BRIDGE Project Summary June 2011
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1.   Identify class level, specify whether core, elective, or major requirement, any other pertinent information on class demographics.

        POL 216 is a sophomore-level gateway course for comparative politics for political science majors. It is one of the electives for Comparative Politics.

        There are sixteen students enrolled in this course. Eight are sophomore students, seven are juniors and one is senior. The majority of the students attending this course are either political science majors or GMS majors, as the course is co-listed in the curriculum in the GMS program.

2.   What <u>problems or questions</u> about my students' learning and my teaching strategies did I address?

        The course of comparative political systems is one of the gateway courses to the study of politics. My goal is for students to understand, master and be able to employ the concepts and theories in the study of comparative political systems.

        For my BRIDGE research, I tried to break away from the conventional lecture style, which I have relied on in conveying the course content, an approach that did not sufficiently stimulate students' attention, interest and critical thinking. Instead, I used an alternate course format in delivering course content, combining lectures and discussions. I have been using reading summaries and class exams in my previous classes, and I have tried to use the class discussion in previous courses non-systematically. In this class, I wanted to focus more on the class discussion and how it could be used to deepen students' understanding of the content, especially in concepts and theories.

        I used the following assignments and activities to help students familiarize and gain appreciation of the concepts and theories: I assigned students to complete the reading before the class, and asked students to complete reading summaries. As students gathered for class, I would lecture for about 45 minutes on the topic followed by a brief question session, given that students have completed the reading assignment before that. During the following class session after the lecture, students would hold discussion sessions based on the reading material and lecture, with the discussion led by a fellow student.

        The "agenda" or the discussion questions are mostly prepared by the instructor. The discussion leader receives the questions before the discussion and is encouraged to revise the questions and prepare for them as they see fit and add their own questions when necessary. I recorded highlights of each discussion and provided post-performance evaluations to each discussion leader. While I was involved in the discussion, it was moderated and conducted by the assigned student. The discussion would usually last for 40 about minutes, after which, guided by the instructor, students would be given time to write down the main points covered in the seminar.

        The instructor would evaluate students' discussion quality, and in-class exams would gauge how students had grasped the concepts and theories in the course material. The exams were designed not so much to test recall of specific facts as to much as thoughtful, informed application of concepts and theories. These concepts and theories are the main content of the reading summaries, the focus of the class lectures, and later the class discussion.

3.   Did I rethink my course goals? (Explain.)

The concepts and themes would still be the focus of the course.

In future I wish to be able to encourage more students' preparation in the class discussion, and will continue to focus on students' understanding, application and critical thinking in this course.

Also I have been thinking that the class should encourage students to develop more in-depth knowledge and understanding on one or more particular concepts, such as by through writing a research-based paper on a concept related to the topic assigned for discussion leadership.

Another course goal that I might consider for future classes might be to more purposefully stimulate students' interest in political science in general through elements of course design in gateway courses such as comparative political systems.

4.   What <u>methods</u> did I use to gain information? [Specify any CATs here, including changes in assignments and assessments, if relevant.]

At the end of the class, I asked students to write down what they gained in a particular discussion session with some techniques recommended by *CAT*, including Empty Outlines and Minute Paper. I consider both helpful in providing scaffolding to students' learning.

The Empty Outlines have turned out to be very useful in helping students master key concepts and themes throughout the course.

The Minute Paper is used at the end of the class period to ensure that students take down notes and reflections during the discussion.

Overall I would say that these relatively low-labor techniques are important and effective in providing guidance and help to me and to my students.

5.   What <u>examples or evidence of student performance</u> can I offer to illustrate how I drew conclusions? [If possible, please include samples to illustrate effects of your interventions. Emphasis may be on qualitative or quantitative data.]

From the information collected in students' exams, it is shown that the course achieved the goal as students demonstrated a good understanding of the key concepts and themes of the class overall. When asked to explain important concepts and theories, student would be able to grasp them well.

Combining with the reading summary and course lecture, students have been well focused in this course on the required concepts and themes, and some of them indicated that they appreciate the variety in the organization of the course, particular the part of the discussion.

Also, students have been open to one another during the discussion. Most students rated discussion high when asked which class activity or assignment helped their learning. Students' performance on the exams has also been encouraging, and students' evaluations at the end of the semester indicated that their feedback toward this class is on par with the feedback of the instructor.

6.   What <u>theories or debates about learning</u> frame or illuminate my inquiry?

Most of the reading assignments have been helpful in providing guidance in thinking about course goals, formulating and building the structure of this course. Among them, I especially appreciated the following:

The excerpt on "making assignments worth grading" from Walvoord and Anderson's *Effective Grading* is about integrating grading, learning, and motivation, and offers advice on how to plan your grading from the first moment you begin planning the course. The article argues that instructors should consider not only how they will shape goals but also how their students will. I think the alignment of the course goals and motivation is important in designing the course.

Also, Randy Bass's article "The Scholarship of Teaching: What's the Problem?" asks its readers good questions about what learning is and what learning objectives should be in one's teaching. The article was thought-provoking to me and I may reference it in my future course design, too.

Also, Bloom's Taxonomy was an inspiring and useful tool when I was preparing to design the course material and course content as it provided important criteria for analysis of what constitutes students' learning and what we should seek in designing course tasks for students.

7.   What have I learned (or what new hypotheses have I developed) so far?

I learned that the design of the course, including the grading, is important in developing clear expectations with students, executing the class, and keeping students motivated in class.

I found discussion in general a useful and stimulating part of the course exercise for students to deepen their thoughts in aspects of application, analysis and evaluation of the key concepts and theories of the course. In class discussion, especially among responsive and cooperative groups, provided important learning tools for students' learning, when encouraged, guided and evaluated.

 I think that variety among tasks assigned in a course is important in fostering students' learning and in keeping students engaged throughout the semester.

 I found timely feedback is important to fostering students' learning, and to keep students motivated. In this class I used the following strategies to provide students with feedback:

◆ Modeling successful examples of the work assigned.
◆ Creating a feedback loop, so that students have opportunities to improve and guidance in practice.
◆ Sequencing assignments to build conceptual understanding.

At the beginning of the class, about once a week, I would select works from students as best reading summaries done by the class. The sample summaries used in class were anonymous, and I would usually encourage students to use these positive examples as models for their own work.

For class participation, I would record and give students' individual evaluations according to the quality of contributions made by each student during the discussion period. At the beginning of the next class session I would give feedback to the class for the previous discussion, usually encouragement with suggestions. I would emphasize that their discussion and participation are a very important component of this class.

Finally, I used the reading summary, discussion, and lectures as different but complementary course assignments to keep students focused on the concepts and theories that the course aim to achieve with the group.

8.	Where will I go from here?

Though I found the restructured course POL 216, based on exam performance and on students' positive feedback via course evaluations, to be a general success, I would like to still consider the development of this course in various aspects.

1.	How to most effectively use the lecture time poses a challenge.

Within the limited time dedicated to lecture, what would be the most effective to broaden coverage, provide in-depth analysis and to foster critical thinking at the same time? Within the limited time in the class, instructors should consider more what they would be able to provide for the students, what criteria they would need to see students achieve, how they would be able to do that and to hold students' accountable for progress.

2.	How to create a great linkage between the lecture and discussions?

The lectures and discussions should provide students with exposure of the ideas and thoughts on a particular topic from both the instructor and peers. How to build the lecture and discussion together and strengthen the connection between the lectures and discussions is an important task for the course in order to provide a comprehensive and connected picture of the topic. Also a relevant question that is worth asking is what should be the connection between the text, lectures and discussions? How could we make the best use of the text, what should we aim in the lectures and what to emphasize in discussions?

3.	How to improve the quality of students' led discussion?

While class discussions may serve as an important tool for students' learning, student-run class discussions have not been an easy task, and quality of such discussions may vary from one to another. The question remains as how to make sure that the students-led-discussions shall not vary much in quality, since some students are more comfortable in participating and some are less so, and some could be more prepared than others, too.