

“Think Outside the Box”: Enriching Learning Experiences Through Student Creativity

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My earliest memory is from the age of two, on the floor of our apartment in Athens with a pen in one hand and a blank paper in the other, drawing. Growing up in Greece I was surrounded by frescoes, outdoor murals, and art museums that made a lasting impression on me, depicting concepts long before I could verbalize or understand them myself. By high school I was creating my own cartoon books, circulating them among friends. A favorite art teacher encouraged me to pursue art, admonishing that “every drawing we attempt represents a problem we are called to solve by design and our imagination.” Art was my passion. But so was politics, and growing up in an enthralling, vibrant domestic political environment, I was also equally fascinated by it. It was no surprise, then, that I was drawn into studying Political Science at university (after all, my self-produced comics were about political crises and wars) which has led me to a rewarding path in teaching.

While designing the requirements for a 2019 course, I came across news about the Swiss team’s 2018 winning entry to Venice’s Architectural Biennale. Their Project consisted of a version of a house with rooms that were either scaled up or down to provide unexpected perspectives to the visitors, to encourage them to approach the functions of living quarters differently and to understand them better. This brought back to mind my art teacher and provided a “eureka” moment: just as different perspectives of architectural scales could highlight functions, and drawings could serve as means to solve aesthetic problems, couldn’t the same also apply to artistic representations of ideas, concepts, or causal arguments? Expressing a thesis differently, visually or otherwise, could further elucidate whether it was logically sound, adequately substantiated, and whether it succeeded in answering a research puzzle. This could also help

approach a question, or a problem from a different viewpoint, add valuable perspective about it, and perhaps contribute to its solution.

This is how the inspiration for a non-compulsory mini bonus course assignment was born: students would be given the option to complement their understanding and presentation of their final papers by visual or auditory means. By encouraging them to “Think Outside the Box”, as this optional assignment was to be called, and to represent their essay’s written arguments via a two-page comic strip (or, drawings, or collage, or set of memes) of at least 10 panels, or through a 3-minute musical composition, or a short poem, the goal was to help them further develop their critical thinking skills and express what they learned through creative works. It is always important to approach a topic from multiple angles, and pedagogy literature suggests that additional perspectives and layers can augment one’s comprehension and absorption of knowledge (Snyder & Cooper, 2015; Lunevich, 2021; Jin and Ye, 2022). Hence, since 2019, much to my students’ delight, I have offered this mini bonus assignment in various undergraduate Political Science courses, ranging from Cyber Politics to International Relations, to Methods. Based on what I witnessed, below are some ways in which their learning was positively impacted.

First, students found themselves in a position of thinking of how to represent their research question, thesis, and ideas in an entirely different, unexpected mode, by having to create a visual, or auditory narrative. Such a process requires additional thinking about one’s overall arguments and counterarguments-how well they are constructed, causally connected and supported-and can enhance the understanding of the material (Eilam and Gilbert, 2014; Lima and Timm-Bottos, 2018). As I told our students, this kind of creative representation need not meet the highest aesthetic criteria: one needs not be a Picasso! It is the story [read: argument] that is important. Therefore, rudimentary drawings, collages, memes, or melodies were all perfectly acceptable. Many students obliged and submitted stick-figure cartoons, but others turned in work that was visually elaborate and meticulously curated as if in an art class.

Second, and equally important, besides enriching one's active-learning trajectory (Bean, 2011; Nelson and Crow, 2014), by encouraging creativity, individual self-expression and self-pacing, and by promoting a 'can-do' attitude, this student-centered assignment also helped increase inclusivity in the classroom. It welcomed diverse perspectives, allowed for greater and differing accessibilities, and its artistic dimension fostered self-compassion and cultivated empathy towards others only as art can do (Henderson and Lasley, 2014; Coyne et al., 2010). In the span of this assignment, I noticed greater peer-to-peer interaction, amidst what students commented was a convivial environment.

Finally, an exercise that both gave one bonus point to the final grade and was enjoyable motivated class members to further engage with their projects and to communicate complex topics thoughtfully and creatively. The prospect of extra credit combined with different, 'fun' modes of presenting arguments facilitated student learning. Students from diverse courses and different years consistently responded favorably to it.

Ultimately, by inviting students to 'Think Outside the Box', I have been encouraging them to further reflect about their work and the course material, while they earn a bonus and enjoy an imaginative, artistic process that promotes their active participation, increases their inclusion, and enhances their learning. Despite plans for a mini exhibition derailed by the onset of COVID-19, a vernissage in the Department showcasing future student work will again be proposed towards reinforcing a sense of belonging, which is an important feature in an otherwise increasingly individualized and alienating undergraduate pathway.

In conclusion, this mini bonus assignment has stayed with students and instructor alike long after a course is over, as attested by some of the larger size submitted posters in my office.

And while I ended up not formally pursuing art studies, it appears art still managed to find its way into my Political Science classes and into my students' work.

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