

What's New? Assessing the Effectiveness of Current Events Assignments

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Abstract

Instructors often integrate current events into their classroom, whether formally or informally. Yet, very little research has been done to assess the effectiveness of current event assignments. Our paper examines whether a “news blog” increases students’ interest for current events, their willingness to develop and express their opinions, and their perceptions of whether news-based assignments help them understand (and apply) course concepts. We rely on the results of pre- and post-tests completed by 60 students in four different politics classes to gauge students’ responses to the assignment, their consumption of news, and their appreciation of the importance of an informed citizenry. Results indicate that well-crafted assignments can provide several benefits: not only did our students enjoy completing the assignment and becoming “experts” on their countries; the assignment also seemed to have helped them absorb important course concepts and gain competency in media literacy. Further, student feedback identified points that can help strengthen current events assignments in future classes.

Keywords

political science education, current events, news blog, media literacy

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Introduction

It can be argued that a key goal of higher education is to help students become engaged and informed global citizens. In the last few years, a large literature has been devoted to the critical role played by class simulations, debates, and service learning projects in developing these civic skills. In that vein, this article focuses on current events and how they can also help foster students’ civic aptitudes.

Our paper assesses the effectiveness of a “news blog” in increasing students’ interest in current events, their willingness to develop and express their opinions, and their perceptions that news-based assignments help them understand (and apply) course concepts. We hypothesized that there would be a discernible difference in perceptions about current events and how they relate to class once the assignment had been completed. In particular, we rely

on the results of a pre- and post-tests completed by 60 students in four different comparative politics classes (two at Salem State University and two at Eastern Connecticut State University). Although this particular project considers the assignment in the context of political science classes, innovative ways of incorporating current events have applications across many disciplines, such as economics, sociology, geography, business, and education. The following section reviews the existing literature on integrating news in the classroom. We then present the methodology, implementation, and results of our study.

Incorporating the News: Why and How?

The role played by current events in college courses varies greatly, depending for example on the topic discussed, the professor's teaching approach, and the students' level. Many instructors opt to introduce news only casually and in an ad hoc fashion, for example by discussing news informally at the beginning of each class (see Canon 1999). This approach has the advantage of fostering a more informal atmosphere in the classroom by encouraging students to discuss issues of their interest. On the other hand, some instructors favor a systematic integration of current events into their syllabus, in particular through the creation of specific assignments, such as news related questions on the final exam (Dowty, 1999). In an American Politics course for example, Schattle (2003) requires students to monitor two foreign newspapers for at least one month to find out how the United States is perceived in other parts of the world. As a way to engage students in local politics, Morris and Macchiarola (1970) assigned newspapers from different states and required students to analyze state and local elections.

Going even further, some instructors ask students to get a subscription to a daily newspaper as part of their course requirement (Eisenstein, 1999). As argued by Rouyer, whose students in Introduction to Political

Science must buy a three month subscription to the *Christian Science Monitor*, "what better place than a newspaper to find the day-to-day application of political concepts and theories"? (1995, p. 36).

Finally, other commonly used techniques to incorporate news more systematically into a course structure include students' journals (Franklin, 1999), news clipping and scoring exercises (Eisenstein, 1999; Mitchell, 1999), current event debates (Canon, 1999), class news presentations, extra credits for "current events" on exams, and students and faculty blogs (Cheit, 2006). New technologies have significantly expanded the range of options, in terms of both news consumption and news-related exercises. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to review the vast pedagogical potential offered by these tools, it should be noted that they allow students and professors not only to more easily search for, read, and discuss news, but also to engage with news themselves by sharing or posting content online.

The goals sought by instructors who make daily news a key component of their class also differ.¹ Some instructors seek primarily to develop among students key academic skills such as critical thinking, reading, and media literacy. Lippucci (1999) teaches her students to "read the newspaper efficiently." In the same vein, newspapers have been used successfully in first-year seminars with goals ranging from developing newspaper literacy (Dusenbery, 1999; Green, 1999) to refining career choices (Hendrickson, 1999).

At a broader level, some professors hope to cultivate democratic citizenship among their students, in particular by encouraging them to stay abreast of ongoing events. Their goal may be simply to prompt stu-

1 According to a special New York Times publication on this topic, using newspapers in class brings a host of benefits, including improving students' thinking skills, interest and motivation as well as preparing them for citizenship; involving schools in their community; and responding to the needs of businesses (Gardner and Sullivan 1999, p. 11).

dents to be informed citizens. For example, students in Dowty's Introduction to International Relations course must read all international news and editorials in *The New York Times*, bring the paper to class, and save key articles. Feedback from his students confirms that many become avid readers of the news (Dowty, 1999). Others expect that connecting students to key societal debates and events will spur their interest for politics. As observed by Rankin (2010, p. 259), "An understanding of current events, even controversial and heated contemporary topics, can also be key to stimulating a young person's interest and engaged learning."

Similarly, integrating news may help students form and discuss opinions and overcome stereotypes. For example, Koch (1994) found that when students were required to read *The New York Times* every day as part of an introductory course, they became both more inclined to talk about politics and current events with other students and more comfortable in voicing their opinions during political discussions. In another study, Lawrence (2006) found that despite several shortcomings, having students keep a blog to report and discuss news of a particular state of their choosing engaged them in state and local politics and gave them resources to use during class discussion. Several professors have also noted that having students read foreign sources or sources from states others than their own broadened their perspectives and battled their stereotypes (Morris & Macchiarola, 1970). One such instructor observed that integrating TV news clips into an American Politics course helped students move away from emotion and 'gut feelings' when analyzing key events like the War in Iraq (Rankin, 2010). In the same vein, by reading foreign sources and their account of US policies, students in Schattle's class were challenged in their perception of American power. As Schattle concludes (2003, p. 435):

It is increasingly important for introductory political science courses to explore how the United

States and its global influences are perceived from afar. Incorporating the study of international news sources into undergraduate survey courses is one helpful strategy in furthering this end, and in their understanding of bias in media reporting.

In new democracies, introducing news sources in the course material also seems to deepen democratic outlooks such as support for basic freedoms (Morduchowicz et al., 1996). Researchers note, however, that these positive effects are usually rather small; one study even found that integrating newspaper reading into a course structure did not improve students' attitudes towards politics (Huerta & Jozwiak, 2008).

In addition, teachers of politics frequently seek, through current events, to make the course content more relevant and exciting and to help students absorb key concepts by illustrating them with timely examples. As Canon argues, "if the students can read an article about the Democratic National Committee and foreign money the same week that I am talking about soft money and campaign finance, the concepts become much more meaningful" (Canon 1999, p. 80). Introducing "fresh content" through the news is particularly appealing as a growing number of students complain about textbooks --which they find outdated and not compelling (Besser & Stone, 1999).² As an instructor quoted by Mosborg (2002, p. 327) argued, "I think kids become awfully passive when they read American textbooks, and that's why I use things such as *The New York Times*."

For example, students who read the *Christian Science Monitor* every day as part of Rouyer's introductory course reported that it contributed to their understanding of course concepts (Rouyer, 1995). Similarly, students who followed a faculty-led blog in a public

2 Visiting Russia before the end of the Soviet Union, Bill Keller, a managing editor of the New York Times, noted that in many classrooms "The press was the curriculum" since textbooks offered very little content of interest beyond propaganda (Keller, 1999, p.18).

policy course at Brown “were able to see the connections between class and the larger world on a regular basis” (Cheit, 2006, p. 4). Similarly, almost 70% of the students enrolled in political science courses in the First Year Learning Community Program at Texas A&M University –Corpus Christi, found that the use of the New York Times as part of the course material made the class more relevant to them (Huerta & Jozwiak, 2008).

Finally, instructors who insert current events systemically into a course may wish to help students reflect about the media themselves and the role they play in politics and in setting the agenda. For example, Barbour (1999) expects students to become “critical and savvy consumers of the media.” Her students must ask themselves a number of questions when reading articles from publications like *The New York Times* or *Newsweek* such as “Who owns the media source?” “Who is the journalist?” or “Is someone putting a spin on the story?” (Barbour, 1999).

Challenges of Integrating the News

Regardless of the type of inclusion or methods used, there are several key challenges in trying to make current events a key component of a college-level course.

First, reading and/or discussing the news in class is time-consuming and is ostensibly done at the expense of course content. Critically, if current events are discussed at the beginning of class, some students may feel as if this is a distraction from the “serious” part of the material and be tempted to arrive late or not to pay attention.

Second, students often do not have a prior habit of following daily news at all or do it in a superficial manner—for example by glancing at headlines on the internet while checking their email. So if current events are integrated only casually such as through an open discussion at the beginning of class, only a few students will participate while others will sit silently. On the

other hand, when prompted to start reading a newspaper, students may have trouble sorting the important from the trivial, distinguishing opinion pieces—such as op-eds and blogs—from reporting, and identifying the political leaning of different media outlets. Students sometimes fail to identify adequate sources and are put off by the pay content of several prominent newspapers websites. Many have never used a site like Google News or a database like Lexis Nexis, which offer great tools for searching the news.

Students may also feel overwhelmed and discouraged by what they do not know or understand (such as the history and stakes of a particular conflict). New technologies accentuate these problems. For example, as noted by Kuzma (1998, p. 580), abundant information online risks creating an “information glut.” The multiple formats in which news can be consumed today also make their identification problematic.

Third, integrating current events into a political science class in particular may give students the impression that political science is a glorified treatment of daily news. Some students already struggle to see the differences between academic and non-academic sources; worse, they may find the latter of superior quality because they may be more updated and less filled with jargon. As a result, students will fail to recognize that social sciences endeavor to be scientific enterprises that rely on objectivity and neutrality.

In the same vein, making daily news a key component of a class may lead both students and professors to lack critical distance, especially when revolutionary events are taking place (such as, for example, during the Arab Spring). Further, integrating current events potentially introduces more controversy into the classroom. Besides, if the course is taught in a non-democratic country, students will be reluctant to openly discuss politics, even abstractly (Ruget, 2008).

Finally, incorporating news items also presents logistical or technical challenges such as the choice of

news sources. Left to their own devices, students will gravitate towards short online news items such as the ones posted on popular websites like Yahoo! On the other hand, by requesting that all students consult the same media outlet, instructors may convey the impression that they are imposing their own ideological preferences. Finally, grading news-related assignments can also be problematic. For example, it may seem arbitrary to assign a substantial portion of the grade to staying informed, something we would expect any good citizen to do.

Because of our student population, we also faced a few additional constraints in our respective institutions. Salem State University is primarily an undergraduate institution with enrollment of over 10,000 students. Eastern Connecticut State University is a four-year public liberal arts college with approximately 4,500 full-time undergraduates. Eastern Connecticut State University is located in a more rural setting, but both universities share very similar student characteristics. Most of their students are first generation college students. Many struggle with financial, family, and/or mental health issues. A sizable majority support themselves by working part-time or full-time, which often affects their attendance and course preparation time. As a result, reading a daily newspaper is relatively uncommon among students. Thus, time-demanding assignments like participating in online discussion blogs may work poorly because students already juggle academic and professional obligations. In addition, requiring students with limited financial resources to get a subscription to a newspaper is often not an option.

Description of the Assignment

For all four classes, the current events assignment was considered an important part of their coursework, worth ten percent of their final grade. The same assignment instructions were provided to three out of the four classes included in this analysis: Introduction

to Comparative Politics, and African Politics taught by Vanessa Ruget at Salem State University, and Asian Politics taught by Kristen Rosero at Eastern Connecticut State University. A copy of the assignment is provided in appendix A. The fourth class included in the study, International Political Economy also taught by Kristen Rosero at Eastern Connecticut State University, was given an alternative version of the assignment, described in more detail later in this section.

For the primary version of the assignment, students were asked to track current events related to one particular country throughout the semester. They were instructed that they would serve as the “expert” on this country and were expected to contribute details and perspective to class discussions. In addition they kept a running blog on events in that country. Thus the assignment was composed of two parts: the online component, in which students maintained a country blog highlighting interesting news stories related to that country and class topics, and an in-class discussion component, in which students were expected to contribute to class discussions regarding current events. This was considered an ongoing assignment to be completed by the students throughout the semester; the stated expectation was that they post a 150-word blog entry on their country at least six times throughout the 16-week semester, though they were encouraged to post more. Sample blog entries were provided with the instructions. There was no specific source requirement in terms of where their news came from, so long as it was considered a trustworthy source. Examples were provided in the instructions and in class. In each class, the current events blog accounted for 10 percent of a student’s final grade.

The goals of the assignment, as presented to the students in the assignment instructions, were stated as follows:

The goal of this assignment is to emphasize the relevance of key concepts addressed in class by illustrating them with timely examples. Moreover, it is intended to provide students with a deeper understanding of a particular country, to help develop informed opinions and overcome stereotypes.

Thus, this assignment sought to address two of the goals frequently discussed in the literature. On the one hand, it sought to make the course content more relevant and exciting, to help students absorb key concepts with the use of current examples (Cheit, 2006; Huerta & Jozwiak, 2008; Mosborg, 2002). On the other hand, we hoped the assignment would achieve broader learning goals. First, we anticipated that students would learn to draw on these resources to become more comfortable in developing and expressing their opinions (Koch, 1994; Rankin, 2010). Second, we expected that a deeper understanding of a particular country could broaden students' perspectives and help them overcome stereotypes (Morris & Macchiarola, 1970; Schattle, 2003).

An alternative assignment was given in the International Political Economy class at Eastern Connecticut State University as a means of experimenting with a different format. In this class, students were assigned to teams.³ Each team started with an assigned article from a different region of the world. Team members would then rotate in posting related articles to a shared blog. This "relay" format was used to encourage teamwork and collaboration, as well as competition between teams. At various "checkpoints" throughout the semester, the team with the most posts was awarded a prize (candy). Moreover, the more posts an individual student had, the more opportunities he or

she had to improve his or her grade for this assignment. Thus, there were both group and individual incentives. Appendix B provides a copy of these instructions as well. Like the individual based assignment used in the other three classes, one of the main goals for this assignment was to emphasize the relevance of key concepts through current events. The challenge of connecting each article to the previous one was meant to emphasize the interconnectedness of international economic events. The additional goal of promoting teamwork allowed for an interesting comparison of the effectiveness of news related assignments in group-based versus individual assignments.

Another difference in the format of these assignments is worth mentioning. At Eastern Connecticut State University, students posted their blogs on Blackboard, while students at Salem State University used Canvas. These learning management systems are broadly comparable but Canvas offers a more dynamic, user-friendly way to converse with students online and to provide feedback on assignments.

Methodology

To assess students' perceptions of the assignment and its effectiveness, we conducted a simple pre- and post-survey for each class. The pre-test survey was given during the first week of classes, while the post-test survey was given prior to the final exam and after the final post was due. Both were filled anonymously and students were informed that results would not affect their final grades.⁴ The questions were designed to assess students' consumption of news (frequency and sources), their perceptions of how informed they were, their interest in

3 As the blog assignment was online, teams primarily interacted via email and the online blog itself, while checking in occasionally with each other at the beginning of class. In this way, the team format did not place any additional burden on the students to meet outside of class.

4 It is acknowledged that any survey methodology can have the effect of eliciting a 'desired' response from the test subjects. However, the authors feel that the students approached this survey as an opportunity to provide feedback on an assignment and thus did not have a strong incentive to inflate responses. Moreover, as is discussed below, responses on the post-test were not in fact overly positive.

current events, their willingness to develop and express their opinions, and their perceptions that news-based assignments helped them understand (and apply) course concepts. The post-test also asked students to reflect on the effectiveness of the assignment itself, through both additional Likert Scale responses⁵ and open-ended responses. These open-ended questions asked students to write down three positive aspects and three negative aspects of the assignment, as well as suggestions for future modifications to the assignment. These responses were then organized according to the various themes that arose and ultimately provided helpful qualitative data to supplement the analysis.

For the analysis, chi-square tests were used to determine a) if the frequency of students' news consumption changed significantly after the assignment and b) if students' feelings on the relevance of current events changed significantly after the assignment. For questions regarding the assignment itself, the chi-square test was used to determine if there was significant variation among the four classes, and particularly between classes using the individual assignment and those using the group-based assignment. The table below presents the response rates for each class:

5 A five-point Likert Scale was used, ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree.

Implementation

According to our survey results, most students spent about one hour completing each blog entry—a very reasonable amount of time that did not theoretically prevent them from completing the rest of the course work. In fact, several students listed the fact that the blogs did not take too long to complete as one of the positive aspects of the course. One student wrote for example: “They weren’t really time-consuming – they were enjoyable.”

Students encountered two challenges when completing the assignment.⁶ First, their initial posts were sometimes problematic, for example, because they were too opinionated, did not select appropriate news sources, or merely summarized the news without providing their own analysis. After receiving our feedback, however, most students learned how to complete the assignment appropriately. Second, although we provided our classes with a list of acceptable sources (as well as tips on how to find relevant stories), both the quantitative data and qualitative statements indicate that students occasionally struggled to find adequate

6 From a faculty perspective, integrating the news can also be time consuming, both inside and outside of the classroom. In particular, commenting on students' individual posts is an enjoyable but lengthy task.

Class	# of Students Registered	Pre-surveys Submitted	Post-Surveys Submitted
Comparative Politics	19	14	13
African Politics	17	13	14
Asian Politics	19	16	17
International Political Economy	20	17	16
TOTAL	75	60	60

Table 1: Response Rates

news items. This was for example the case for about 23% of those in Asian Politics. Qualitative statements from the post-test survey also suggest that finding news stories was particularly difficult for students who had picked small countries and for those working on closed autocracies (such as Eritrea). Several students in the African Politics class also noted that they had trouble assessing the accuracy of the stories they found (two students in that same class observed that the news they commented on was often depressing).

Evaluation

Overall, students in all four classes had a positive response to the idea of integrating the news into the course. In the post-test, over 90% of them either agreed or strongly agreed that “keeping up with current events is important to being a democratic citizen.” In the fourth class, African Politics, the number was close to 80%. But a comparison between the pre- and post-test did not reveal any significant changes among the students as far as their views regarding current events. This may be because a majority of students started out with fairly strong agreement with the statement. In addition, most had completed a current events project in another class: over 80% had already done so in high school. Close to 80% had also encountered a news related assignment in another political science class, and 75% had in another college class.

Tellingly, close to 100% of students in all four classes believed that the assignment should be used again. Forty percent of all students, however, (and 75% of students in the Asian Politics class) believed that some modifications should be made. The most frequently cited suggestions were to remove a two sources requirement, to allow students to write on a different country if nothing noteworthy had happened in “theirs,” and to require periodic short class presentations so that students could share their findings with others.

More importantly, our study suggests that current events assignments may be at least moderately effective in making the class content more accessible to students and in increasing their interest for the news.

A More Interesting and Accessible Class

One goal of the assignment was to make the course content more relevant and exciting, using current, real-world examples to illustrate key concepts. Our results indicate that, from the students’ perspectives, the assignment was largely successful in achieving this goal. A large majority of students in our classes (86.7% total) reported agreement that they enjoyed the class discussions on current events.

Large numbers of students also found that these discussions made the class more interesting, the class topics clearer and “more relevant,” and that they helped them gain a new perspective on the course topics. Table 2 shows the percentage of students who agreed or strongly agreed with each statement. These results are corroborated by students’ qualitative statements. One student indicated that one of the things (s)he liked about the assignment was that “It is more interesting to follow current events than study only theory;” another wrote that it was “more relevant to daily life than a term paper.” At least 14 (about 23%) said that the assignment helped them apply course concepts—including a student in African Politics who observed that she was able to “see how concepts discussed in class play out in the real world.” In fact, several students made reference to the idea that the assignment, as one student put it, “took the course material to a relatable real world platform.” Students also confirmed that it gave them a new way of thinking about class concepts. For example, one student in Asian Politics said (s)he liked that it “connected students with a country in a unique way.”

Using chi-square values, we tested for significant differences among the courses. Generally, the weakest responses corresponded with the Asian Politics

	Total	Comp. Politics	African Politics	Asian Politics	Intl. Political Economy	Chi-Square
Enjoyed the class discussions related to current events	86.7	92.3	92.9	64.7	100.0	10.818*
Helped make the class topics more clear	80.0	92.3	100.0	58.8	75.0	13.469
Helped make the class topics more clear	74.6	84.6	85.7	50.0	81.3	11.348
Gave me a new perspective on course topic	81.7	76.9	92.9	76.5	81.3	9.827

* chi-square is significant at 0.1 level

Table 2: Assignment Evaluation
Percent agree / strongly agree

class. This difference was significant particularly in the question regarding class discussions, which were unfortunately more sporadic in the Asian Politics class. In this class, the instructor acknowledges that discussion of the current events posts needed to have been better incorporated into the structure of the class meetings. Students primarily saw the assignment as a way to earn extra points at the end of the semester, instead of consistently following through with it. The difference between this class and the others in terms of the students' evaluation of the assignment can therefore be attributed to weaknesses in implementation.

That being said, the qualitative comments from students in the Asian Politics class did confirm that the assignment was beneficial to students' understanding of the material. One student wrote, for example, that "when the professor is speaking I am not lost" and that the assignment provided "good brain food." Ultimately, the majority of students in the Asian Politics class did say the assignment should be used again, but with modifications.

Informed Citizens

The assignment clearly encouraged students to consult the news on a regular basis. The most striking change was in the percentage of students who looked at foreign news sources (from 6.7% at the beginning of the semester to 16.9% at the end, a statistically significant difference). In African Politics, the percentage of students who *at least* occasionally checked foreign news sites went up from 61.6% to 85.8%. In Asian Politics it grew from 50.1% to 75.1%. It should be noted that students were not specifically required to look into foreign news sources, though this may have been a function of the course topic and country-specific nature of the assignment. Another important change was in the number of students who listened to the news on the radio (from 8.6% to 20.3%). Our speculation would be that since many students commute to school, there may have been somewhat of a change in their willingness to tune in on their way.

In their self-evaluations, a large proportion of students (85%) agreed that as a result of the class and

	Before	After	Chi-Square
Major U.S. Newspaper (print)	11.7	15.3	3.109
Local Newspaper (print)	1.7	6.9	5.778
News Magazine	11.7	8.6	1.472
News Websites	40.7	53.4	3.387
News Feeds via email or social media	45	52.6	2.491
Evening News	26.7	23.7	0.749
Cable News	23.3	27.6	3.533
News Radio	8.6	20.3	12.149**
Foreign News Sites or Papers	6.7	16.9	8.452*

* chi-square is significant at 0.1 level

Table 3: Percent of Students who Reference Every Day

the assignment, they were “more likely to pay attention to international political news.” This was the case with 76.9 % of students in Comparative Politics, 100% in African Politics, 70.6% in Asian Politics, and 93.8% in International Political Economy. This was also one of the most commonly listed positive aspects of the assignment in students’ qualitative responses. As one student stated “I have started reading newspapers, watching the news, and I even sometimes comment on news blogs posted on the internet.” One student noted that (s)he now knew where to find information while another declared that the assignment “sparked an interest in me to always know what is happening around the world and in my country.” On the other hand, even after the assignment, generally no more than half the class reported reviewing the news every day.

Still, while our assignment did not necessarily encourage a significant number of students to start reading the news every day, the qualitative comments from students indicated that they were paying closer attention. Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, not only were students encouraged to be more fre-

quent consumers of the news, some students actually acknowledged that it made them *better* consumers of the news. This was something we had not actively sought to measure in our surveys, but was rather something students themselves identified as a benefit of the assignment. For example, one student listed among the positives that the assignment “forced students to actually read *and understand* news articles” [italics added]. Another student noted that “it helped us retrieve valuable information out of long articles.” One student seemed surprised at the number of sources available for news, saying “I never used the internet to find news – I now know many sources to find the news. [I] didn’t realize all the news going on around the world that was easily accessible.” Several students noted that the assignment encouraged them to access and utilize more numerous news sites than they normally would have.

Developing Opinions & Overcoming Stereotypes

The broadest goal of the assignment was to encourage students to become more comfortable in developing their opinions about international politics. However, somewhat surprisingly, completing a weekly news blog

did not significantly increase students' confidence in their knowledge of current events, except in the African Politics class. In fact, although slight, the decline in knowledge confidence for International Political Economy was significant. The percentage of students who liked to share their opinions during current events discussion even went slightly down (except, again, in the African Politics class)—although it was also remarkably high at the beginning of the semester in at least two of the classes. Table 4 indicates the percentage of students who agreed or strongly agreed with each statement. The chi-square values indicate whether there was a significant difference in the responses before and after the assignment.

The difference between African Politics and the other courses is noteworthy. One particularity of that course was the high number of foreign (especially African) students enrolled—close to one third of the class. Most of them opted to “blog” about their country of origin. They were therefore potentially more likely to notice how much (or rather how little) they knew about the country's politics at the beginning of the semester and how much they had learned by completing the assignment. Perhaps they also took the assignment more seriously because of their personal bond with the country; rather than yet another academic task, the blog may have presented an opportunity to explore the politics of their homeland. As for students in the other three classes, it may very well be that the assignment actually shook their confidence and helped them to realize how much more they needed to learn.

Several students indeed maintained that the blog helped them become expert on their country of focus. As explained by one of them: the assignment “helped increase my knowledge and allowed me to have something to say during class discussions on current events.” Indeed, at least twenty students observed that completing the news blog made them, “aware” or “more open minded” about what is happening in the world—thus

“I feel confident about my knowledge of current events”

	Before	After	Chi-Square
All	73.4	74.6	3.554
Comparative Politics	85.8	84.6	1.776
African Politics	53.9	64.3	4.111
Asian Politics	62.6	62.5	0.22
International Political Economy	88.3	87.6	7.987**

** significant at the 0.05 level

“I like to share my opinion in discussions on current events”

	Before	After	Chi-Square
All	80	79.7	0.11
Comparative Politics	100	92.3	2.443
African Politics	61.6	78.6	1.808
Asian Politics	75.1	68.8	1.077
International Political Economy	82.3	81.3	2.991

*Table 4: Confidence in Current Events
Percent agree / strongly agree*

suggesting that current event assignments can help students develop an opinion and overcome stereotypes. In the words of a student in Comparative Politics: “it opened my eyes and helped me become a more worldly citizen.” Similarly, a participant in the African Politics class stated that being forced to follow the news “keeps students in tune with what is happening even if it does not affect them.” Several International Political Economy students noted that the assignment gave them new “perspective” indicating that it “open(ed) (their) eyes on foreign views” and that they “got to see

different sides for all issues.” Based on these qualitative comments, there does seem to be some confirmation that the assignment was able to achieve broader learning goals. One student in the Asian Politics class confirmed this directly, saying that the assignment “helped me develop opinions on international topics.”

Contrasting the Team-Based Assignment

Finally, in addition to assessing the success of the assignment’s goals, this analysis also allowed us to evaluate alternative types of assignments. As the following table illustrates, on several points, the team-based assignment was ranked slightly more strongly than the individual-based assignment used in the other three classes. However, the chi-square test reveals no significant differences between the two assignments.

Overall, students responded very positively to the group-based assignment. Although there were two or three students who did not like the group format, many students considered the group format one of the positive aspects of the assignment. Qualitative comments spoke of the interactive nature of the assignment as a

good way of getting students to work together. One student commented that (s)he liked that the group blog format “allowed me to see the opinions of my peers on certain current events.”

As far as its implementation, students liked the progression of the assignments and the “checkpoints” which kept them on track. The requirement of making connections to each previous article also helped students better appreciate the subject material. As one student put it, “It allowed students to find connections that they wouldn’t have made before.” While there were a few minor recommendations to improve the assignment, either through smaller groups, more class discussion, or simply “more candy,” the assignment was very well received.

Conclusion

Overall, we had a very positive response to the current events assignment in our classes. Some of the more general comments we received from students included:

- » “More fun than writing pointless political science essays”

	Total	Individual	Team	Chi-Square
Assignment instructions were clear	93.3	90.9	100	1.558
Found it easy to find news articles	76.3	72.1	87.5	2.883
Enjoyed the class discussions related to current events	86.6	81.8	100	3.75
Made the class more interesting	80	81.9	75.1	1.647
Helped make the class topics more clear	74.6	72.1	81.3	1.586
Gave me a new perspective on course topic	81.7	81.8	81.3	2.934
More likely to pay attention to international political news	85	81.8	93.8	1.36

Table 5: Comparing Team-based with Individual Blog Entry Assignment
Percent agree / strongly agree

- » “Honestly, this is a great assignment. Looking up info on websites about what’s going on in other countries was fun and essential for this class”
- » “Overall I thought this was a very effective and beneficial assignment”
- » “I learned about countries I wouldn’t have looked at otherwise”
- » “The blogs were interesting and fun to do”
- » “I learned how to blog”
- » “This assignment made me a subject matter ‘expert’ on Syria”
- » “The assignment kept me in touch with my home country”
- » “I am more likely to keep up with current events now”
- » “The current events I researched were also topics we discussed in other courses”

Beyond a positive response, our paper sought to assess whether this sort of assignment was useful in achieving certain learning goals. Not only did we want students to follow the news more closely; we also hoped they would gain a better understanding of course content, develop informed opinions, and broaden their perspective. Though there is certainly room for improvement, our results indicate that students believe this type of assignment can achieve these goals.

First, although we did not see a significant change, or even a very high number of students reading the news every day, many of them did indicate that the assignment encouraged them to pay closer attention to the news. Perhaps reading the news every day is not necessarily the best indication of whether an assignment like this can indeed make them ‘more informed citizens.’ Rather, the likelihood that they will pay greater attention, utilize different sources to find the news, and be able to glean important information from those articles are perhaps more important benefits. Thus, while we may not be able to expect our students

to read the news every day, we might expect them to become *better* consumers of the news.

Second, there was strong evidence that students felt that this assignment was an important element of the course itself and of their understanding of class concepts. A strong majority saw the assignment as manageable but beneficial. From an instructor’s perspective, knowing that such assignments can make the class more interesting for students goes a long way in terms of keeping them engaged. Future assessments might consider the impact of similar assignments on the performance outcomes of students in the class.

Finally, we had mixed evidence that the assignment helped students achieve broader, life-learning benefits. To what extent did we see students developing their opinions and gaining a new perspective? On the one hand, the quantitative measures indicate that there was not a significant increase in their confidence of current events or in the likelihood of sharing their opinions. In fact, in some cases it declined. On the other hand, the qualitative comments from students frequently noted that the news blog made them “aware” or “more open minded” about what is happening in the world. These findings might lead us to speculate that there is perhaps an awareness created by reading the news consistently that makes students question their pre-existing views. Thus, the more they know, the more they realize they *do not* know – and this, after all, is an important step in learning. ■■■

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Appendix A

Current Events Analysis

Goal:

Throughout the semester, students will be asked to track current events related to one of the Asian states. They will serve as the “expert” on this country and will be expected to contribute details and perspective to class discussions. In addition they will keep a running “blog” on events in that country.

The goal of this assignment is to emphasize the relevance of key concepts addressed in class by illustrating them with timely examples. Moreover, it is intended to provide students with a deeper understanding of a particular country, to help develop informed opinions and overcome stereotypes.

Requirements:

This is an ongoing assignment to be completed by the students throughout the semester. It is composed of two parts:

1. An online component, in which students maintain a country “blog” highlighting interesting news stories related to that country and class topics.
2. An in-class discussion component, in which students will be expected to contribute to class discussions regarding current events

At least six times this semester, you should post a paragraph-long blog entry on the Blackboard discussion board (approximately 150 words). Guidelines for each entry are as follows:

- » Each entry must summarize one or more key news stories that are directly relevant to your assigned country and the course topic(s). Specifically, it should address the following:
 - › What were 1 or 2 major developments in your country of focus in the last week?
 - › How does this relate to major developments in the continent in recent months?
- » As much as possible, your blog must also make connection to our course material. That is, how do these news items relate to a specific topic addressed in class or assigned reading? *Be specific!* Provide sufficient detail to make the connection.
- » In general, avoid simply summarizing the news items. Provide a critical assessment of their relevance.
- » Each entry must contain (and include the link to) at least 2 trustworthy media sources.

Suggested Sources:

- › <http://www.nytimes.com/pages/world/asia/index.html>
- › <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world/asia/>
- › http://www.cnn.com/ASIA/?hpt=wo_bn4
- › TIP: you can also set up news alerts for your country

Grading:

Students will be assessed on a scale of 1-5 based on the following:

- » the relevance of the news items to the class topic
- » the timeliness of the article - each entry should be related to events within a week of the post
- » the clarity and strength of the write-up
- » Participation in class discussions

BONUS points will be given if you can incorporate news stories from locally operated news outlets.

Appendix B

Current Events Assignment

International Political Economy

Goal

The broad goal of this assignment is to identify current events related to international political economy and to draw connections across countries and contexts. A “relay” format is used to encourage teamwork and collaboration, as well as competition between teams. For each team, the immediate goal is to make as many connections as possible.

Instructions

Each team will start with an assigned article from a different region of the world. Once the initial article is posted on the blackboard discussion board, team members must take turns (rotating through all team members each time) posting a follow-up article related to some aspect of the previous one.

Articles

- » News articles should be from reputable news sources, with links to the original article(s) provided.
- » Suggested sources:
 - » The Economist: www.economist.com
 - » NY Times Business Section: <http://www.nytimes.com/pages/business/index.html>
 - » The Wall Street Journal: <http://online.wsj.com>
 - » Financial Times: www.ft.com
 - » BBC News Business Section: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business/>
 - » IMF News: <http://www.imf.org/external/news/default.aspx>
 - » WTO News: http://www.wto.org/english/news_e/news_e.htm
- » Foreign news outlets may also be used.
- » Be cautious of news blogs. Wherever possible, try to find the original news item(s) being referenced.
- » You may also find it helpful to set up a Google news alert.

Connections

- » Students are encouraged to be creative with the connections made. Try to speculate what the impact of the event might be, which other countries might be affected, etc. Has it lead to further action by governments, corporations or international organizations? Is there something similar happening elsewhere?
- » You are not limited to events in the region where the original news event took place. In fact, the goal should be to explore how widely connected political economic events actually are.
- » Keep in mind that news stories unfold and the consequences of an event may be felt for some time. Therefore, do not expect connections to appear all at once.
- » Do not be redundant with the news stories. Follow-up posts should be *related* events, not just a new report on the same events. Also, keep in mind you want to facilitate subsequent follow-ups for fellow team mates as well.

Write-Up

- » Each new article post must include a brief write-up (no less than 150 words) explaining the connection to the previous articles.
- » These write-ups will serve as the basis for the Current Events portion of your grade. Each write-up will be graded according to the following 5-point scale:
 - › 1 = poor - connection is not clear, write-up is incomplete
 - › 2 = below average - a weak case for the connection is made
 - › 3 = average - connection is made, minimum write-up requirements met
 - › 4 = above average - write-up goes beyond minimums, makes a clear connection
 - › 5 = excellent, well-written, creative & insightful connections
- » Note that the more write-ups that are posted, the more chances you have to improve your average scores, and thus this portion of your final grade.

Check-Points

- » To make this relay a bit more exiting, there will be four check-points throughout the semester which will allow team members to share with the class some of the connections they've been making and where their topic has taken them.
- » This will also be an opportunity to see which team is "winning" – that is, which team has made the most connections. Expect prizes...
- » Check-point dates are listed on the syllabus.