

Reflections on teaching “Media, war and peace”

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At the University of Wollongong in the early 2000s, a new degree was set up, called the Bachelor of Communication and Media Studies. It offered several strands, including journalism and advertising/marketing, and had a common core required for all students. One of the members of the committee that set up the degree said the core should include a subject on media and international conflict resolution. I was the lucky one who got to teach the subject. These are my reflections on teaching it from 2004 through 2016.

The first thing I did was to recommend the name “Media, war and peace.” I also broadened the ambit beyond war and peace to include violence and nonviolence. This meant covering topics like riots and sit-ins.

I had been involved in the peace movement since 1979 and had read a lot on media studies. There was a lot of potential material. I could have structured the content around my preferred areas of interest, but I was more interested in giving students lots of freedom to choose their own topics.

In designing the subject, I tried to think how students would be encouraged to develop their own interests. This played out through the different assessment tasks.

One-minute reports

A typical component of assessment is called “class participation” and is often based on the teacher’s evaluation of how much a student has contributed in class discussions. I had long found this undesirable because of its subjective aspects. In a previous class, a student suggested an alternative: every student would give a weekly oral report on a reading. If they did the report, they received credit, irrespective of the quality of the report. This worked extremely well.

Weekly oral reports also solved another perennial problem: getting students to do the reading. Years earlier, like most of my colleagues at the time, I listed required and optional readings for each week’s tutorial, but found that

only a few students actually did any reading at all. In one year, I required brief written summaries of the readings each week, but this turned out to involve onerous amounts of checking and record-keeping.

Nearly all the students doing “Media, war and peace” had already taken subjects on media, so I aimed to get them reading about war-and-peace issues. So the plan was that each week there would be a topic - a concept or theory about war, peace, violence or nonviolence - and each student would search to find a reading about the topic and report on it. I provided a list of possible topics, ranging from assassination and genocide to enlightenment (in Buddhism) and pacifism.

To get more buy-in from the students, I let each tutorial group choose the topics for each week. In the first tutorial, part of the time was spent choosing one-minute report topics for the next few weeks, and later in the semester the students selected the topics for the remaining weeks. Some favourites emerged over the years, including protest music, torture, euthanasia and genocide. If anything, students tended to choose more violent topics, so I insisted that at least half had to be among selections concerning peace/nonviolence.

Then there was the topic for week 1, the first tutorial. I chose this one myself: conspiracy theories. There’s an obvious problem: the topic of conspiracy theories is not specifically about war or peace, so I told the students they should report on an article about a conspiracy theory involving war or violence, like 9/11 or the assassination of President Kennedy, or an article analysing conspiracy theories.

Why conspiracy theories? They are quite relevant to understanding contemporary media but, more importantly, they are a lot of fun. The week before the first tutorial, I sent to all students a detailed email saying to find an article about conspiracy theories and be ready to give a 30 to 60-second oral report on it. Nearly all students were ready.

In a class of 20 students, the oral reports typically took about 20 minutes, sometimes followed by general discussion. Students were attentive. They had searched for and looked at various articles about conspiracy theories and chosen one to comment on, and therefore were most interested in what other students

had to say about the same topic, in this case a variety of weird, amusing or perplexing claims.

Another feature of the one-minute reports is that most students tried to pick an article and a topic that would be different from everyone else's. They might be attracted to 9/11 conspiracy theories because these are prominent and intriguing, but be aware that these would be popular and therefore pick something else.

Overall, the one-minute reports have worked well year after year. Some students are unprepared, but usually only a few: expectations from peers were probably more important than the minor amount of credit involved. Several things made the one-minute reports effective. Students had an input into the topics chosen and, more importantly, could choose their own article. Then they got to listen to other students reporting on other articles on the same topic, providing a variety of perspectives. Rarely did I need to intervene except to keep students down to 60 seconds. After the first few weeks, nearly all did this without any timekeeping.

The short

The next assessment task was the "short," meaning short presentation. Each student had to pick a "media item," such as a newspaper article, photo, video or tweet, and analyse it using one of the concepts or theories. An example would be a photo of the Cronulla riot (a race riot in southern Sydney in 2005) analysed using the concept of riot. I specified that they had to present the ideas of at least two writers/theorists concerning the concept or theory and use those ideas to comment on the media item.

This assessment task combined the two sides of the subject, media and war/peace. It required students to learn some theory about the war/peace topic and relate it to media coverage. The task gave students a great deal of choice. They could choose the media item from an almost limitless selection, and for the war/peace concept they had dozens of options. For many students, making these choices was the hardest part of the assignment.

As well as doing the investigations necessary to prepare their own short, students got to hear the shorts of all the other students, thus exposing them to a

variety of topics and perspectives. In the early years of the subject, each student presented their short - maximum duration 10 minutes - to the rest of the class. Later, the length of the tutorials was cut back by administrative fiat and I decided to eliminate the presentations in class. Instead, I had the students prepare a video, post it online (for example on YouTube) and make a link to it from a tutorial-group-specific Google Group.

To get students to watch each others' videos, I introduced another element into the assessment. Draft shorts were due by a specified date, and then students had to comment on at least three other draft shorts within the next week. Then students had a few more days to submit a final version of their short. I only marked the final version, not the draft.

I was asking students to give informed peer commentary on each others' work. They were not used to doing this. In class, I presented some previous shorts and went through the process of analysing them and commenting on them.

Because my assignments were unfamiliar to students, initially there were many queries. They couldn't easily understand what was expected. In the early years, I gave a sample short myself and then analysed it according to the assessment criteria. Later, when I moved to video shorts, there was another option. After the first year of student video shorts, I asked permission of the students who had produced the best shorts to put links to them on my website. The next year, I gave the URLs to the students: they could look and see good shorts from the previous year. These examples were far more effective in providing guidance about what was expected than anything I could say. As the years went by, I added more links to [top shorts on my website](#).

The advantage of providing links to past assignments is that most people understand tasks better through examples than through abstract descriptions. In addition, by watching previous videos, students were exposed to the ideas in them, whether about peacekeeping or culture jamming. Finally, they watched very good videos, providing an incentive to try to do just as well themselves.

The project

The final assignment, the project, was even more free-form. I asked students to prepare an information pack that would explain to members of the public something about how the media did, or didn't, address an issue concerning war or peace. The information pack could be a leaflet, slide show, blog, poster or video - anything really. There were some innovative packs, including a T-shirt and a Rubik's cube. The pack had to be short, the equivalent of 1000 words of text.

In addition, to the information pack, students had to write 1500 words about how they did the project. These 1500 words had to be in the form of a dialogue, like a play, typically a discussion between two students. Writing in dialogue form is unorthodox. Unlike an essay, which is usually formal, dialogues need to be informal to suit the genre, in other words to sound like an actual conversation. I asked the students to use footnotes to give references and explain points, rather like the explanatory footnotes in Shakespeare's plays.

I gave the students the option of working alone or in groups of two or three on the same topic. They could also submit either the information pack or the dialogue as a joint submission. More students worked alone than in groups, and I never noticed any systematic difference in performance.

For the information pack and dialogue, I posted [examples of outstanding work](#) on my website, starting after the first year I taught the subject. These examples provided models for students. As with the shorts, the prior examples of excellent work served to explain the assignment far better than the words in my subject outline.

Class activities

So what did we do in the tutorials? Every week there were the one-minute reports, but there were an additional 90 minutes or so in each tutorial. In the first few weeks I ran exercises. After that, the students ran exercises. This was an assessment task. Students worked in groups of two or three to prepare an activity for the rest of the class that would help them to learn more about one of the concepts (assassination, etc.), using whatever examples they preferred. I had to emphasise over and over that the class activity was an *activity*, not a

presentation. In a typical activity, students set up several work stations, each with a task (like watching a short video and answering questions about it). Students in the class, in groups, would spend 10 or so minutes at each station.

The class activities were usually engaging and informative. For the group that went first, I offered feedback on their plans and then, after the activity, gave feedback to the entire class on how I applied the assessment criteria. If I had had more time, I would have tried to give feedback on each group's plans. Alas, this was one element that suffered due to increasing teaching loads.

So the classes were mostly taken up with student-centred activities, first the one-minute reports and then class activities. It was engaging for the students and stimulating for me too.

I have written elsewhere on [how to make marking easier and more fun](#). For "Media, war and peace," this had two aspects. First was the subject matter. It was all interesting. Furthermore, each student's assignment was different, so I didn't become bored marking the same topic over and over. Secondly, I could mark the class activities (and, in earlier years, the shorts) in class, as they were taking place. I gave student groups my comment sheet and their marks at the end of the class in which they ran their activity. They appreciated the rapid feedback and I appreciated having less out-of-class marking.

Snacks were an important part of each tutorial class. In week 1, I brought along snacks for everyone, for example grapes, nuts, crackers and cheese, and fruit juice. For later weeks, I invited pairs of students to volunteer to bring snacks. They most commonly brought chocolates, potato crisps and soft drinks — though some provided healthier options. There was no break for eating snacks. Instead, they were available during an activity, one of mine in early weeks or one run by a student group in later weeks.

For years, I administered a questionnaire in the last tutorial asking for recommendations for running the next year's subject, for example preferred one-minute report topics, assessment task weights and class activity processes. Snacks were nearly always recommended highly.

Sharing

One of my goals was to build a sense of community and mutual support within each tutorial group, in a common commitment to learning. Rather than stand at the front of the class, I asked the students to help arrange the chairs in a circle, so we were all facing each other without desks in between. When discussing topics in a circle arrangement, there is no centre and so everyone looks at each speaker in turn. This worked well for the one-minute reports.

In the first few weeks, I had each student write their first name on a sticker. After learning all the student names myself, I dispensed with the name tags. I never took a formal roll, but instead kept attendance records by noting the names on the tags. In this way I tried to reduce students' attention to being in a class, though of course they were in one.

We started each tutorial class in the circle, but before the 1-minute reports I ran a preliminary exercise on introductions and sharing. This involved going around the circle with each student, and me, giving their name and addressing a topic. I sequenced the topics to make them gradually more personally revealing, as students became more comfortable with each other. Here is a typical sequence of topics for introductions and sharing.

1. Your name, favourite animal, and communication medium used most yesterday (TV, Internet, iPod, radio, newspaper, book, etc.)
2. Pair up with someone you didn't know before this class. Find out about each other. After 5-10 minutes, each person introduces their partner to the whole group.
3. Name and any nicknames you're willing to reveal
4. Your name, and tell about a part of your body that is artificial, altered or missing (examples: ears pierced; hair colouring; tooth fillings; wisdom teeth removed; tattoo; nose ring; joint replacement)
5. (1) Something you're afraid of (e.g., heights, spiders, snakes, speaking in public) and (2) something you're not afraid of (that others are afraid of)
6. An embarrassing moment (for yourself or for someone you know) and/or a time when you weren't embarrassed in a potentially

embarrassing situation. (A useful starter: “Someone has been saying hello to me for ages but I’ve forgotten their name.”)

7. A time you helped someone, with no expectation of personal benefit.

8. A smell that reminds you of something.

9: Something you worked at really hard and became better at as a result.

It can be something academic, sports, painting, cooking, supporting friends, engaging conversation, etc. — the “something” can be intellectual, physical, interpersonal, emotional, etc.

10. A time when you stood up for yourself (for example, saying no to a request that was an imposition, or opposing an abuse of some sort).

11. An ordinary activity that makes life worthwhile, something you do daily or weekly, for example having breakfast, watching the sky, taking a walk or talking to a special friend.

12. A little thing that annoys you.

13. A time when you felt at peace with the world or with yourself.

Some of these are just for fun, but for every one I offered, after completing the sharing, a rationale. For example, for #6, the rationale is that dealing with embarrassment — and humiliation — is a crucial life skill. In every case, I started with myself to set an example and to reveal something about myself.

The sharing exercise at the beginning of each class was not about the subject matter of media, war and peace. It was more about building relationships and life skills. Students never complained. Instead, they joined in, often enthusiastically. (Incidentally, many of these topics are excellent conversation starters for groups of friends.)

The sharings and the class activities helped forge students’ commitments to each other, providing a sense of a collective journey and making the class far more satisfying. Many of the students hadn’t known each other before “Media, war and peace,” and some knew not a single other student initially. Even those who had had previous classes together often had never spoken with each other. Many students told me that in no previous class had they gotten to know all their classmates, and they were very appreciative of being able to do so. This no doubt

was a major factor for the students who told me that “Media, war and peace” was their favourite subject from their whole university experience.

Drawbacks

There is one obvious drawback to the way I ran “Media, war and peace”: there was no central narrative or overarching theoretical framework conveyed to the students. They were exposed to the topics I set down in the first few weeks - conspiracy theories, nonviolent action, deciphering violence, peace journalism - but for the most part they were finding out about bits and pieces of different theories and topics. This was certainly a disadvantage. I think it was outweighed by a different set of factors.

Because the students had a great deal of choice in their topics and the ways in which they presented their materials, they were much more likely to pursue topics in depth. Some students put in incredible effort and produced attractive and moving pieces of work. To have even a small minority becoming so involved was to me a worthwhile outcome. This would have been unlikely without the freedom students had to choose their topics and approaches.

I gave the students a few references for the topics in the first few weeks, but nothing in the way of a comprehensive reading list. This was a disadvantage, in that they could not readily take advantage of my knowledge of various areas. But lack of direction had the virtue of helping students to learn a different skill: finding and judging sources for themselves. This occurred in finding articles for the one-minute reports and in greater depth in finding references for the short, class activity and project. Given that there is now a surfeit of information readily available, and that the students already had plenty of experience in previous classes in reading and analysing texts, my goal was to encourage them to learn how to find and judge sources.

After I introduced peer feedback on drafts for the short and the information pack, this required learning a new skill: giving comments on others' work. I learned that few students have this skill, but it can be readily developed. Again, providing examples is powerful. After a year of requiring peer feedback, I presented my classes with examples of excellent feedback. The result was greatly improved feedback: the standard went up dramatically.

In retrospect, there were several key features of my approach. The first was enabling student choice of what to study and how, within broad guidelines of subject matter and presentation. The second was helping students to learn how to run classes themselves, to be teacher-learners. The third was to provide models of good work, for both guidance and inspiration. The fourth was to enable peer feedback in a safe, supportive situation.

My formal undergraduate teaching career is now over, so far as I know. I look back on “Media, war and peace” as one of its highlights. It was fun, and we all learned a lot.

Thanks to Ian Miles for valuable comments.

[Subject outlines and other information about “Media, war and peace”](#)