



2022

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Christopher Huggins

University of Kentucky, christopher.huggins@uky.edu

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Recommended Citation

Huggins, Christopher (2022) "Increasing Content Mastery in Criminology," *Greater Faculties: A Review of Teaching and Learning*: Vol. 3, Article 6.

Available at: <https://uknowledge.uky.edu/greaterfaculties/vol3/iss1/6>

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Increasing Content Mastery in Criminology

Christopher Huggins

*Department of Sociology
College of Arts and Sciences
University of Kentucky*

I entered the Teaching Innovation Institute (TII) with one goal in mind: to teach criminology more effectively using active learning exercises in my class. Having taught the class many times over several semesters, I noticed that students routinely struggled with some of the material, notably the section of the class devoted to criminological theory. The normal lecture and discussion format just did not lead to performances on the exams that suggested mastery of the concepts and content. Thus, I targeted that learning outcome as the one to focus on during my TII tenure. In short, my goal was to find some way to get students to better comprehend crime theory through active learning utilizing the digital tools every student has access to.

First, I knew I wanted to incorporate all my activities so that they were available for students through Canvas. I knew from the TII workshops that having digital, online versions of these assignments would make it easier for students to collaborate inside and outside the classroom. Second, I wanted to develop assignments that would take advantage of the iPad itself. Because of the Smart Campus initiative, we instructors could assume that most, if not all, of our students would have access to them and all of their many pedagogical bells and whistles.

To demonstrate the usefulness of these activities, I want to describe a couple of the active learning exercises I designed after participating in TII, why I chose to use digital tools in their implementation, and how the activities related to the learning objectives of the course. The first activity that I developed focused on relating general information about crime data to the specific experiences of students. One of the sections of the criminology course covers the basics of the discipline. In this section, I cover the origins of the discipline, what criminologists study, and the sources of their data. Describing the differences between official sources of crime data like the Uniform Crime Report, National Incident Based Reporting System, and the National Crime Victimization Survey, I expect students to familiarize themselves with the strengths and weaknesses of the various sources of crime data. While this approach has always somewhat worked in the class, I felt that it would help students if they could relate these sources to their own lives. I asked students to use their iPads in class to go to recently published UCR data to compare what was reported nationally and in their home state. They compared violent crime and property crime, and clearance rates both nationally and for their home state. The students then analyzed what the data told about their state when compared to national trends. The students reported whether they trusted the data, if it matched with their own experiences, and what the data might miss about crime. This exercise helped to highlight the strengths and weaknesses of the sources of crime data, while also empowering students to actively participate in determining these conclusions using the tools they had at their fingertips.

The second activity I want to share similarly helped to make students more active learners while also incorporating digital technology into the classroom. The most difficult material in the class each semester is the theory section. In this section of the course, students learn the major criminological theories from classical to postmodern. Students struggle with the nuances and amount of information in this section of the class. In a class with multiple exams, the theory exam always yields the lowest scores. Again, with the help of TII workshops, I developed active learning approaches to overcome this challenge. My best example of this is an exercise I designed to help teach classical criminological theories. Wanting to teach rational choice theory, I often lectured about Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED). CPTED uses natural surveillance, access control, and territorial reinforcement to explain why some built environments are more criminogenic than others. CPTED is based on the application of routine activities and rational choice theory. While students could understand the basics of the theory, I wanted them to relate this to their own lives. The activity I designed asked them to take their iPads or smartphones around campus or their neighborhood to take pictures of good or bad examples of environmental design from this CPTED perspective. They then sent the pictures to me to a throw-away google account. In class, I pulled those pictures up and asked the photographer to explain why they took the picture, how it demonstrated or violated the CPTED principles we had discussed, and how it related to the classical theories. The class that followed was one of the best of the semester, as student after student had their chance to describe their photographs and relate it to course content. I felt this activity really helped the students actively participate in the achievement of this learning objective while also taking advantage of digital technology. Encouragingly, that theory exam average was not the lowest of the semester.

In summary, my participation in TII pointed me to tools that helped me reframe my class, incorporate new ways of teaching core class material, and hopefully benefited the students' learning in the process. These tools are available to instructors of all disciplines. While at first I was skeptical of some of the strategies or technologies mentioned in the TII workshops, with some imagination and creativity (and flexibility), I was able to incorporate some much-needed changes into my class. I would encourage others to do so as well. These changes may be uncomfortable in the short term but can prove invaluable in the long term. We should all experiment in our classes, and these digital tools provide a great laboratory to do so.

Media

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