

Reflecting on the Spring

Written by Dylan Kissane

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The POL 210 course for the Spring has drawn to a close. The final Research Papers were submitted, have been graded and returned to students. Final grades have been determined, submitted and communicated. It is all over, bar the shouting, as we would say in my native Australia.

CEFAM starts its Summer semester on Monday, giving students and faculty only a weekend to breathe between one semester and the next. For students it will be a couple of days of relaxation before an intensive summer session with at least two hours of international politics every day. For faculty, it is barely enough time to reflect on the semester that was before diving into new and intensive sections.

As a professor, though, any chance to reflect on a semester's teaching – no matter how brief – is welcome. I take advantage of a couple of different tools, both institutional and self-designed, to ensure I get some read no how my teaching went down with the students, where I can improve, and how the course can evolve to maintain interest for the next group of business students who walk in my classroom door.

The first tool is a student review of teaching. In the past this had been done online, with students logging in sometime during the last couple of weeks of the semester and logging their thoughts on the course. Recently, though, the participation rate amongst students has plummeted so, this year, we reverted to anonymous, handwritten, in-class evaluations of courses. The surveys are reasonably complete but have the drawback of being data heavy, meaning there is a lag between the survey being distributed and the results coming back. Though the data is valuable, it is not ready in time to tweak the course for a Summer semester that follows hard on the heels of Spring.

The second tool I employ, then, is a far less structured feedback exercise in the last class of the semester. Generally I take at least twenty minutes and ask the students to work in groups to give feedback about the course. I usually give them a couple of broad guidelines but encourage them to think broadly about the course and how it might be improved, including my performance as a professor. This year I was particularly interested in getting feedback about the reading schedule as I no longer use a textbook but rather a collection of journal articles, book chapters and selected extracts from the mainstream press. Flicking through this feedback from the students allows me to get a clearer idea of where the course might be tweaked.

For example, one of the exercises I had my students complete was an article critique. I provided five classic IR articles (authors included Mearsheimer, Waltz, Keenan and Layne) and asked them to review and critique one of their choice. I intended this to be a pretty serious theoretical interrogation on behalf of the students, reinforcing some of the work we had done on IR theories. The feedback I received included that this was very hard for them to complete and that it was particularly challenging for students with lower-level writing skills. There were four requests for a writing workshop which, while outside of my domain, is probably something worth thinking about. As well, there were two students who commented that this exercise helped them for their research paper and their group presentation. I was happy to see this as it was precisely why the articles (Layne and Keenan, in particular) were chosen.

I also learnt from this feedback that the reading load was found by many to be excessive. This is something I constantly struggle in course design as I need to balance the requirements of the course (an introductory IR course

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for 2nd and 3rd year undergraduates) with the fact that almost all of my students speak and read English as a second language. While I have no hard and fast rule, I try to assign a couple of articles per class and probably no more than 50 or 60 pages, often times half of that. For the moment, I am not going to change this around, though I will keep an eye on how the students in summer cope with largely the same reading load.

Finally, a third tool I employ is to compare the average results across previous years and semesters teaching the course. I grade fairly consistently and my average grade tends to hover around a B- for most of my courses. Getting an A for an assignment is not unheard of, though finishing the semester with an A is uncommon. Indeed, looking over the past four years only four students had earned A's in a Spring or Fall semester POL 210 class. This year the average grade for the class was down around 10% but I was happy to give out my fifth A grade to a strong, talented student who wrote a remarkable paper on human rights and humanitarian interventions. Even if the class average has dropped – and I don't believe that that is something that is entirely within my control to address – a fantastic paper provides a little light at the end of the Spring semester tunnel.

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