

Midterm Synthesis Reflection

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Context: Out of class and in-class; Upper level U.S. Foreign Policy

Keywords: critical thinking, metacognition

Student Activity Time: 1-2 hours out of class, 30 minutes in-class

After learning about the history of U.S. foreign policy, students reflected on which president was the best leader and why.

Introducing the Reflection Activity

In an upper level U.S. Foreign Policy course, junior and senior level students engaged in a range of daily reflection activities. The purpose of these activities was to help students pause and consider the past in service of their future learning in the class and beyond the class. In one reflection activity, students reflected on their learning about leadership and leadership skills.

The first half of the semester was focused on the history of foreign policy, from before the founding of the US to the 1980s. By this point in the course, students were well positioned to make a comparative and critical analysis of presidencies over time. To integrate and synthesize what students had learned since the beginning of the term, students considered which president made the best foreign policy leader. Specifically, they were asked to answer the question—“which president was the best leader and why?” Students individually reflected on this question, arrived at an answer, and defended the decision with evidence. Students were asked to spend a couple hours outside of class thinking and writing about their selection and come to class prepared to write a reflection essay, then discuss and defend their choice against other students’ choices.

At the start of class, they wrote a 2-3 paragraph reflection essays that counted for a quiz grade. They then discussed their individual reflections in reflection groups. At the end of these discussions, each group reported out on the different presidents they selected. During this report out, students got into a heated debate about leadership styles and what makes for a good leader. The educator graded the reflection essays using a zero, one, or two point grading approach (i.e., zero if the student did not do the assignment, one if the student wrote something that showed some thought, and two if the student demonstrated informed critical thinking in the essay).

To wrap up the class activity, the educator led the class in a discussion about different presidents’ leadership records and policy outcomes, within the dimensions of four categories: power, peace, prosperity, and principles. The point of this discussion was to dig deeper into a conversation about leadership characteristics within a provided framework and to let students draw their own conclusions about what makes a good leader in the context of challenging political realities.

In terms of outcomes, even though students were not explicitly told that the point of the activity was to synthesize and reflect on what they had learned to date, their reflection and discussion supported thinking in this way. They demonstrated critical, comparative analysis of foreign policy leadership over time and reported self-evolution in how they thought about foreign policy success vs. failure.

Recreating the Reflection Activity

	Description
1	Introduce the written reflection assignment to students ahead of time and ask them to come prepared to write a 2-3-paragraph response in class as a quiz essay.
2	Facilitate small group discussions about students' answers.
3	Debrief students on highlights from the discussion based on a provided framework.
4	Grade the written 2-3-paragraph reflection after class, using a zero, one, or two grading approach (i.e., zero if the student did not do the assignment, one if the student wrote something that showed some thought, and two if the student demonstrated informed critical thinking in their essay). The discussion is not graded, but is based on the written reflections.

In the Words of the Educator: Tips and Inspiration

Keep students focused on the reflection assignment. The main thing in facilitating the discussion is to not let the students go off topic in their arguments about who is good and who is bad in terms of presidents and policies, but to keep redirecting the conversation to why that makes them good leader. This is the whole point of the conversation. So, guide the conversation in a way that keeps them progressing towards the objectives because they can get off topic really fast.

Provide students with specific reflection questions. Because this is a small assignment, provide students with specific reflection questions. This approach helps target their reflections and their in-class discussions.

Move student conversation forward. The time for student conversation is limited, so it is important to encourage students to share information quickly. I always break my questions into parts, and I'd say okay now let's talk about this part in your answer. Then we regroup and we debrief a little bit and then they talk about the next part. I bring their attention back after 3 minutes or so and I keep them moving on so that each person gets a turn and once I do get their attention I have a predetermined set of categories that help frame or I can have them identify categories that will create some frameworks together.

What was the inspiration for the reflection activity? As I designed the course, this comparative reflection activity seemed timely considering the halfway point of the semester.