum-stances surrounding this particular class. The books themselves were the primary attraction of the list. There are few courses (even in po-litical science) for which one could select from so many interesting and well-written best sellers, offering such a diversity of perspectives. Courses focusing on gender issues may offer the best potential for dis-cussion list applications very simi-lar to what was done here. An open public-forum discussion list has particular advantages in small class settings where a broad range

of external input to the class discussions is desired.

Several possible modifications of the POS302-L approach, however, would have more general applicability. This could involve faculty at two or more institutions getting together to coordinate the syllabi and student assignments for a discussion list format. Instead of book reviews, the student discussions could be organized around a series of issues or research questions. The "Virtual Seminar in International Political Economy," taught by Lev S. Gonick at Arizona State University-West, integrates the use of a discussion list with electronic archives of the course's required readings.[3] Discussion lists also provide an opportunity for including authors of reading assignments in on the discussions of their works. Textbook authors and editors might also consider organizing discussion lists geared to their books. There are many potential variations of "distance education" applications of Internet; it would have been quite simple, for example, for students at other campuses to participate on POS302-L as a part of an independent study course arranged with professors at their home campus.

Faculty research activities often involve working with faculty at other institutions, building on what they have done, applying their methods and techniques, and submitting work for external evaluation. In contrast, our teaching activities are isolated from colleagues in the discipline and much that we prize in our research endeavors—collegial exchange and cooperation, peer review, methodological sophistication, and accumulation of knowledge—is often neglected in the classroom. Perhaps teaching is not valued as highly as it should be on university campuses for this very reason.

If, or when, it becomes more common that courses are taught on the Internet, there are significant implications for the teaching profession. The Internet will provide opportunities for external evaluation of the students' and instructors' work and broader opportunities for collegial exchanges related to the development of course syllabi and assignments. For better or worse, instructors or groups of instructors may find themselves competing with faculty at other institutions for student subscriptions to their courses as they now do, in a

sense, with faculty in other departments at their own institutions.

Notes

1. The "Political Science List of Lists" contains a comprehensive listing of discussion lists on topics related to politics and political science. It is available on the APSA Gopher at: <gopher://apsa.trenton.edu>.

2. A complete set of the course and discussion list materials, including all of the book reviews and many of the commentaries, are available on the course Gopher archive: <gopher://gopher.ilstu.edu:70/11/depts/polisci/courses/pos302>.

3. A description of Gonick's seminar, the students' papers and the electronic archives are available on Gopher at: <gopher://csf.colorado.edu/csf-lists/gpe>.

About the Author

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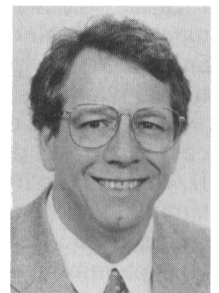
Poughkeepsie to Persian Gulf Revisited: ICONS, the Internet, and Teaching International Politics

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In the fall of 1990 when the hot spots in the world were Beijing, Baghdad, and Berlin, I was searching for a better way to teach international politics. I stumbled into the fascinating ICONS (International Communication and Negotiation Simulations) program administered by the Department of Government and Politics at the University of Maryland at College Park.[1] In the December 1992 *PS*, I reported on my novice's encounter (Vavrina 1992).

Today the hot spots have shifted—Bosnia and Chechnya have stolen the headlines. Yet, I remain firmly convinced that ICONS is a splendid way in which the Internet can be used for better pedagogy (Vavrina 1993).

ICONS: A Brief Summary

ICONS is a high tech version of a "model United Nations." College students on their home campus do research to role play a particular country's diplomatic delegation.[2]

Via computers and telecommunications they correspond and negotiate with their peers (who are literally scattered around the world at other colleges and universities)[3] that portray the government missions of other nations. The semester is divided into research, simulation, and debriefing phases. Real-time conferences, in which country-teams from all over the globe negotiate in English on predetermined agenda items, are the highlight (Crookall and Landis 1992; Starkey 1994; Wilkenfeld and Kaufman 1993).