

Working Together, Working Towards: An Approach to Outcomes Based Learning

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When I was asked by Leonard Preyra, then Chair of the Political Science Department to teach the *Scope and Methods of Political Science* course (POL 401.0) in the middle of June 2003, I thought to myself, “how hard could it be? I can put together a year-long course in a few months.” I had just published a book on research methods for African universities and thought that teaching research methods to SMU students would be much easier from a pedagogical point-of-view; we would have at least language and culture in common. Senior undergraduates, I assumed, would already be well-versed in research methods. I could simply build on my own field and library-based research experience, draw some useful examples from my own book, and the students would walk away ready to undertake empirical research.

What I quickly realised was that the research process, while intuitive, was not easily downloaded from a textbook, despite the best intentions of an eager instructor. Compounding this was the fact that my course is populated with a mixture of 2nd, 3rd and 4th year students. Many are political science majors, several are not; some have yet to declare a major. With this potpourri of students, I began lecturing about the basics of theory, the importance of hypotheses and how we know what we know. While I found the material gripping, students were worried at best and openly nervous at worst about their prospects of not only grasping the basics of research but of how we would be able to survive the monotony of the nitty-gritty details of the research process. I mentioned these student concerns to a colleague at Dalhousie and her reply was simply that research methods is something students must do, it is a rite-of-passage that is suffered, not valued since, as she correctly pointed out, students don't remember anything they learned in lecture anyway. Her point troubled me, particularly since it was likely true. The difficulty I faced was in getting students to work with the material – to analyse text, undertake literature reviews, formulate good research questions and be able to set about answering them quantitatively and/or qualitatively.

In October 2003, I attended Pierre Zundel's seminar on outcomes based learning. His seminar focused on student-centre teaching, assessment and learning. It was during this seminar that I began to play with the idea of re-tooling the *Scope and Methods of Political Science* course to suit the outcomes I wanted students to take away from the course. After discussion with the class about how to re-format the course to best fit the needs of my varied group of students, I adopted a series of research outcomes that would allow students to work in groups, with the material, doing hands-on research at a level that was appropriate to their existing skills. I felt that each student, regardless of year-of-study or major, should be able to grasp the basics of research and actually begin to use the methods in their other courses. The outcomes model of teaching suited this requirement well – it allowed me to start at the comfort and substantive level of students and bring them along to where I wanted them to be. In the outcomes-based method of evaluation, students are given two opportunities to grasp the required work. This double opportunity is more labour-intensive for me, but is also a source of much relief and satisfaction as I am better able to evaluate student work. I am also more confident that students are internalising the cumulative elements of the research process. Since instituting the double opportunity, students have been more creative and imaginative in their group and written work and, in turn, have found research to be fun!

Instead of marking students once on work they may or may not understand, outcomes-based learning sets out the “outcome” and matches it with a set of indicators that students can refer to when reading the text book in preparation for lecture and assignments. I then evaluate student work based on these indicators, which facilitates the clarity of my comments and feedback for students. Students who have not grasped the core elements of the outcome, for example, “theory testing” or “identifying cause and effect”, are then requested to re-do assignments, replete in the knowledge that they are building their research skills without compromising their grade. The double opportunity also facilitates the ability to provide better feedback; it pinpoints where the student is, or is not, grasping the required research method and the gaps that need to be filled in student knowledge of specific elements of the research process. This knowledge has allowed me to spend more time on elements that I thought were relatively straightforward and intuitive but were, in fact, a stumbling block for students. Generating testable hypotheses, for example, only appears easy and makes sense to students during the lecture. In group work, when the actual process of generating such a hypothesis is undertaken, the difficulties that students face become apparent. Knowing this, I was able to spend more time on what students required, rather than only touching the surface of what I perceived as straightforward and what students themselves deemed difficult.

Since the adoption of the outcomes based teaching and evaluation approach, students have become more engaged in both coursework and assignments. The classroom average went from a “C” following the first two assignments to a “B+” by the end of the term. The number of students who regularly attend class has also improved, as has our rapport. Students regularly email me about various elements of the course and I know they are applying methods to research projects in other courses. The responsibility for learning the technical aspects of research and of the role of research in generating knowledge has been taken on by students. And, oh, I should mention that the preparation of this article for the Office of Instructional Development was integrated into the classroom. While the act of sitting down to write is a singular process, good writing is the result of ideas generated through exchange of ideas and information with others. This article was generated with student input and is the embodiment of active, student-centred learning – it is part and parcel of the process of research in which my students are currently engaged.