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# The Negotiated Syllabus: How to Create Community in Online International Studies Classes

Shawn Smallman

Portland State University, [drss@pdx.edu](mailto:drss@pdx.edu)

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The Negotiated Syllabus: how to create community in online International Studies  
classes

Saturday, March 28th, 4:15pm

Tapa 1, Tapa Tower, Hilton Hawaiian Village

International Studies Association Conference

March 2020, Hawaii

\*cancelled due to COVID-19

Shawn Smallman, Portland State University

drss@pdx.edu

At the same time that institutions with rich online offerings experience rapid growth (Southern New Hampshire University; Oregon State University), many faculty in the United States continue to hold negative attitudes towards online classes. In particular, they are concerned that faculty will not come to know their students, that the classes lack rigor, and that students will lack a sense of engagement both with their peers and with the class material. Critics of online learning, such as Power & Morven-Gould (2011, abstract) suggest that online teaching is associated with student isolation and withdrawal. There is a common theme that runs through these concerns, and that is engagement; that is, faculty who exclusively have experience with face to face classes often believe that the students will lack a learning community, so that they will fail to engage not only with the faculty member, but also with each other, in a way that will allow students to successfully achieve the course learning outcomes.

The reality is that online classes have many advantages for creating student engagement. Because the discussion board is often the core of an online class, faculty get to know all of their students, not only the ones who are comfortable speaking in class. Students who are introverts may be more comfortable sharing ideas in an online format, and they have often engaged deeply with the course material. Students also have the ability to join the discussion at the moment that they are best prepared. Finally, the online class can make it easier to structure peer review and group activities without the limitations posed by a class period. Still, one additional pedagogical tool can

build on all of these advantages, and create a rich set of opportunities for faculty to connect their students.

This paper will argue that classes can achieve a high level of engagement -including a sense that the class constitutes a learning community- through the Negotiated Syllabus and Universal Design, which will include such elements as co-constructed curriculum, a capstone project that is shared with the entire class, peer-review as a community building tool, and a carefully constructed discussion board. This will be a practitioner-focused paper, which will be based on student discussion comments, teaching evaluations, student reflections, grade data and faculty journaling from seven online courses that have been repeatedly offered over the last six years. The goal is to give other faculty the tools necessary to foster student engagement in their own online International and Global Studies classes.

### **The Institutional Context and Problem:**

I teach at a large urban-serving institution, which has the most diverse population in the state of Oregon. The average age of our students is 28. Approximately two-thirds of our students are transfer students. The school was originally founded to serve returning GIs after World War Two. After the original campus was wiped out in the Vanport flood on May 30, 1948, the institution was rebuilt in downtown Portland. Although the university has come to be known for sustainability and community-based learning, its access mission remains central to its identity. Because we are an urban serving institution, with a large first-

generation college student population, the “online paradox” is attracting increasing attention (Johnson & Cuellar, 2014). This term refers to the fact that entirely online programs have lower retention rates, but that students who take a mix of online and face to face classes have improved retention. Our students often take online classes because they have work or family responsibilities. The particular techniques described here are likely to work with students from diverse backgrounds and levels of privilege; these are not approaches best geared only to students at elite universities.

### **Universal Design and the Negotiated Syllabus**

The term Universal Design (UD) was not born within academia, but rather within the field of architecture. It then moved into the fields of education and neuroscience. Over the last fifteen years Universal Design has become an increasingly powerful idea with higher education (Burgstahler, 2015). Universal design (UD) represents a learning framework meant to improve learning for all students by creating a flexible learning environment, which is designed to make resources accessible to all students. The central idea of the UA approach is to have educational institutions identify ways to improve students’ ability to use learning materials, while given students more agency to achieve their learning goals. The Universal Design approach allows instructors to think differently about teaching because it removes the focus from the individual learner and his or her “ability” to master the material. Instead, this approach

requires instructors to provide a variety of acceptable formats through which each student may engage the material.

The Negotiated Syllabus is a concept that in many ways is an extension of Universal Design. The core idea is that students have agency in the materials through which they choose to learn. In other words, the students have the autonomy (Clarke, 1991), to adapt assignments, materials, and content to their learning needs. For example, in an upper division course, a faculty member might assign five works for the week—e.g., a podcast with a transcript, two videos through the library’s streaming video database, one academic article, and one book chapter—with a requirement that the student read, view, or listen four of these works. And for an assignment the students might have choice of scripting a podcast, writing a research paper, or creating a data visualization. This approach makes students responsible for their own learning, and meeting the course learning outcomes, which do not change with a negotiated syllabus. What is different that students have choices in choosing the best material for them to master the subject matter. This paper will examine how to apply the Negotiated Syllabus to the discussion board, peer review, and co-constructed curriculum.

## **Engagement**

Engagement is one of the most studied aspects of higher education, because it is linked to student persistence and retention (Bigatel and Edel-Malizia, 2017, 58). There is even a National Survey of Student Engagement

which is administered at hundreds of U.S. colleges annually. The NSSE then shares reports that allow institutions to measure how effectively their curriculum is engaging their students (NSSE, 2020). This student survey, “The College Student Report,” is followed carefully by university administrators, and shapes curriculum. The existence of this institution, and the funds committed to it, demonstrate the seriousness with which colleges take this concept. There are also a wide array of measures and organizations that exist to document engagement through proprietary measures, such as “Quality Measures” for online classes. Many have struggled to document that they adequately capture student engagement (Bigatel and Edel-Malizia, 2017, 59). Other institutions have focused on identifying the pedagogical tools that best create student engagement, as with the American Association of College and Universities’ (AACU) “High Impact Practices project (Bigatel and Edel-Malizia, 2017, 59).

The difficulty is defining the meaning of this term. Bigatel and Edel-Malizia, 59) use a metric associated with intensity: “In this study, *student engagement* is broadly defined as the time and physical energy that students expend on activities in their academic experience.” This definition has much in common with of the NSSE:

Student engagement represents two critical features of collegiate quality. The first is the amount of time and effort students put into their studies and other educationally purposeful activities. The second is how the institution deploys its resources and organizes the curriculum and other learning opportunities to get students to participate in activities that decades of research studies show are linked to student learning (NSSE).

The challenge with this definition is that it does not include social interactions, as well students' curiosity and intellectual commitment. This definition is useful but partial. For the purpose of this paper, engagement will be defined as student's participation in their own learning experience, the documented creation of learning communities, and student's ability to shape their own learning in meaningful ways. For NSSE and other institutions, it's important to have measurable metrics for student engagements, which is the point of the survey. This paper will instead focus on the extent to which students can shape their own instruction, and can engage in a community of learners to engage the class content.

The need for student engagement is particularly relevant to online courses, where students lack face to face meetings with their peers, and the class often takes place in an asynchronous manner ((Bigatel and Edel-Malizia, 2017, 58). It is important to note that student engagement entails strategies that engage everyone in the class: "Student engagement involves not only what *instructors do* to engage students, but also what *students do* in the way of instructional activities." (Bigatel and Edel-Malizia, 2017, 58). For this reason, achieving student engagement in an online environment entails substantial adaptations to overcome the weaknesses of this format, but more importantly, to also take advantage of its multiple strengths. Online learning can create a space for interactive, collaborative, and self-directed learning (Bigatel and Edel-Malizia,

2017, 61) What is essential to this effort is to create an affective and social aspect to the class. But how do you implement a Negotiated Syllabus in an online class to achieve this goal?

### **Discussion Board**

Because there is a social aspect to learning, conversation and participation are essential to a successful course. This is one area in which online classes can have an advantage over a face to face classroom. Kimberley Tanner (2013, 322) talks about equitable teaching, which “is about teaching *all* the students in your classroom, not just those who are already engaged, already participating. . .” The discussion board is central to creating engagement in online classes. Its great advantage is that all students are required to talk, not only those most involved. Because there are typically detailed guidelines regarding what to write, and students usually work in an asynchronous fashion, students have time to think before responding. Introverts are as ready to share their opinions as people who are comfortable in the classroom spotlight. There is no need to randomly call on students or to circle the room for points, in order to hear from everyone in the class (Tanner, 2013, 325-6). Because in most online classes students must do two posts, one of which is a response to classmate, the discussion board takes on the aspect of a conversation. And because it is easy to subdivide discussion boards into small groups, the discussion can be intimate enough to create a sense of community and inclusion (Tanner, 2013, 327).

The instructor should do weekly course summaries, which call out students points by name, and describe the small-group conversations. This creates a sense of connection between the discussion group and the class as a whole. When students are mentioned by name, they know that their opinions are being heard. It also makes it clear that the course is not the same as the course shell, and that there is an engaged faculty member following the conversation. Lastly, this also requires that the instructor engage deeply on the discussion board, so that they track group dynamics. It is common to romanticize the engagement in face to face classes. But it is important to remember that many people also feel alienated or excluded in these classes, and may be reluctant to speak (Tanner, 2013, 327). Because it demands participation from all students, the discussion board ensures an equitable teaching strategy, in which all students participate.

While these techniques are an important start, a Negotiated Syllabus can deepen student engagement through the discussion board. The key point of this is to create independent learners, who take the initiative to resolve problems, share information, and engage their peers. One small way to do this is to create a general questions space on the discussion board. The instructions for this discussion group state that this is a space for the entire class to ask questions related to the course that other students might have. And that other students are welcome to answer their peers without waiting for the instructor. In practice, this allows students with more technical skills to help their students with a data

visualization assignment, or someone who is familiar with APA to advise a peer. In this way, students acquire a sense of agency in the class.

In a class with a negotiated syllabus, however, the discussion board should be structured so that students have more authority. In my class there is always more than one discussion prompt for the week, because students will be viewing, reading or listening to different material. In practice, students like being able to share and compare information about different course materials. I also tell students that the prompt is a suggestion, but not a requirement. Students are also able to pose their own questions. At the start of the course, students are reluctant to write responses to their own questions. As time passes though, and students see their peers writing on different topics, students will compare readings to topics covered in other classes, share additional materials with the class that they've come across, and take control of the discussion space. Finally, the discussion board can be used not only as a means to share ideas about the course content, but also to co-create the course content itself. In this manner, authority for the course content is passed from the faculty member to the students during the course.

### **Course Assignments and the Final Project**

One way to create engagement in an online class is with project-based learning, in which the students create their own course content. There are a number of advantages to this process. In a regular course, it is impossible for the instructor to cover all of the topics that might interest the students. By turning the

final section of the course over to content that the students themselves have created, a wider array of issues can be covered. For example, in my Cyberwar and Espionage, Global Drug Trade, and U.S. Foreign Policy courses, it would be impossible for me to cover all world regions, all drugs, or all digital issues. Instead, in these courses my students are assigned to research and create a project what interests them. In my Global Drug Trade course, the key learning outcome of the course is writing, so students write a research paper. Because the exact requirements of the final project differ from course to course, I want to examine this class in detail.

The entire class is scaffolded to support writing and this project. Every week there are separate readings or videos about writing. There is also a brief writing quiz (worth five percent of the final grade) in week three, that tests them on how to use APA in references, identify peer reviewed papers, choose a good thesis statement, as well as other writing and research skills. In week one, students view examples (shared with permission) of students' work earlier in the course. In week four the students share an outline of their project, which includes their topic, learning outcomes for the reader, thesis statement, and draft reference list. Students provide feedback on this work. Students in fact receive far more feedback than it would ever be possible for one professor to give. In week seven students do a data visualization assignment related to their final project. Students can choose between doing a timeline or a chart. There are

detailed instructions -including both a video and written guidelines- for this project. This assignment is the only course content for week seven.

In week eight students share a copy of their work for peer review on the discussion board. Everyone in the class must provide detailed comments on two of their peers' papers, beginning first with papers that as yet do not have any feedback. This creates a collaborative experience. In week nine students upload a copy of their paper to Turnitin, which allows them to check not only for originality, but also style and grammar points. In week ten, the discussion board is not broken into small groups. Instead, students must read and comment upon ten papers on a discussion board that is shared with the entire class. Typically, these comments are thoughtful; it is common to see students expressing their gratitude to their peers. The papers also include either the charts that the students created earlier, or links to the timeline. These papers are the only course content for the final week. After the final week students upload their papers to Assignments, with a one-page reflection. This extensive peer review process ensures that the final papers are polished. By this point, the class has created a community of learning.

This project-based learning, in which students create their own curriculum, is the basis for all of my upper-division classes. The details vary from class to class. In most of my courses, students can choose the format of their final presentation: slideshows, podcasts, videos and other digital artifacts. Some students also choose to do research papers. Because students are often more

concerned about losing face with their peers than they are of losing a few points for a late grade, work is typically submitted on time.

The students who create digital artifacts often put in far more time than they would on a paper. For example, one student created an animated video related to the Global Drug Trade. In their final reflection they commented that they were pleased with their work, but they also recognized the immense amount of time that this project had taken compared to a traditional paper. This video was one of the three most popular works in the class, based on student feedback on the discussion board. This shared learning in a community space creates a learning community in which students are responsible to each other for their own success. The final papers -having gone through so much work and revision- are far better than those in a typical course.

One final point is that it is important that students should be able to rethink or remake their projects from the ground up. For example, with the digital visualization assignment, I had originally designed the course so that students would only create charts. The goal of the project was to introduce students to using data sets; and to scaffold the course so that they might begin thinking about their thesis earlier. Right away, however, students discovered alternative formats for data visualizations, and identified a timeline tool that they wanted to use. I changed the rules to allow the students to use other tools. My partner in the Office of Academic Innovation then created guidelines for how to use this tool, which have been incorporated into all subsequent classes. For project-

based learning to be meaningful, students must be able to define the terms of the project so that there is a true co-curriculum. This partnership with the students, in which they have true autonomy to define their learning process, is at the heart of the Negotiated Syllabus.

Lastly, I wish to note that some faculty at other institutions (such as some science faculty at the University of British Columbia) have taken the negotiated syllabus beyond the assignments level, to the actual grade weighting in the course itself. Typically, in an introductory course at UBC the final exam is worth forty to fifty percent of the final grade, and the syllabus states that students cannot pass the course unless they pass the final exam. But now some instructors allow their students to choose how much certain course assignments will count towards their final grade at the start of the quarter. They are able to do so within the learning management system itself. Of course, there are parameters to what is possible. This approach is still rare in higher education, but also represents a logical extension of the Negotiated Syllabus.

**Conclusion:**

By drawing on project-based learning as part of a Negotiated Syllabus, professors teaching online in International and Global Studies courses can create a deep sense of engagement in the class. This is true even in an urban-serving institution with a high level of transfer students, and a significant number of first-generation college students who are dealing with financial and other challenges. In one recent literature review of online learning Muljana and Luo (2019, p. 27,

29) found that course design and the “facilitation of a student engagement and a sense of belonging” (Muljana and Luo, 2019, 27) were essential to retention in online classes. By using project-based learning, and giving students the responsibility to co-create curriculum with a Negotiated Syllabus, students can share ownership of the course. As faculty quickly move their courses online during the COVID-19 pandemic they will not typically have time to incorporate these tools into all aspects of their courses. But even using some of these techniques in a week or section of the class can create a dramatic change in student engagement in these courses.

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