REFLECTIONS ON TEACHING

INTERNATIONAL COLD WAR HISTORY ONLINE

by

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.01. Background: [Return to Index]

Four years ago my university decided to experiment with Internet courses and asked for faculty volunteers. Since I had read in a number of education periodicals about the growing use of the Internet for instruction, I was interested in exploring the possibilities of this classroom technology. I decided this would be a good opportunity to evaluate the new learning technology for myself. Critics seemed to feel that online courses would be academically unsound and result in impersonal, mechanical modes of delivery. Conversely, supporters of Internet based instruction so often seemed rhapsodic and visionary that potential problems and difficulties were minimized.

I introduced my online course during a summer session. Offering the course in the summer freed students and myself from the traditional summer school schedule. Students could find full-time summer jobs and still take a summer school class; for me there was something attractive about being able to teach from home as well. An online course would also allow me the opportunity to teach from remote sites via a laptop computer and modem, especially helpful since I had to conduct research and attend to several off campus professional commitments. Finally, the summer session also provided me with reduced pressure from other institutional responsibilities, allowing me to focus on learning and using this new technology.

At the outset I readily confess to not being a computer expert. I use word processing, e-mail, and other applications that most faculty utilize but I do not keep up with all the latest software or systems described in any number of computer magazines targeted for the higher education market. Periodically, I skim articles and magazines and regularly ask those more versed in computer technologies related to distance learning systems about the current status of the field.

I was more concerned with pedagogical issues than technical ones. Nevertheless, I recognized that I could not compartmentalize the learning environment separate from the technology or delivery system. At my institution the information technology and the off-campus academic
divisions were responsible for the technical issues related to the delivery of the course. Faculty had the responsibility for organizing and designing a curriculum within an eight-week time frame. Each course underwent the traditional course approval process. It was expected that online courses would be somewhat different, however the academic expectations would remain the same as a traditional course.

I decided to develop an upper division course on the history of the cold war. I chose this course for a variety of reasons, including the fact that I was already aware of the existence of a number of excellent web sites on international cold war history. I expected that most students in the course would not be history majors, but rather students who were seeking to fulfill a humanities elective in their major. However, our Department of History considers it important that history majors graduate with a certain degree of familiarity and comfort using the Internet as a learning and research resource. I have taught the class on three occasions and have witnessed students from a number of different majors enrolled in the course. Initially the course enrollment was kept small to allow faculty to become comfortable with the technology and to work out any "bugs" in the delivery. The maximum course enrollment is set at fifteen; however, the highest number of students I have had in a class was eight.

Initially the class was offered primarily as an e-mail course, since that was the extent of the technology I had available. As I taught the course, I was able to add online features such as a chat room. Currently my institution has adopted Blackboard.Com and I use its features.

02. Content: (Return to Index)

In developing the syllabus the course I organized the eight-week session around the chronology of the cold war. I chose a text by Ronald E. Powaski, The Cold War: The United States and the Soviet Union, 1917-1991, because it was a broad survey of the background, issues, and events of the cold war. A student could use it as a succinct overview for discussion and a resource for the research paper. The manner in which Powaski organized his material made it conducive to divide the chapters into an eight-week format. He also presented a concise explanation of the interpretive debates in cold war historiography. The text was to be a resource for students who could refer to it for chronology or analysis of an event or person. I anticipated more extensive reading and research would take place on the Internet and for the research paper. The text would be an information "security blanket" for a student to fall back on if questions or problems arose.

Following Powaski’s outline, the course began with a summary of US-Russian and US-Soviet relations until the 1930s. The book’s background was particularly useful for non-history majors. Powaski next evaluates the policies and attitudes of the Roosevelt administration, and then follows with an examination of the cold war policies of each of the succeeding presidential administrations. Paralleling the text, the course used a chronological approach and focused on political confrontations and developments.

The students had two learning tasks each week in addition to the reading. The first half of each week students were expected to read the chapter assignment and respond by e-mail to questions I had prepared on the reading. Students did not send these written responses to other students. I graded the written responses for student understanding. A student had to do the assigned reading in order to respond to the questions I posed. The reading assignment was intended to introduce them to the events and issues covered in the assigned unit. Students were encouraged to find additional information on the Internet. For example, the CNN network broadcast a series on the cold war and had a variety of items and information related to the series on its web page <http://www.cnn.com>. The second half of the week was spent in
discussion. I felt that a discussion component was needed, because that was the style of
instruction I was most comfortable and effective using, and I did not want to sacrifice that
approach in a distance learning situation. In addition, I required a number of other written
assignments throughout the semester.

To stimulate class discussion and participation, I used a variety of teaching techniques. For
example, to initiate e-mail discussion, I would send out a controversial question for students to
discuss based on the assigned reading. For e-mail discussion each student was expected to
create an address label with each class member’s e-mail address and send out copies of their
reactions to my questions to everyone in the class. Later I used message boards, which
preserved a more complete and organized record of the week’s discussion. I did not have any
difficulty creating reactions, debate, and discussion in the course. Furthermore, students were
expected to analyze each other's comments and react via e-mail or the message boards. In
turn, there were subsequent reactions to the initial reactions. I monitored all of the e-mail or
message board discussion to make sure no major errors or erroneous assumptions developed.
Occasionally I joined the conversation. However I attempted to allow students to take the lead in
finding inconsistencies in their arguments or disagreements with the manner in which events
were presented in the text.

To conclude the discussions, I used a chat room forum. I have enjoyed using chat rooms as
learning and discussion tools, but I believe e-mail discussion and message boards just as
effective. The instructional techniques an instructor uses will depend on his or her individual
teaching style and goals. When I used a chat room, I scheduled a one-hour chat room, once a
week, in the evening. To initiate the chat, I raised questions, corrected misinterpretations, or
responded to student queries. However, the majority of the chat room time was spent debating
and discussing the issues addressed in the chapter assigned for that week or that resulted from
the written discussion. Although verbal communication was not possible in the chat room
(although software exists which will support online verbal discussion), I did not find this omission
to be a problem.

The first pedagogical challenge of a chat room concerns the size of the class. I felt that if more
than five or six participants were in a room, it was difficult for everyone to participate or maintain
a flow in the discussion, because the comments came "fast and furious". I have been impressed
with the level of student involvement in the chat room. In fact, I have observed students who, in
spite of my efforts to draw them out, would say little in a traditional class discussion, suddenly
come alive in a chat room and actively participate. Student responses to the chat room have
been very positive. Students became acquainted with each other in a little more personal way
than written e-mail or message board discussion allowed.

Another challenge of a chat room was also related to class size. There was a brief time lag
between a student's comment and the responses in the software I used, which allowed
someone to enter a new idea. At times, someone had entered another idea in the time lag and
as a result confusion would result as to what issue to focus the discussion on. The larger the
class, the harder it was for everyone to become involved and the more efficacious typists could
potentially dominate the discussion. For larger classes I would suggest using two or three chat
groups. I am hesitant to give up the chat room, because I have found it to be an engaging
opportunity. My reaction to the first "chat" was concern, because there was so much
involvement that the discussion seemed to go off in many directions very quickly. It was hard to
keep a focus. Yet, I was excited to see such a lively discussion. In later "chats" I tried to keep the
class a bit more focused, but tried not to lose the spontaneity of the discussion.

Each discussion and chat room contribution was graded for content, with discussion points
allotted. A student was expected to contribute at least five e-mail or message board comments (not all on the same day) and the chat room during the week's assignment. While a student's grade may be an impetus for some to be involved, I have really sensed a genuine interest in discussion from the out-of-class comments I have received during the two years I have taught the class. The difficulty with a chat room was the potential variety of time zones, especially for students outside of the United States. To resolve this issue multiple chats based on time differentials would have to be considered.

Initially the only test administered to students was the final exam. I required students to have a proctor, approved by me, who would make sure no study aids were used. The final exam was essay and focused on major themes and issues. Students who have completed their weekly questions and participated in the chat room have had no difficulty with the final exam. The few students who have not been diligent during the course have had difficulty performing well on the final exam, but this would be true in a traditional course as well. I have also used testing software for Internet instruction. It works best for timed quizzes, but I have also used it for essay tests.

I require a variety of writing assignments in my course as well. The major writing assignment has been a research paper or web based research project with visuals. Thus far, students have opted for the research paper (students who started to prepare a web-based presentation found they did not have the skills to integrate audio, graphics, and text into a web presentation), but I anticipate this will change over time. All research papers or projects had to use primary sources. I stressed this because I wanted students involved with the event or issue they were researching as closely as possible. Research was not a problem for students who did not reside near a major library, because there was a wealth of information on the cold war available on the Internet [see discussion below]. I have also required shorter papers evaluating cold war issues or crises. To help prepare a student for research, I have a web page with a variety of links for students to search. In addition, I assign a brief Internet essay early in the course in which a student is required to conduct research on the Internet for sites related to a particular cold war topic. In the essay students are expected to critique what they have seen and learned.

I have also required each student to build a web page. Students choose a topic and then look for resources they want to include on the web page. It is to be a cold war web page, but I allow it to be personalized to reflect individual interests or, in the case of adult students, personal experiences. The grading criteria for the web page stressed historical understanding, creativity, and functionality. To compensate for the political emphasis of the course, I encourage students to study the impact of the cold war on society and culture in their essays or web pages.

.03. Online Resources:  

The web has a wealth of cold war information. Student "surfing" has helped me stay informed about web sources and the information has enriched class discussion. My web links page contained, what I felt, were the most useful sites. I realized I did not have time to keep one current so I limited the links to those sites that appeared to have permanence and particular relevance. I avoided web pages created by individuals for a number of reasons, but particularly because I felt I could not depend on the permanence of those pages.

Internet support for teaching the cold war was, and continues to be, excellent. Often information and declassified documents appear on the Internet [before they appeared in print. A student can actually see history unfolding as they read documents created by government officials being released on various Internet sites. The following sites are examples of those I found particularly useful. It is not intended to be comprehensive--web information changes constantly.
A number of government sites contain excellent documentary support for the course. The
Department of State’s *Foreign Relations of the United States* (FRUS) and a variety of other
information is accessible on the department’s history web page
<http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/>. Another Department of State site worth visiting
for recently released information is the *Freedom of Information Act: Electronic Reading Room*
<http://foia.state.gov/default.htm>. Also agencies like the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)
<http://www.cia.gov> and the Library of Congress have cold war materials useful for research or
class discussion. The CIA main page can direct one to a variety of CIA sites, but for course
purposes the Center for Intelligence Studies page <http://www.cia.gov/csi/index.html> contains a
variety of CIA documents from the cold war era. In using the Library of Congress, I found it best
to send students to the “query” page and have them do a word search on a particular
personality or issue <http://lcweb.loc.gov/harvest/query-lc.html>.

There were two sites I particularly encourage students to become familiar with. One is the web
site of The Cold War International History Project <http://cwihp.si.edu/default.htm>. The Cold
War International History Project also had a discussion group that allowed students to
participate. However, I did not find the discussion group to be useful. The second is the National
Security Archive <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchive/>. There are a large number of primary
sources on the National Security Archive web page for students doing research or just
interested in finding out more about an event or personality. If an instructor’s library subscribes
to Chadwyck-Healey, a much larger number of National Security Archive documents are
available digitally through Chadwyck-Healey’s web site. There is so much information available
that a cold war class does not even need access to a traditional library to find information.

An extensive portal is the *U.S. Diplomatic History Resources Index*
<http://www.tamu-commerce.edu/coas/history/sarantakes/stuff.html>. Students can access this
site and find a large number of web links that will lead them to almost any issue they are
researching or reading about related to foreign policy issues.

Another option an instructor should consider is to become part of the H-Diplo listserv that is
sponsored by H-Net. To enroll an instructor can go to the H-Net main page
<http://www.h-net.msu.edu> and find the H-Diplo link on the discussion network. Students are
not allowed to participate. It is a source of information and also provides a lively academic forum
involving a variety of views and opinions, many of which relate to cold war issues. Cold war
issues are frequently discussed and debated. Occasionally I introduce comments, news, or book
reviews from the H-Diplo listserv if they concern an issue discussed in the course or textbook.

**.04. Evaluation and the Future:** *(Return to Index)*

Student evaluations and comments have been highly positive. The chat room was particularly
popular. In fact, students who were taking another online class that did not use a chat room
commented to me that the cold war course appeared more relevant, stimulating, and
interesting. They wanted to be allowed into the cold war chats. Also, students appreciated being
required to develop a web page. For some, it was their first venture into html and all of the
issues of web page content. History majors, and particularly those in secondary education, who
take the class feel better prepared and more confident with their computer skills and the use of
technology as a learning tool.

In teaching online, I also became aware of how writing intensive online classes were. Even with
eight or fewer students, it seemed that I was always reading something and frequently
responding in writing via e-mail. Although there was no oral discussion component, I believe the
increase in written communication more than compensated for the lack of oral communication experience. The course forced students, and myself as the instructor, to become more conscious of the content, in particular the words that we were putting out on the screen. It was possible, especially in the rapid give-and-take of the chat room, to use a wrong word or make an imprecise statement that led to an erroneous assumption or misunderstanding. I think all of the participants in the class became more sensitive to how words or thoughts might be perceived.

Student course evaluation results have provided me with a few surprises. For example, students reported that a high level of "community" occurred in the course. This was not an objective I consciously sought to develop; however, in reflecting on the response, I believe the large amount of written and chat room participation contributed to greater class cohesiveness. Students, however, were most disappointed in the design of the course web site. Because I had no training in online course design, I spent considerable time trying to think through the visual organization of the class web site. Although I received positive responses from my colleagues, I obviously was unable to put myself in the position of a student in my class.

I have grown increasingly comfortable with the course and have continually made modifications. Would I want all of my classes online? I don’t think so. I still like the traditional classroom. The traditional classroom has a different environment and still needs to be a part of a student’s educational experience. However, I believe that it is important for every major in our department to be exposed to at least one online course if they are to be intelligently equipped to teach, research, and learn in today’s digital world.

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