

Ford School of Public Policy 201 Systematic Thinking about Problems of the Day

The purpose of the Public Policy 201 course is to show students that in order to make sense of policy problems they must understand the underlying structure of the problem, and that different academic disciplines are essential for this. For example, to make sense of international economic development policy they must understand international economics and the politics and economics international NGOs. Evaluating No Child Left Behind requires knowledge of educational practice, politics, and knowledge of education finance. Both within and across modules, different disciplinary strengths are required. Students come to appreciate that point, or so we hope.

The course is organized in modules, co-taught by a different instructor jointly with Paul N. Courant. In the first three instances of the course, the lead faculty for the modules are drawn from five different disciplines (law, economics, education, MCDB, and political science) and five schools and colleges (Ford School, LSA, Law, Information, Education). Interdisciplinarity occurs both within modules, in the interplay between Courant and the lead faculty, and across modules.

We have found that continuity of method across modules takes some work. Linking them up has to be done by the coordinating instructor and the students, but that's actually not so hard.

For each problem, we use the basic structure described below. We also spend a good deal of time in small group discussion, both in lecture and in weekly section, we require a short paper (a policy memo) of each student, on one of the five modules, and we have a quiz on each module. The final exam requires students to apply the method to two (of three) policy problems that they have not seen before.

What's the Problem?

- Provide data on the size and shape
- Look at prominent policy options (if any)

- What would we have to know to find out what to do?
- How do we find out?
- Make some progress; aim at making a policy recommendation
- Motivate learning by the need to solve the problem
- Make sense of opposing recommendations
- Use current events systematically
- Draw connections across modules

This year we revised the writing assignment, using more of section time to teach students how to write policy memos, and not assigning the memos until the second or third module. This worked a bit better but still needs more work. Next year we may have them write an op-ed piece, which is a genre that is more accessible.

Faculty learned from each other about subjects. The pedagogical development took place in staff meetings and in meetings with the GSIs. It's useful to discuss overarching themes with all of the instructors. It's also useful to have one person with a fairly strong interdisciplinary bent to coordinate the course to provide continuity. In previous experiences with team-taught courses, I have found a high payoff to their being more than one faculty member in the room, as distinct from teaching seriatim. And it's useful to teach topics as problems to be solved or illuminated, in this instance requiring academic knowledge of more than one field.