

Internet Citizenship: Course Design and Delivery Using ICT

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INTRODUCTION

This article presents the design of an undergraduate course that focused on how the Internet¹ may be used as a medium for discovering information about citizenship, in general, and for advocating and practicing citizenly conduct, in particular. The goal is to share with the reader a set of guidelines to specify course objectives and requirements, to select relevant materials, to engage students in self-directed learning, and to appreciate the process of working with the students over a semester. Applications of information and communication technology (ICT) were integrated into the course management and delivery, and they also formed the basis of the topic for the course content.

The title of the course was “The Voice of an Engaged Citizen: Vote, Advocate, Volunteer, Respond, Act...How?” This course was one of 14 first-year seminars² (FYS) intended to be taken by high-achieving freshman at the University of Maryland–Baltimore County (UMBC).³ These seminars, which are limited to 20 students, are intended to create an active learning environment. The students’ development of effective oral and written communication skills and the mastery of techniques to seek and evaluate information are the cornerstones of these seminars. This particular course was intended to explore the ways that ICT could foster the practice of citizenship. The course also had the objective of teaching students to use the Internet to search for reputable evidence in support of the Internet’s use in such an application area.

COURSE DESCRIPTION

First, the students taking part in this course should use the Internet to learn what citizenship is. From there,

they can look for ways that the Internet can be used to practice citizenship. Practicing citizenship via the Internet may include, but is not limited to, finding and evaluating Web sites that provide information about important issues and that provide the opportunity to communicate with our representatives. Likewise, students are also encouraged (1) to look for research that has been done to see if and how citizens are using the Internet to participate in democracy, (2) to seek information about political activist groups on the Internet, and (3) to determine how effective those groups are in attracting members and influencing decision making. Students should then attempt to find out if the Internet has information about character development and the learning of moral values.

The overall objectives for the coursework are formulated as the class progresses. This way, the class will allow itself the flexibility to pursue an avenue it finds interesting. The format of the work should include group discussions and seeking out information on the Internet. During some of the classes, students present their findings for discussion, ensuring that the students learn how to prepare and deliver PowerPoint presentations and how to write evaluative essays of journal articles and other material.

COURSE MANAGEMENT AND DELIVERY

A Blackboard site was available in support of this course where material, such as readings and Web site links, were posted for the class to review. It should be noted that the “syllabus” of this course evolved in the form of an “Assignments Log” posted on the Blackboard site that specified the requirements for each particular class. This log evolved because there was flexibility in

the pacing and type of assignments required from the students; typically, the due dates for written essays and presentations were posted two weeks in advance.

However, the most important use of Blackboard was its function as a forum for students to provide immediate written comments on class events, whether led by the instructor or by the students themselves. Furthermore, Blackboard was also used for students to post their PowerPoint presentations, their review essays of journal articles, and their evaluations of Web sites so they could be reviewed by the instructor as well as other members of the class.

COURSE CONTENT AND STRUCTURE

This particular seminar course met twice each week for 75 minutes over a 14-week semester. Class time was devoted to the following types of activities.

First, the instructor (HHE) posted on Blackboard a collection of journal articles (Evans & Yen, 2005; Froomkin, 2002; Thomas & Streib, 2005), related reports (Best & Wade, 2005; Clift, 2002; Emurian, 2004; Noveck, 2004; Vance, 2000), and surveys (Horrigan, 2004). This material was used for reading and discussion in class. The preferred style for engaging this material was found to be a type of "round robin" where each student would lead and read several paragraphs, later passing that role to another student. The student leader and reader was free to make comments and ask questions as he or she engaged the material, and other class members were encouraged to present their own questions and comments. At the conclusion of a reading and discussion, each student posted his or her own thoughts on the reading on a designated Blackboard discussion forum. Students were encouraged to give an evaluation of the material read and discussed in relationship to the overall objectives of the course. These class exercises, which were interspersed throughout the semester, provided the occasion for open discussion and the rehearsal of tools of analysis that were applicable to the students' written reviews of journal articles that they themselves selected.

Second, as briefly mentioned above, each student reviewed six journal or other reputable articles throughout the semester (Coleman & Norris, 2005; Gil-Garcia, 2005; LaVigne, Simon, Dawes, Pardo, & Berlin, 2001; Lourenço & Costa, 2006). Each review was based upon a set of guidelines⁴ for evaluating an article, ultimately

resulting in a two-to-three page, single-spaced essay. The articles selected by the students were posted on the Blackboard site for approval, and the review served as a basis for a PowerPoint presentation to the class. The set of guidelines was discussed in class, and anonymous examples of reviews written by students in similar seminars were also presented and discussed. For the first review, the instructor met with each student individually to provide feedback on a draft of the review. This meeting ensured that both the students and the instructor were in agreement with regard to what was expected from the review; consequently, both the instructor and students found this initial feedback session to be invaluable to the production of subsequent quality essays.

Third, several classes were devoted to examination and open discussion of various Internet portals and Web sites thought to be relevant to the course topic of Internet citizenship. This activity was made feasible since the class was able to meet in a PC lab or in a seminar room, depending upon the needs for each particular class. Based upon the feedback from the students during these open discussions, it was decided that PowerPoint presentations would be delivered by each student to evaluate a Web site. Consequently, each student shared his or her findings with the class. The pace of this course allowed each student to make three of these PowerPoint presentations. Among the cornerstone sites investigated, in open discussion or by student presentations, were the following:

1. <http://www.advocacyguru.com/>

This site contains a wealth of Web sites organized into the categories below. From among the many sites presented within a category, one example is presented for each category.

- a. Advocacy Resources
 - CITIZENOUTREACH
(www.citizenoutreach.com)
- b. E-Government General
 - E-DEMOCRACY
(www.e-democracy.org)
- c. Communicating with Elected Officials
 - YOUR CONGRESS
(<http://www.yourcongress.com/>)
- d. Nonprofit Resources
 - NONPROFIT BASICS
(www.nonprofitbasics.org)

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