

Understanding International Political Systems Through Service-Learning

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Students in an Introduction to Comparative Politics course experienced hands-on learning to help them fully recognize the complexities of various government systems.

BACKGROUND

Political Science (POLS) 150: Introduction to Comparative Politics is a large class with an enrollment of 300 students. Generally students have difficulty grasping the relevance of other countries' problems and consequently understanding why foreign governments do not just adopt the U.S. principles and solutions. I utilized a service-learning component to help students actively engage in understanding the differences in the capacities of political systems to identify and address problems via a project connected to the December 2004 tsunami disaster.

The Asian Tsunami Disaster Relief Consciousness and Fundraising experience allowed students a chance to grasp that countries, much like people, are different in terms of their initial wealth and property allocations. Correspondingly, their tradeoffs between policy choices are different. It is easy to identify a clear solution. For instance, there is general agreement on what needs to be done: send more money and people to help rebuild the countries affected by the Tsunami disaster. However, the lack of communications, access, equipment, or technology can impede relief efforts. It costs the U.S. \$15,000.00 to fly and land a relief plane in a disaster area. How much is that in terms of annual GDP for Indonesia, India or Sri Lanka? How long would it take for those countries to do the same? Students need hands-on learning to fully recognize the complications that arise because of varied government systems.

In general, an immediate gratification issue in the American culture permeates how organizations such as interest groups, political parties and businesses articulate and aggregate policy demands. The service-learning assignment underscored that well-conceived efforts are time-consuming, take effort to materialize and may still offend someone.

Finally, educators note that students in large classes tend not to perform as well as their counterparts in small classes. Poor attendance is one important contributing factor to the poor performance, and I intended that the service-learning component would positively affect student attendance. Thus, one of the barometers measuring difference of performance was attendance.

Project Notes

Course syllabus (see PDF)

Learning goals:

1. Identify the roles of government and how they are performed.

2. Identify how structures or institutions facilitate a government's functions.
3. Identify how structures or institutions impede a government's functions.
4. Consider additional events that may affect the government's functions.
5. Consider the roles of interest groups in a political system.
6. Consider the roles of the opposition in a political system.
7. Consider the roles that international organizations and foreign governments perform.

IMPLEMENTATION

The service-learning portion was comprised of three main elements. First, I scheduled a Tsunami Relief Day for April 6. Second, student groups had to create and turn in five project progress reports due at staggered dates and intended to monitor students' involvement. Third, each group had a final project report due on April 25 that included a reflection paper from each group member.

In detail, the progress reports were monitored and graded. Each student in a five-person group was responsible for chairing one of the tasks, and each was required to report on how the elements they chaired affected the event. The groups completed a typed report (double-spaced, at least four pages) that described the tasks fulfilled, explained which country or countries was targeted for the information dissemination and why that country was chosen, and notated their involvement in the collections drive, contact and publicity of the targeted area. Additionally, each group turned in a final folder that included all the progress reports plus a review and analysis of the event.

Six points about the pre-service preparation:

I asked students to come up with a group response that would raise both awareness and donations for the Asia Tsunami Disaster relief. Two aspects of this project that I underscored to students were service and learning. Here are six details about the pre-service preparation:

1. Register the event.
2. Familiarize TAs with goals, process, reflection and integration of service-learning.
3. Familiarize TAs with resources that provide information about the crisis, such as the World Bank, IMF, UNICEF, or country background information.
4. Require students to sign a contract: "I understand that this POLS 150 course has a significant civic involvement component and that there are no substitutes to this option. I recognize that this civic involvement requires time spent outside of class for preparation and study, as is the case with any other component of traditional learning, and I am prepared to commit that time."
5. Detail deadlines for progress reports. These comprise students' reflection and integration pieces and help magnify the underlying reasons for using a service and learning tool.
6. Publicize the events throughout the campus.

Project Notes

Activities for students:

1. Create awareness posters or stickers and place them publicly to inform others about the event (community and event oriented).
2. Undertake a collections drive for donated items for the event (community and event oriented).
3. Contact, publicize, and place reminders of the event (community and event oriented).
4. Sell the collected items at the event (community and event oriented).
5. Prepare information to answer questions during the collections drive and for dissemination at the event (learning oriented).
6. Record feedback and responses (learning oriented).
7. Analysis of the event in terms of what processes worked well, which did not, areas for improvement, and lessons learned (learning oriented).

"Reflection and Integration" through progress reports provided assessment in these areas:

- Students will gain insights about why the U.S is involved with certain countries, how the governments in affected countries deal with their problems, or why they are unable to handle those problems (See Bradley's Criteria for assessment, level 1 or 2).
- Students will demonstrate their ability to observe and perceive multiple perspectives as well as identify conflict (Bradley's Criteria, level 3).
- Students will reason, negotiate, and compromise (Bradley's Criteria, level 3).
- Students will demonstrate successful team building.

OBSERVATIONS

Overall, I looked at what happens if students didn't change from their initial apprehension about the service-learning project (which all seemed to have). I also looked for evidence of learning in the papers. Most of the groups attained good results. A lot of the students went beyond the expectations for the posters, both at the level for involvement with KU and with the larger community.

The student notebooks include documentation for the entire project. Each group had five members, and the assignments over the semester numbered five, so some groups divided up the papers with a single person assigned to a certain paper. All the final papers, the student reaction papers that each student had to write, looked good. Everyone came up with something to say when asked, "What did you learn?"

The TAs did most of the grading. With 300 students, I only had time to look at some projects. These four points formed the basis for our evaluation:

1. Student effort was more important than information, from the first project paper through the last.
2. I asked the TAs to comment only on the information about each point.

3. Although each TA ended up grading approximately 120 papers over the semester, we didn't think these were difficult to grade as all the important points were in the syllabus.
4. The "reflection," or final reaction paper, was the only writing where effort was less important than self-wisdom.

Project Notes

Group project notes

During the semester, students completed five papers, as well as a Final Reflections Paper (listed at right). For each assignment, I have included examples of student work. Two of these projects, done by Group 1 and Group 2, serve as projects that reflect excellent work throughout. These projects had consistent work that led up to a good finished project. Group 3 and Group 4 projects concerned me because I felt that they focused too much on the collections and the donations; that is, the project was more important than the learning. Group 4 did a band performance for their service project, and I particularly noted the student reaction papers in this project. Some of the students liked the service learning, and some didn't; again, the focus was too much on the success part of the work. I found the final project interesting because of the tenacity of the group members. They failed and failed again in the initial stages, but they kept trying and never gave up. I believe that this indicates that they were engaged with learning in spite of not always being successful.

Paper 1: Awareness Event

Students were instructed to:

- Create awareness posters/car stickers/etc for event
- Paper should discuss the aspects of the poster that are important
- Paper should explain where to place awareness posters/car stickers/etc and why
- Paper should explain what you learned about community awareness in the process. What will you do during the event to address what you learned?

Paper 2: Contact, Collect, Publicize, and Remind

Students were instructed to:

- Set minimum collections targets and collect donated items for the event (community and event oriented).
- Paper should explain how this target is to be achieved and what measures are taken (including names of contacts, organizations contacted, etc).
- Paper should explain what caused it to succeed or fail.
- Paper should explain what you learned about community awareness in the process. What will you do during the event to address what you learned?

Paper 3: Provide Information

Students were instructed to:

- Determine and print out information about the countries affected during event.
- Determine and print out information about the agencies involved and their organizational philosophies.

- Paper should include the information used. Paper should also explain why this information is relevant (about the countries and the agencies) and how to make it accessible.
- Paper should explain what you learned about community awareness in the process. What will you do during the event to address what you learned?

Paper 4: Awareness and Donation Event and Community and Agency Feedback

Students were instructed to:

- Paper should record the general feedback received from the community. Describe some of them and explain why they were interesting, important, or revealing.
- Paper should discuss what feedback from the community tells you about the information given out.
- Paper should record feedback from the agency. What does the feedback tell you about the value of the event to the agency? What does the feedback tell you about your involvement?
- Paper should discuss what you learned about community awareness in the process. What would you do to address what you have learned for future projects?

Paper 5: Analysis of Event

Every participant was required to write this up for the parts that they chaired and hand it in for the final folder. Students were instructed to:

- Identify and explain how the elements you chaired helped the processes work.
- Specify areas for improvement: where they did not work and why.
- Discuss lessons learned—about the countries, about the event, about the community, and about civic participation.

Final Reflections Paper:

Students were instructed to respond to a single prompt: What did you learn?

For examples of student work, see links to Papers 1-5 and Final Reflections Paper.

Grading

The TAs did most of the grading. With 300 students, I had time to look at only some projects. Here are the grading guidelines that I asked the TAs to follow:

- Student effort was more important than information, from the first project paper through the last (the five papers mirrored the chronology of the developing project). I asked the TAs to look for the effort the students made to use the material in a useful way, an extension of just looking for content (plagiarizing would have shown up as disjointed writing, so it was a minor concern). Because I broke down the paper assignments into elements of work progress, it would be evident that the students did little work if they didn't put in details. I didn't think we could penalize students on content issues; instead, we focused on how it all came together.
- I asked the TAs to comment only on the information about each point. Both in the lectures and in the TA recitation sessions, we highlighted to the students the need to incorporate the learning goals into their papers. We also provided examples of such

integration. And, we provided information and additional resources for further research into their learning goals, if they should choose. However, I didn't reveal that we were grading primarily on effort. In other words, *how and how much* the students incorporated the information (and therefore, learned) was the "effort" aspect that was graded.

- Although each TA ended up grading approximately 120 papers over the semester, we didn't think these were difficult to grade. I had laid out all the important points in the syllabus, and some of the TAs went further to flesh out these points about what we looked for.
- The "reflection," or final reaction paper, was the only writing where effort didn't count. Self-wisdom was the most important part of this assignment, especially as it reflected the student's response to civic involvement.

REFLECTION

Overall, I noted many positive outcomes in this course. The student projects amazed me because of their creativity and the involvement of the group members. I became acquainted with more students on a first-name basis than I have ever known in a class this size, and our interactions went beyond the surface level. The TAs who worked with me noted that the students were more responsive, more motivated, and more accountable than others had been in similar course they had assisted with. It's hard to pinpoint the exact cause of those changes, but I believe the service-learning component was part of the overall improvement.

The experience also had challenges that made it trying at times. I was surprised that some students objected to service-learning, apparently because they believed it would be more work than a traditional lecture course. I was also surprised at the differences in support for service-learning from various university entities. There were more day-to-day stresses in incorporating service-learning than I had anticipated, but I think many of these were connected to the stresses that come from teaching any course for the first time.

I had hoped that attendance and retention would improve, and 260 of the 300 students remain in class. Those who dropped out tended to do so when they learned about the service learning. Only two dropped at the end of the semester, which I thought was a very impressive change. Attendance fell after the actual event, but not before. In general, only 200 out of 300 students finish this course, and the drops come at the end of the semester when they panic about their grades. One thing that I do think happened was that with more writing, the students had more connection. My expectations at the beginning were that students could not learn without being involved in the learning process. That is, they cannot just go to class to get "learning," but it comes with extended involvement with the subject matter. I believe the service-learning provided that connection, although I don't have an accurate measuring tool to evaluate its impact.

How I'd incorporate it again:

Here are my notes to myself, and hence, my advice for those who are interested in adding service-learning:

- Be very committed.
- If service-learning is mandatory, it might bring up more objections than if it were optional. There are students who do not want to do this, and they tend to belong to two extremes: the very good students who may breeze through a lecture course such as this without the mandatory participation, and the students who perform poorly who choose to breeze through a lecture class such as this without the mandatory participation, notwithstanding the poor grades. Both groups raise serious objections that need to be considered: why should the students not have a choice about learning?
- Have the students write one individual paper each and also a one-page reflection of each of the components (papers) that other students in the group completed. In other words, incorporate more elements of the reflections at each stage of the project to evaluate how the students learned along the way.
- Realize that there will be objections. As part of the Service-Learning Institute, we read articles, one of which said objections from other faculty often occurred. I wondered if it could really happen—and then boom!

Project Notes

General reflections

- I did see a lot of students get involved, and I am looking forward to reading their comments on the student evaluations. For the most part, I think their reflection papers were honest and showed that the service-learning component was good.
- It amazed me to see all the projects that the students came up with. They were very creative.
- I knew more students in this class than in any other large class that I have taught. Usually after teaching a large class, a teacher will remember an incident but say, “Oh, I don’t remember the student’s name.” That was not the case. The students came to my office, they talked to me, and they asked me specific questions. Two of the three TAs in this course had taught the same class in the previous semester under a different professor. They said that this semester the students were more responsive, more motivated and more accountable. They also felt that the students did better on exams and papers, and they showed more respect towards the teaching staff. Including service-learning didn’t make the job easier, just more enjoyable.
- In a smaller class size, I don’t think I would get the same objection to mandatory service-learning. It raised objections because this course is required, but if that were a reason for students to drop, they could always take the course another semester when someone else teaches it. I have to mediate this with other faculty.
- The Service-Learning Institute provides support. It focuses attention on service-learning and therefore more people are willing to concede that it would be useful or that they would be open to trying it.

Retention and attendance

One of my goals was to have a high student retention rate throughout the semester. I hoped to keep attendance strong as well. Historically, students are not connected in large classes, and therefore they drop out, fail or have low attendance. Out of 300 students, the typical enrollment

for this required course, usually one-third (100) drop out. They generally drop when they realize they won't get the grade that they want. At the end of the semester, a stream of students may come by my office with drop slips for me to sign.

In this section, 260 of the 300 students remain in class. Those who dropped out tended to do so when they learned about the service learning. Only two dropped at the end of the semester, which I thought was a very impressive change.

The service-learning project (the tsunami relief day) was held about two-thirds of the way through the semester. The reflection papers were due two weeks later. Attendance fell after the actual event, but not before. One thing that I do think happened was that with more writing, the students had more connection. My expectations at the beginning were that students couldn't learn without being involved in the learning process. That is, they can't just go to class to get "learning," but it comes with extended involvement with the subject matter. The service-learning provided that connection.

I don't have a real barometer to evaluate the impact of service-learning on retention rate, but I did notice that other similar classes were having more drops. The problem is that I can't really say that service-learning impacts attendance and retention. I'd have to control for several factors, since there are so many other factors that affect students: the amount of work or papers due in other classes towards the end of the semester or a general malaise that students sometimes feel about school at that point.

Student and TA responses

TAs and affective attitudes:

The three TAs for this course had differing reactions to the service-learning component. One was a strong advocate of it, another was middling in support, and a third was less enthusiastic. I noted that the students they were in charge of performed in ways that matched the reaction of that particular TA, and I wonder if their attitudes seeped down and were reflected in the student papers and projects.

- The TA who was a strong advocate: her groups collected \$2600.00; student papers were very strong.
- The TA who was middling in her support: \$12000.00; student papers were average.
- The TA who was less enthusiastic: \$900.00; student papers were poor.

Why do students object?

Resentment and surprise were some reactions from students when they learned that they had to do service-learning. Overall, the objections became more muted once the project got underway. In some respects, I would have expected more along the way as students encountered problems. But, no matter how they felt in the beginning, their work on the projects showed that they had learned from the service-learning.

Service-learning involves a lot of time learning, more than cramming 24 hours before a test. Students who did well had to spend a lot of time on their projects. They had to put in a lot of time thinking as a group. This required more than just a draft in order to meet the definition of service-learning.

Very good students didn't want to do the work. They were planning on an introduction-level course that they could sleep through and they resented having to do what the service project entailed. One student said to me, "How can I take this course if I don't have the time to do all the work?" Others at the other end of the spectrum also wanted to avoid the work. They complained about the number of papers and projects, a typical objection. So, the two extreme ends of student abilities wanted an out from attentive work.

Teaching responsibilities

I enjoyed teaching this way, even though there were stresses. It may have been more stressful because this was the first time I taught it incorporating the service-learning element.

- Coordinating 50-60 groups of five students to a group was a daunting task.
- My prep time changed, as I had to do a lot of class preps in order to make sure students had information if they needed it. I covered six to eight countries, and I added four more to make sure we had enough.
- The traditional lecture portion of the course did not change.
- The time TAs spent grading changed. I met with them every week, which I don't usually do. I wanted to make sure that they weren't overwhelmed and to keep apprized of what was going on. Group projects did decrease the overall amount of grading than would have happened if the students were writing these papers individually.
- Most large classes rely on three to four multiple-choice exams that can be scanned, a scenario that requires less grading time than papers do. We only had two tests, and they included multiple-choice questions and short answer questions. The students did well on the writing parts of the tests.

Things came out of the blue that I couldn't expect and couldn't control. For instance, one part of the projects was the fund-raising, which was held on the patios at Wescoe Hall and at the Kansas Union. Three days out from the project date we had great weather predictions. We continued watching the weather, and the day before, the forecast changed to a 90% chance of rain. Because of that, I hurriedly sent messages for students to move to the Kansas Union—and then we had no rain. Also, we weren't allowed to sell anything at KU, a university rule. So, we had to make sure that the students requested donations and did not say that they were selling anything and verify what was donated on an orange form. This was something that we hadn't anticipated and that we had to deal with as it came up. We also had to get multiple approvals from university entities in order to be at the two locations, and then we found out we would have to share one location with five other groups.

We had to keep a dialogue going with students about the service-learning portion of the course and the changes we needed to make to it. As part of that dialogue, students made suggestions that we needed to respond to. For instance, the students suggested that we stagger the dates of the projects, but organizationally we couldn't do that. This, of course, provided an interesting possibility for discussion, such as how do governments deal with expectations of performance (we can see on the BBC document shown in class how much as not been done); how do organizations and interest groups compete between themselves for funds (answer: They should not! The best organizations and interest groups co-exist and, indeed, even learn to coordinate their success). Only the best groups of students learned that without our coaching. Many reacted

to the constraints with exasperation, but focused on their work anyway. Some reacted to the constraints with exasperation and then used it in their reflection papers to explain why things never got off the ground for them.

Even though I told students, “No, you can’t have food,” they still showed up with donuts, cookies and other food at their booths. I think the university looked the other way regarding that breach of rules.

Although it was a steep trial, we can put to use what we learned next time. It was a great learning experience overall for both students and teachers. And, as a final note, students collected \$4800.00 from the donations.

Reactions from colleagues

I’m not sure how to explain it, but some faculty members were upset that I taught the class this way. Some have a preference for a pedagogical tool that resulted in personal concerns. The scale of objections exceeded what I expected. At one point, I really became unsure if I would use service-learning again in this class because of that reaction. But, if I consider this to be a learning experience for me as it was for the students, then it becomes clear: I need to go about it differently, not abandon it.

Notwithstanding, it is clear that a different course with a smaller number of students might make service-learning more acceptable. It would be easier to accommodate objections from a small class and also respond to the small but vocal faculty members who objected to it. The Service-Learning Institute will keep legitimizing this pedagogical tool, and that will be valuable because some departments are not strong advocates of service-learning

Resistance may come from worries about students being short changed by not learning enough. I didn’t get that sense from this class (although there will always be some students who drift). I believe other faculty may have been offended because I made the service-learning mandatory in a required course. However, I believe that it isn’t something that could be optional in a class of this size. We don’t give students the option to do a paper, so why provide an option for this segment of the course work? Also, if some students decided not to do service-learning and were doing less well than they had expected in their other work, they might want to change options mid-course in order to improve their grades: that can’t be a possibility. But, I must confess that I drew my inspiration from Provost Kathleen McCluskey-Fawcett, who taught a large class in which she used service-learning. In the same way, I hope that my experience will be useful to others.

Another confession: it was my tenure year, and I had just received notification that I received it. If I were an untenured faculty, I don’t know if it would be as easy to deal with the criticisms.