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# Internet Citizenship: Course Design and Delivery Using ICT

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## INTRODUCTION

This article presents the design of an undergraduate course that focused on how the Internet<sup>1</sup> may be used as a medium for discovering information about citizenship, in general, and for advocating and practicing citizenly conduct, in particular. The goal is to share with the reader a set of guidelines to specify course objectives and requirements, to select relevant materials, to engage students in self-directed learning, and to appreciate the process of working with the students over a semester. Applications of information and communication technology (ICT) were integrated into the course management and delivery, and they also formed the basis of the topic for the course content.

The title of the course was “The Voice of an Engaged Citizen: Vote, Advocate, Volunteer, Respond, Act...How?” This course was one of 14 first-year seminars<sup>2</sup> (FYS) intended to be taken by high-achieving freshman at the University of Maryland–Baltimore County (UMBC).<sup>3</sup> These seminars, which are limited to 20 students, are intended to create an active learning environment. The students’ development of effective oral and written communication skills and the mastery of techniques to seek and evaluate information are the cornerstones of these seminars. This particular course was intended to explore the ways that ICT could foster the practice of citizenship. The course also had the objective of teaching students to use the Internet to search for reputable evidence in support of the Internet’s use in such an application area.

## COURSE DESCRIPTION

First, the students taking part in this course should use the Internet to learn what citizenship is. From there,

they can look for ways that the Internet can be used to practice citizenship. Practicing citizenship via the Internet may include, but is not limited to, finding and evaluating Web sites that provide information about important issues and that provide the opportunity to communicate with our representatives. Likewise, students are also encouraged (1) to look for research that has been done to see if and how citizens are using the Internet to participate in democracy, (2) to seek information about political activist groups on the Internet, and (3) to determine how effective those groups are in attracting members and influencing decision making. Students should then attempt to find out if the Internet has information about character development and the learning of moral values.

The overall objectives for the coursework are formulated as the class progresses. This way, the class will allow itself the flexibility to pursue an avenue it finds interesting. The format of the work should include group discussions and seeking out information on the Internet. During some of the classes, students present their findings for discussion, ensuring that the students learn how to prepare and deliver PowerPoint presentations and how to write evaluative essays of journal articles and other material.

## COURSE MANAGEMENT AND DELIVERY

A Blackboard site was available in support of this course where material, such as readings and Web site links, were posted for the class to review. It should be noted that the “syllabus” of this course evolved in the form of an “Assignments Log” posted on the Blackboard site that specified the requirements for each particular class. This log evolved because there was flexibility in

the pacing and type of assignments required from the students; typically, the due dates for written essays and presentations were posted two weeks in advance.

However, the most important use of Blackboard was its function as a forum for students to provide immediate written comments on class events, whether led by the instructor or by the students themselves. Furthermore, Blackboard was also used for students to post their PowerPoint presentations, their review essays of journal articles, and their evaluations of Web sites so they could be reviewed by the instructor as well as other members of the class.

## **COURSE CONTENT AND STRUCTURE**

This particular seminar course met twice each week for 75 minutes over a 14-week semester. Class time was devoted to the following types of activities.

First, the instructor (HHE) posted on Blackboard a collection of journal articles (Evans & Yen, 2005; Froomkin, 2002; Thomas & Streib, 2005), related reports (Best & Wade, 2005; Clift, 2002; Emurian, 2004; Noveck, 2004; Vance, 2000), and surveys (Horrigan, 2004). This material was used for reading and discussion in class. The preferred style for engaging this material was found to be a type of "round robin" where each student would lead and read several paragraphs, later passing that role to another student. The student leader and reader was free to make comments and ask questions as he or she engaged the material, and other class members were encouraged to present their own questions and comments. At the conclusion of a reading and discussion, each student posted his or her own thoughts on the reading on a designated Blackboard discussion forum. Students were encouraged to give an evaluation of the material read and discussed in relationship to the overall objectives of the course. These class exercises, which were interspersed throughout the semester, provided the occasion for open discussion and the rehearsal of tools of analysis that were applicable to the students' written reviews of journal articles that they themselves selected.

Second, as briefly mentioned above, each student reviewed six journal or other reputable articles throughout the semester (Coleman & Norris, 2005; Gil-Garcia, 2005; LaVigne, Simon, Dawes, Pardo, & Berlin, 2001; Lourenço & Costa, 2006). Each review was based upon a set of guidelines<sup>4</sup> for evaluating an article, ultimately

resulting in a two-to-three page, single-spaced essay. The articles selected by the students were posted on the Blackboard site for approval, and the review served as a basis for a PowerPoint presentation to the class. The set of guidelines was discussed in class, and anonymous examples of reviews written by students in similar seminars were also presented and discussed. For the first review, the instructor met with each student individually to provide feedback on a draft of the review. This meeting ensured that both the students and the instructor were in agreement with regard to what was expected from the review; consequently, both the instructor and students found this initial feedback session to be invaluable to the production of subsequent quality essays.

Third, several classes were devoted to examination and open discussion of various Internet portals and Web sites thought to be relevant to the course topic of Internet citizenship. This activity was made feasible since the class was able to meet in a PC lab or in a seminar room, depending upon the needs for each particular class. Based upon the feedback from the students during these open discussions, it was decided that PowerPoint presentations would be delivered by each student to evaluate a Web site. Consequently, each student shared his or her findings with the class. The pace of this course allowed each student to make three of these PowerPoint presentations. Among the cornerstone sites investigated, in open discussion or by student presentations, were the following:

### **1. <http://www.advocacyguru.com/>**

This site contains a wealth of Web sites organized into the categories below. From among the many sites presented within a category, one example is presented for each category.

- a. Advocacy Resources
  - CITIZENOUTREACH  
([www.citizenoutreach.com](http://www.citizenoutreach.com))
- b. E-Government General
  - E-DEMOCRACY  
([www.e-democracy.org](http://www.e-democracy.org))
- c. Communicating with Elected Officials
  - YOUR CONGRESS  
(<http://www.yourcongress.com/>)
- d. Nonprofit Resources
  - NONPROFIT BASICS  
([www.nonprofitbasics.org](http://www.nonprofitbasics.org))

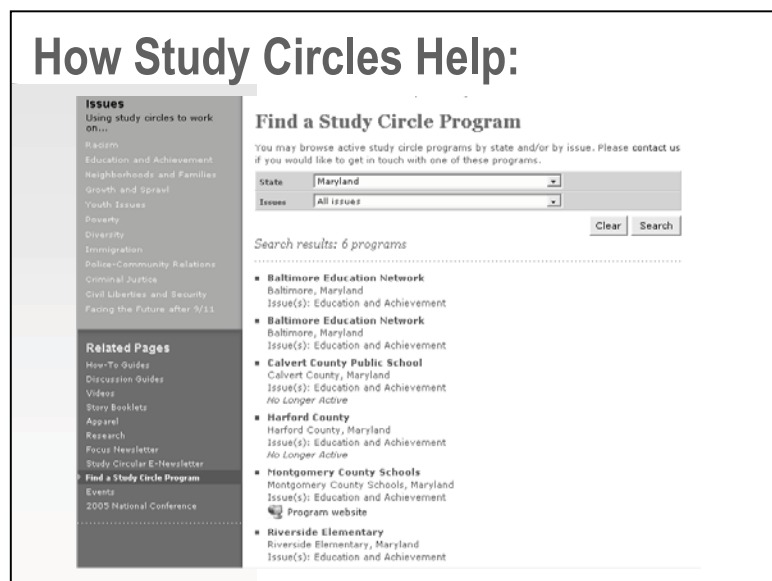
- e. Online Political Networks and Conversations
  - E-THE PEOPLE  
(<http://www.e-thepeople.com/>)
2. <http://first.gov/>
  - This is the U.S. Government's official Web portal.
3. <http://www.regulations.gov/fdmspublic/component/main>
  - On this U.S. Government Web site, you can find, view, and comment on regulations for all federal agencies.
4. <http://www.nifi.org/>
  - The National Issues Forums help people of diverse views find common ground for action on issues that concern them deeply.
5. <http://www.studycircles.org/en/index.aspx>
  - The Study Circles Research Center helps communities develop their own ability to solve problems by exploring ways for all kinds of people to think, talk, and work together to create change.
6. <http://h2oproject.law.harvard.edu>
  - The stated vision is to encourage the growth of a more open set of intellectual communities than those spawned by the traditional university system.

7. <http://www.americaspeaks.org/>

- *AmericaSpeaks* is developing a national infrastructure for democratic deliberation that institutionalizes the links between decision-makers and citizens in determining public policy.

An initial attempt was made for the student presentations of the Web sites to be a demonstration; that is, the student would show the features of the Web site by navigating through it in front of the class. This approach turned out to be awkward and unsupportive of communicating the evaluation of a site. Therefore, embodying the student led nature of the class, the students decided that the presentations of the Web site should follow the PowerPoint presentation format similar to that used for presenting the review essays. By using this format, screen shots of the features of the Web site were able to be included into the presentations, and it became easier to point out the strengths and weaknesses of a site. Figure 1 presents an example of a screen shot used for a student presentation. The screen shot was more beneficial than an open navigation Web site presentation because it allowed the student to focus on a specific aspect of a given Web page. In this example, the student chose to focus on the types of study circles offered in the state of Maryland.

Figure 1. Slide from a Web site PowerPoint presentation on StudyCircles.org



In addition, classes that were scheduled between assigned deliverables consisted of such exercises as the investigation of Web sites that occurred during the third class of the semester.

1. Overview in class

a. **Congress.org**

(<http://www.congress.org/congressorg/home/>)

b. **U.S. Senate Portal**

(<http://senate.gov/>)

c. **U.S. House of Representatives Portal**

(<http://www.house.gov/>)

d. **The White House Portal**

(<http://www.whitehouse.gov/>)

These portals were investigated and discussed in class and the students used them to express an opinion, anonymously to the other students and instructor, on a topic of interest.

## STUDENT MILESTONES, CONTRIBUTIONS, AND FEEDBACK

In administering the course, there were several milestone instructional events that provided the occasion for the students' acquisition of background skills and knowledge that became instrumental to the successful deployment of this seminar to undergraduates.

One such instructional event was posted on the Blackboard site on the date of the second class, and it was due on the date of the fourth class:

*This assignment is to prepare a PowerPoint presentation covering the below three topics. Find sources on the Web for this exercise.*

- a. Give a definition of citizenship,
- b. Give core values needed for the practice of citizenship, and
- c. Give specific behaviors regarded as exhibiting the practice of citizenship.

*Give your opinion on the quality of the sources of information and defend your opinion. What makes a resource of information have high quality? Give the links on your PowerPoint presentation.*

This was the first major assignment for the students in this class, providing the occasion for each student to express his or her opinions on the course's content

while challenging each one of them to provide reputable support for those opinions.

Another one of these instructional events occurred during the second class of the seminar. It consisted of a lecture by a reference librarian<sup>5</sup> who taught the students how to search for information using the library's various databases, research portals, and search engines. The importance of this lecture cannot be overemphasized. Students were familiarized with access to electronically available journal articles and other material that were essential to their success in seeking information related to the topic of this course. Although most students were highly experienced in using Internet search engines, the library offered additional and secure paths to information that many students had yet to explore. Other instructors would be well advised to offer this type of lecture early in the academic careers of students, to include graduate students where necessary.

One very important class milestone occurred during the fourth class, as given in the Assignments Log:

1. Founding Documents

a. <http://www.constitution.org>

b. We will read in class the Declaration of Independence and parts of the Constitution, to include the Bill of Rights.

c. Assignment: *Post your comments* today about your reaction to reading these formative documents.

The instructor and students shared the reading of these documents, accessed via the Web site above. As it turned out, the Declaration of Independence and the entire Constitution were read during the 75-minute class. This class event turned out to be a vital as well as inspirational milestone for the students and the instructor.

Last, the final milestone, which, as the schedule would have it, occurred during the last class, consisted of student presentations of "Reflections on Internet Citizenship." These presentations were summative evaluations of the course by the students in terms of what was accomplished by each learner. Through these presentations, students were given the opportunity to share lessons they learned while taking this seminar as well as express their opinions about how they believed the course could be improved for future classes. The strengths and weaknesses addressed in those presentations even served to aid the writing of this instructional



article. A collection of observations made by several students is given below:

- The Future of E-Government:
  - Overall, E-Government seems to have a bright future
    - People are “getting out of line and getting online”
    - “E-the-People”
- Article Reviews:
  - One of the best parts about this class
    - Very unique activity for a FYS class
  - One activity provided tons of knowledge for future reference
    - Learned a new writing format
    - Improved critical thinking skills
  - Preparation for graduate school
    - Really enjoyed the fact that this activity will be of use to me in furthering my education—kind of like a “heads up”
    - Excellent “plan-as-we-go” class that developed us as writers, presenters, and analysts of academic writing.
    - All assignments had a purpose and we achieved the goals together.
    - I also learned how to critique.
  - Finding trustworthy articles and sites
  - Determining methodology
  - Finding strengths and weaknesses
    - Enjoyed going over articles in class.
    - I liked the course.
  - The ability we had to discover such a variety of information in such detail through the presentations of topics we each went out and chose on our own was really neat.

## CONCLUSION

This article presented an effective design for structuring and implementing an undergraduate seminar course on the topic of Internet citizenship through the applications of ICT.

It is very important to note that the evolution of this course from a flexible “Assignments Log” allowed the students to undertake a wide variety of activities, from writing those aforementioned journal article reviews to giving Web site presentations using PowerPoint technology. Furthermore, the types of activities pursued in this seminar class (as well as in most other seminar courses) served to strengthen the students’ overall writing and presenting skills, which will continue to be of use to them as they proceed with their education. In the same sense, the student-led nature of the course allowed the class to pursue topics within the concept of Internet citizenship that they saw as particularly intriguing, ensuring that the students remained actively involved in the course content throughout the entire semester. This was easily accomplished, as much of the coursework was designed for the individual student (e.g., allowing each student to select his or her own journal articles to review). As a result, while one student may have chosen to investigate the security concerns surrounding Internet citizenship, another student could have decided to research the technology needed to further the practice of Internet citizenship. Such material variety kept the coursework fresh and interesting as the semester progressed.

Overall, student feedback indicated that the approach described here regarding the instruction of an undergraduate seminar course on Internet citizenship was highly effective. Both the students and instructor gained valuable insights on the course content through the interactive group activities that became one of the cornerstones of this class. Similarly, having the opportunity to make several presentations clearly had a positive impact on the students’ skill level as it was observed that students’ presentations increased in length and quality over the semester. Therefore, it is the hope of the authors that, after reading this article, the reader will have gained a better understanding of the undergraduate seminar program offered at the University of Maryland–Baltimore County and will also be able to execute successfully the methods previously described to create an Internet citizenship seminar of his or her own in the future.



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## KEY TERMS

**Citizenship:** Although the typical definition of citizenship refers to the rights and privileges of those designated legally to be citizens, the concept was extended in this article to include motivation to participate in shared governance.

**First Year Seminar:** At UMBC, outstanding freshman are allowed to enroll in a course that has a seminar format similar to what graduate students might experience.

**ICT:** Information and communication technology was used as the medium studied for political engagement and for course delivery and management with Blackboard.

**Internet:** The term “Internet” includes the World Wide Web because that is a common way to refer to the media for electronic communications and exchanges of information.

**Internet Citizenship:** This reflected the use of the Internet for political engagement and empowerment, from local, state, and national perspectives.

**Instructional Design:** In the present context, this refers to the techniques that were adopted to encourage the students to seek and evaluate information and to provide written and oral reports to the instructor and to the class.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Internet is used here to include the World Wide Web because that is a common way to refer to the media for electronic communications and exchanges of information.
- <sup>2</sup> [http://www.umbc.edu/undergrad\\_ed/fys/index.html](http://www.umbc.edu/undergrad_ed/fys/index.html)
- <sup>3</sup> The junior author (MMC) was a student in this seminar. The senior author (HHE) was

the instructor and is an associate professor of information systems.

- <sup>4</sup> <http://nasal1.ifsm.umbc.edu/courses/Review-Guidelines/ReviewGuidelines.html>

- <sup>5</sup> The authors appreciate the lecture by Drew F. Alfgren to this and other classes and his ongoing support of our students' development of research skills.