

TEACHING POLITICS TO THE STUDENTS WITH MULTIDISCIPLINARY BACKGROUND WITH INNOVATIVE METHODS

Abstract

Paper researches various teaching methods tested into practice for increasing the engagement of the students. Teaching 'Principles of Democratic Governance', which is basically introduction to politics, as a core course across various Georgian universities offered to the students with multidisciplinary background, proved to be a challenge. Therefore, I have tested several alternative teaching methods as a response to this challenge. The Problem-Based Learning Method appeared to be the most successful as it includes a group working during classes and acts as an icebreaker for the students with the different knowledge and experience. The learner-oriented method is giving students puzzles or problem and gives independent, free space to research the topic and solve it. Another efficient method is simulation, especially to teach theories of the international relation with of negotiations and Hobbes Game. Watching movies (mostly documentaries), reading literature and holding discussions proved fruitful to teach topics like totalitarian regimes. Debates on certain chapters for instance: Political Ideologies or Human Rights - appeared to be a road towards better understanding of above-mentioned topics. Alternative teaching methods give opportunity of the objective evaluation as well, in the case of the PBL the lecturer/facilitator is actively monitoring the process and in the case of necessity asks in depth questions to check up on the work of the student during learning time. To evaluate objectively different activities are finalized with the essays with clearly determined components of assessment. The experiments have been proved successful across various universities in Georgia and it is recommended to include this course as at least as an optional in the curriculum of the TSU Bachelor's programme in European Studies.

Key words: Introduction to Politics, Teaching and Learning Methods, Problem Based Learning (PBL) in Practice, Games and Simulations methods in Practice, Students with Multidisciplinary Background,

Introduction

Politics was a subject of teaching, learning and discussion at least starting from Ancient Greece and throughout the history it has been developed into the independent field of science. Furthermore, "Introduction to Politics" was established into the core course in various fields of study, as it is vital to teach students and youth about basic political concepts such as: forms of the governance, political systems, elections, ideologies, etc. Teaching politics is challenging especially to the students with the multidisciplinary background and due to the mandatory nature of the course across various programmes of different Georgian Universities, the students take it for granted without making substantial contribution during the classes and causing low level of engagement when it is provided with traditional teaching methods. In order to understand the best practices of teaching politics, within the framework of innovative teaching and learning methods at the TSU Institute of European Studies, the crash course without ECTS has been already tested with the MA students. The practice was successful, taking into consideration that this subject is applicable for the bachelor students, my experiment continued with the different universities at the freshmen and sophomore level to understand if these methods are efficient with them. The practices have shown that the interest towards the subject is increasing with the alternative/innovative teaching methods. During the classical lectures the professor has an opportunity to transfer the substantial amount of knowledge to the students, but very often in the big groups this method is less efficient as not all students are participating in the teaching and learning process.

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The article will be oriented on examining teaching and learning methods that can increase the involvement of the students with the multidisciplinary background and help them to understand the ongoing political processes in Georgia and in the World with wider context and in a coherent manner. After the course is finished, students should be able to enhance learning abilities ('study how to learn'), hypothesize and analyse challenges in the multiple disciplines (Kauffman, 2015, pp. 111-115). Taking into consideration my experience of teaching "Principles of Democratic Governance" to the students of IT, Management and Economics, I can conclude that the traditional teaching methods were ineffective; In order to increase engagement of students I have looked through the various teaching methods, most of them were perfectly summarized in John Ishiyama's Handbook on Teaching and Learning in Political Science and International Relations. Part III of the book reads the best practices of different teaching techniques out of which the most successful in my case turned out to be Problem Based Learning (PBL) Method, Teaching politics and international relations with movies and literature, offering practices for promoting the student discussions (debates) and simulations (Ishiyama, 2015). Theoretical and practical cohesion will be discussed in this article in order to answer the question: which teaching and learning methods proved effective during teaching the interdisciplinary group the course on the 'Principles of Democratic Governance' (Introduction to Politics)?

I. Problem Based Learning (PBL) Method

The Problem Based Learning (PBL) is the most frequently used method in my classes as it is a cooperating and inclusive method of learning, which first was developed for the medical studies in 1960s. PBL leads to deep learning because students engage in the knowledge construction independently; as well as they solve the puzzles and develop 'learning how to learn' ability. Consequently, this approach tested the most effective, teaching interdisciplinary groups with the different educational background.

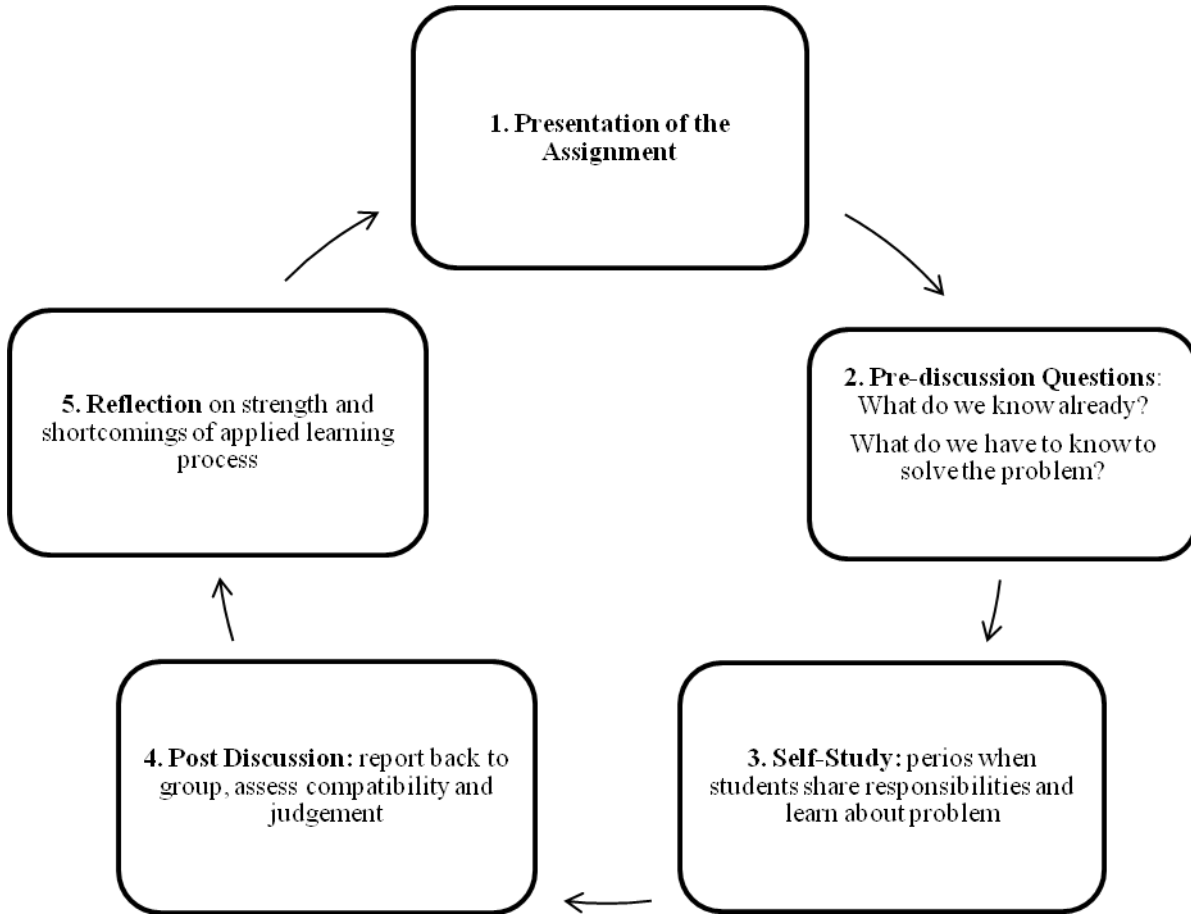
The PBL is implemented in a group activities, it additionally enhances communications skills (Ishiyama, 2015). It is important to understand that facilitator should support both, group and the individual activities, as the final purpose of the PBL to prepare independent scholars who can work in different environments (Hussin, 2019, p. 14). Structure of the PBL is as follows: 10-15 members of the group of students are learning with the supervision of the lecturer by solving problem or assignment. The PBL must satisfy three core principles for successful learning and teaching: 1) it should follow a problem-based process of knowledge construction; 2) should be learner centred; and 3) should be collaborative (Ishiyama, 2015, pp. 369-372). Implementation of these principles in the course is the biggest challenge, as only well-organized assignments will get the desired results. Understanding the background and experience of the students is also important. For example, for the interdisciplinary group the preparation of a more structured assignment works better. Creating assignment is a complicated process and consequently it improves with the involvement of the students. Assignments engage students in the learning process; thus, it should be interesting for all members of the group to include their opinions from the individual background. Hence, understanding specific knowledge of the students is highly recommended as the students should be able to understand the context. Good assignment should not push learners towards one correct answer, rather it should give the opportunity to multiple options of the problem-solving. According to the 'Handbook on Teaching and Learning in Political Science and International Relations' there are three main characteristics of a good assignment: 1) allow deliberation (instead of just description); 2) guide the tutorial group; and 3) include a certain amount of scaffolding (Ishiyama, 2015, pp. 372-376).

During in-class time, students discuss the assignment using different approaches, however, I prefer the Maastricht University 7-step guideline outlined for the groups composed of 10-15 students, which stands as follows:

- Discuss the case and make sure everyone understands the problem;
- Identify the questions that need to be answered to shed light on the case;
- Brainstorm what the group already knows and identify potential solutions;
- Analyse and structure the results of the brainstorming session;
- Formulate learning objectives for the knowledge that is still lacking;
- Do independent study, individually or in smaller groups: read articles or books, follow practicals or attend lectures to gain the required knowledge;

- Discuss the findings (this is held during the next session) (Maastricht University, n.d.).

Overall, the PBL cycle is as follows (Maurer, 2015, p. 371):



Implementing the PBL method in practice takes lots of energy, but it is worth trying especially in the interdisciplinary groups. During introduction I always ask students to tell the group about their educational background. If the response is not clear, - additional questions are recommended to be aware about overall composition of the group. First topic of my syllabus is 'What is Politics?' This is an opportunity to measure the understanding and knowledge of politics using Socratic Method, which further clarifies the content of the assignment. This method is guiding students towards knowledge instead of traditional teaching. This is a dialogue between lecturer and students, but it is important to keep up questions to get to the right answer (Trepanier, 2018, pp. 1-2). The PBL cycle starts after understanding the background and knowledge of the students and the introduction of the assignment. This part of the article demonstrates the phases of this particular method based on the puzzle provided in the BOX 1.

BOX 1. PBL Assignment: Learning Election Procedures

Imagine that you are a representative of the political party and next general elections are getting closer. The Central Election Commission announced the date and you are tasked to prepare a strategy for the elections. What are your plans, who are you meeting with and when?

After completing groups, the facilitator explains the assignment and checks the knowledge of the students about elections in this particular case and gives the free time and space to the groups to discuss the problem/puzzle. Meanwhile, students are working, the role of the facilitator is to pay attention to the process and interfere only if necessary. During the first sessions proactive facilitation might be necessary as groups are taking first steps of the teambuilding and working together. Frequently checking up on groups and asking question about their attitudes will help them to set up an effective working system and avoid the point from where unproductive approach becomes routine. It is worth to consider that this involvement should not be artificial and should be done in the extreme cases, when the students are distancing from the actual topic of the assignment.

Pre-discussion Questions

During pre-discussion the students are not discussing only the task, they research knowledge of the group about the particular topic and outline the roadmap to fulfil the assignment. In this order they discuss two basic questions: What do we know already (to identify knowledge)? And What do we have to know to solve the problem (define learning strategy) (Maurer, 2015, p. 371). On this phase, learners go through first 5 steps of Maastricht University's PBL guideline, which includes: understanding the problem/puzzle, identification of questions, brainstorming, structuring results of the brainstorming and formulate learning objectives/tasks. The facilitator should pay attention that in the groups the roles are redistributed well; ideally, this part is done by students independently, but close monitoring and involvement from the facilitator is acceptable. One person in the group is a leader, who mediates the discussions and supports efficient engagement of the students in the learning process, summarizes the discussion and gives tasks to other members, finally the leader merges working materials of the group members and presents it at the next session. The second is secretary/whiteboard worker, who is collecting the information, making memos and gives visual perspective from the whiteboard. Additionally, as any other member, the secretary is also actively involved in the discussions (Maurer, 2015, p. 372). As soon as this phase is completed, students know their individual tasks and are preparing for the research on which they have one week until the next session.

Self-study

The students have one week to implement individual works. During this phase, collecting and analysing information is vital and the facilitator must pay attention that each student is well equipped with the required skillset. Students work with the outlined learning tasks individually before comparing and contrasting their findings. The largest part of the learning process takes place outside of the classroom on this stage of the PBL cycle.

Post-Discussion

During the post-discussion, students are compiling their tasks and the leader is merging the document into a wholesome maximum three page report, all materials written in one style. The relevance of the topic and judgement of the paper should be compatible and students must understand how exactly their reports respond to the problem/puzzle of the assignment. The post-discussion gives to possibilities for checking one's own understanding and deliberating among members of the team

Reflection

The PBL cycle finishes with the reflection step, which assesses the learning process, shortcomings and amendments to the course of study for the future assignment of the group. The groups present 3-5 pages report on their activity during the next class and discuss the process of learning and content of the resolving the puzzle in 10-15 minutes.

Assessment in the PBL method

Finally, the facilitator/lecturer gives feedback and assessment to the groups. During working on problem/puzzle groups need advices how to improve working together. According to Maurer there are two major reflection moments that help students' development of learning specifications: "at the beginning of the course, students are asked for a self-evaluation in which they assess their strengths and weaknesses in terms of skills and/or

content that they want to put special emphasis on. At the mid-term and/or end of the course, students repeat this exercise and can reflect on their progress in terms of tackling their weaknesses” (Maurer, 2015, pp. 377-378).

The next step is the individual assessment, which is a debatable issue in the PBL. Traditional evaluation is based on the direct personal performance of the student using research papers, essays, seminars and etc. In this order close monitoring of the process is crucial as it is possible to track the engagement of each student. During presentation the facilitator asks questions to the presenter about roles and tasks of the members and additionally gets the information randomly from other fellows of the group, which gives an opportunity to understand the depth of knowledge acquired during the learning.

This method proved effective to teach and learn in big groups (50 students) with the interdisciplinary background. Despite the positive experience, holding whole course in the PBL method was not enough. Consequently, incorporation of other methods are vital for the specific topics.

II. Games and Simulation

The syllabus of the Principles of Democratic Governance includes theoretical concepts of the International Relations, Political Ideologies, Political Systems, the forms of the Democracy and at some point teaching only with the PBL is not enough especially for the students who have the urge to debate about different viewpoints. Thus, additional learning methods proved helpful to fill the gap of the interests of students. Games and Simulations especially during teaching theories of international relations are the most effective ways to let students understand how to use different attitudes in the different circumstances.

Victor Asal talks about two core ideas for the efficient simulation and talks about the benefit of this approach: “First, the world can be modelled, by which we understand that a set of relatively simple rules can encapsulate the fundamentals of a given situation. Second, those rules might take the form of some kind of decision-making architecture, or of personal or institutional characteristics, or indeed of random events”.

In terms of benefits, Asal talks first of all about the opportunity, simulation is giving to the students for exploring interesting topics. The next argument in favour of this method is that it allows students to get a general knowledge about the dynamics of negotiations. Finally, simulations act as the ice-breaker for the group and accelerates the team building. In general, this method gives the student an opportunity to acquire theoretical and practical knowledge (Asal, 2015, pp. 305-306).

As the Principles of Democratic Governance is a complex course, I try to explain the basic concepts and theories, therefore while teaching International Relations, would rather concentrate on two main theories such as Realism and Liberalism, rather than teaching all theories and complicate the understanding of the international relations, which usually is already influenced with the different kinds of conspiracy theories. Therefore, I prepare two simulations for each theory. There are wide range of simulation games and Victor Asal describes them very well and most effective to teach realism is The Classical Realism Game (AKA Hobbes Game). In terms of teaching liberalism – a simulation game of the EU Foreign Affairs Council session proved to be the most appropriate activity as it introduces with the idea of cooperation and compromises in the international relations and also serves as a practical example of the EU decision-making process.

In order to warm up the audience and break the ice, usually I split students into four groups and ask them to gather all chairs in the room and store near one wall. Usually, they think that it is a competition and assignment is to steal chairs from other groups after several minutes of quarrel I interfere and tell them about true purpose of the assignment. It is cooperation and despite different associations, they might have common goal and in order to achieve it the concentration is vital. After this, they are more concentrated to the new assignment and listen to every word the facilitator says.

The first is a ‘Classical Realism Game’ and in order to play it in-group of 30 students, - two decks of cards are necessary. Each student gets a card and they duel each other with rock paper and scissors game, loser dies and gets reviving card from the facilitator. Playing follows this rhythm, until facilitator’s deck is empty and consequently, from that moment whoever loses rock-paper-scissors leaves the game. The game continues until two students with the most cards battle each other. In that moment according to the protocol the facilitator stops the game and asks: why are you fighting? The answer usually is either this is the aim of the assignment, to survive or to win. Facilitator asks another question to all the students: in your opinion what was the point of the game? And discusses it with the students. After which gives additional assignment to read Hobbes’

Leviathan: Chapter XIII Of 'The Natural Condition Of Mankind As Concerning Their Felicity And Miser'. During next session the facilitator/lecturer discusses with the student three principal reasons for fight according to Hobbes: competition, difference and glory. This game teaches the students that avoiding fight was in their best interests, but they preferred to enter in the competition, later understanding the motives described by Hobbes.

The second assignment is negotiations on solving humanitarian crisis in hypothetical continent and countries. Each student represents one of 27 EU Member states with their own interests in the EU Foreign Affairs Council plus there are representatives of China, Russia and US, who have interests and opportunities to influence the decision-making process. The purpose of the assignment is to respect international law and based on the compromise, find an appropriate solution to the problem through different phases of formal and informal negotiations. The assignment teaches the students how alliances and strategic partnerships are built in the international relations. The simulation is focused on determining the national interests and establish useful strategic partnership with the countries with common interests through the compromise.

The students are evaluated with essays on comparative analysis of IR theories: realism and liberalism based on their experience in simulations. The assignment helps the lecturer to understand the involvement and acquired knowledge in this process.

III. Other Useful Methods of Teaching

For the multidisciplinary group it is important to create an interesting environment. Taking into consideration the fact that they might not planning to continue their studies in the field of political science, only explaining certain concepts are not enough, they need demonstration. While teaching totalitarian regimes, only definition and verbal example is not enough. I found it effective to watch series of documentaries over this topic. Firstly, the lecturer introduces with the definition of totalitarian regimes. After he lets students watch a documentary mini-series of Netflix: 'How to become a tyrant', each of six episode is around 30 minutes and usually I prefer to pick the first episode: 'Seize Power' (about Adolf Hitler) and the fourth one: 'Control the Truth' (about Stalin). This tested an effective way to help students understand the essence of the totalitarian regime. The assignment is to read or watch '1984' by George Orwell and discuss it during the next seminar. After watching real life examples of the totalitarian regime and then reading about fictional one, it is easier to draw parallels between these two. Finally, students write an essay about totalitarian regime based on real example they find interesting. The vital part of the essay should be the viewpoint and angle of analysis of the student regarding particular regime.

Another topic of the syllabus is civil rights and liberties. Usually it is useful to first, introduce with the constitution and their rights and assign them to read in my case, Constitution of Georgia, Chapter Two: Fundamental Human Rights. It is better to read it together and explain the most important rights, how they work in practice. The debates tested effective to engage students in the discussions of civil liberties. The lecturer brings interesting case (fictional or real), for instance, I bring the so-called 'lifeboat case' - a real story about four survivors of the shipwreck (THE QUEEN v. DUDLEY AND STEPHENS., 1884). The practice has shown that asking students individually what they think about the assignment and group them based on the responses is an effective approach. I give them a certain amount of time to prepare arguments and name speakers. The speaker has the right to choose who will respond to the argument of the opponent group. Traditionally, each student writes essay, in this case about the interesting case of personal liberties and freedoms.

Conclusion

Teaching introduction to politics to the students with multidisciplinary background as a core course is challenging, but with the correct attitude involvement of the students will increase. There are many methods of teaching and learning. I have tested several and found some of them effective during my classes with the students of IT, Economics and Management background. The most successful and interesting appeared to be the Problem Based Learning (PBL) method. My personal experience says that it works well especially with the big groups .The approach is "learner-oriented" as the students are searching to the knowledge themselves and the lecturer is a facilitator, who guides them in this process. One of the main advantages of this method is that students learn working in groups and independently.

The PBL is used mostly during my classes as a primary method of teaching and learning, but it is not enough at some point, therefore other approaches such as 'simulation games' is also useful especially during teaching 'theories of international relations'. The mostly used games are The Hobbes Game (Classical Realism Game) and Simulation of the EU Foreign Affairs Council (Negotiations). Each of them represents example of two major IR theories: Realism and Liberalism.

The syllabus does not give enough time to research different totalitarian regimes and only theoretical explanation about components of totalitarianism is not enough; this may be compensated by watching documentaries or reading literature and holding discussions, followed up with the analytical essay about particular regime.

During covering the civil rights and liberties chapter, students first of all are introduced with their rights with the explanations for what each right stands for and after this they are introduced with the interesting case about human rights for the debates. As usual the assignment is followed up with the essay on civil liberties.

Finally, from these experiments it proved efficient to use alternative teaching methods rather than traditional method, especially if the lecturer has a big group of students with the multidisciplinary background. Understanding level of knowledge of the students is vital to come up with the relevant and interesting assignments; consequently, increasing engagement of the students. For the objective evaluation, active monitoring of the group activities is required for the facilitator. Additionally, determination of certain criteria to distribute points further increases objectivity of the evaluation.

These methods offer students opportunity to study 'how to learn' and develop necessary research skills not only for the political science, but any other field; it enhances various skills, including working in the group and individually and of course helps to get an in-depth knowledge of the particular topic utilizing interesting activities.

Considering, the multidisciplinary background of the European Studies, it is important to teach bachelor students the key political science and international relations concepts. The theoretical knowledge of these topics will help them during the next courses to easily understand such complicated topics as EU Integration, European Politics, EU Institutions, Political Ideologies and Theories, Theories of law, Philosophy and etc. Hence, it is recommended to include the Introduction to Politics at least as the optional course at the bachelor programme of TSU European Studies education. Meanwhile the lecturer should make an expectation that not all students are interested in these topics and in order to overcome the lack of attention to the subject he/she should plan the classes having on mind the different teaching methods such as: PBL, Simulation, Games, Debates and other above-mentioned approaches.

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