EXPERTISE AS TEACHING PRESENCE
ONLINE TOOLS FOR INTERACTIVE LEARNING EXPERIENCES

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Abstract

The Community of Inquiry model has become one of the most common frameworks for designing online and hybrid courses. Substantial literatures have developed around its three elements: cognitive, social, and teaching presence—though the third has proven the most nebulous and hard to define. Much of the discussion about teaching presence focuses on its connection with social presence, emphasizing strategies like video as a way to improve instructor immediacy. By retelling the author’s struggles to teach one particularly challenging course, this paper identifies a neglected aspect of teaching presence—the importance of the instructor as a subject-matter expert. This aspect of teaching presence can be especially important when introducing novice students to advanced or challenging material. It can also be particularly challenging to incorporate into online instruction, where students and professor have minimal to no direct interaction. The paper concludes by discussing free online tools that can be used to create interactive learning experiences that leverage instructor expertise.
Background: Instructional Designer by Day, Adjunct by Night?

When I entered my PhD program in 1999, my goal was the same as most new doctoral students: make my way into the ranks of tenured faculty. As is happening more often for increasing numbers of PhD-holders, though, I have found myself in an “alternative academic” position. For those unfamiliar with the term, an “alt-ac” works within (or possibly outside of) higher education in a job that may take advantage of an advanced degree but which is not a traditional faculty or administrative position (Bethman and Longstreet). In my case, since 2011 I have been employed at Grand Valley State University as an instructional designer.

For those unfamiliar with the role, instructional designers have a broad and varied job description, and what an instructional designer does at one institution might have little resemblance to an instructional designer elsewhere. Instructional designers work as academic support staff, coming alongside and working with faculty to the extent that they’re willing. For many faculty that extent is “none at all,” having been trained that teaching, like research, is a solo academic endeavor. As a rule, instructional designers have no secret plan to remove faculty’s academic freedom within the classroom. The field of instructional design exists in large part, though, because “teaching is a highly complex activity that draws on many kinds of knowledge” (Mishra and Koehler 2006, 1020). Faculty are the undisputed source of content knowledge, but they generally lack detailed knowledge of pedagogy and instructional technology. When invited, instructional designers bring their expertise in these additional areas to ensure high-quality, high-impact learning environments focused on students.

At Grand Valley, I work as one of three instructional designers. Because of the size of the university (roughly 1600 faculty) our job is largely consultative, working with faculty who seek out

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1 This can be very true in online classes, where some institutions design courses by way of a centralized team and then hire adjunct faculty to teach the courses once they’ve been designed.
our services either from a perceived personal need or because of the special demands of their department or program. Through requirements placed in the faculty handbook and the university curricular process, the administration has given us a special mandate to work with instructors teaching hybrid or online classes. Beyond the one-on-one consultations and workshops we would normally offer, this mandate also entails facilitating the special workshop that all faculty must successfully complete before the University permits them to teach hybrid or online classes.

The Political Science department at Grand Valley has taken a very cautious approach to offering its courses in hybrid or online versions. However, after several Political Science faculty completed the University’s certification workshop, the department asked me to develop a fully online version of the department’s PLS 206, “American Constitutional Foundations.” Because the course had only ever been taught as a face-to-face course, the first step of the process was to submit a “course change proposal” form. This document, which needs the formal approval of a University curricular committee, describes in general terms the changes to assessment and content delivery that will take place in the new “format” of the course. The course change proposal for PLS 206

\[\text{2} \text{ Grand Valley has formal definitions for both hybrid and online courses. An online course is the easiest to explain: all the scheduled face-to-face “seat time” for the course is replaced with content and activities found online. At Grand Valley, an online class may never meet face-to-face, even for optional course sessions. This definition is at odds with other definitions of “online” classes which allow optional or even required face-to-face sessions (such as for a final exam). The University is committed to ensuring that online learners can have the same experience as students living on campus, and it was decided that the inability to attend even an optional course meeting might put online students at a disadvantage, whether real or perceived. At Grand Valley, a “hybrid” course is one where 15% or more of the course’s meeting time has been replaced with online instruction. For a three credit course, that amounts to approximately 6 hours of instructional time. While this might seem like a clear cut definition, faculty are frequently confused and ask how much online work (readings, videos, activities, etc) they can assign before their course becomes a hybrid. The crux of the definition is not the use of the World Wide Web, per se, but is the reduction in in-person, face-to-face instructional time.}\]

\[\text{3} \text{ Unfortunately for the content of this paper, the Political Science course I discuss is titled “American Constitutional Foundations”, and our eLearning certification workshop is “Foundations of Online/Hybrid Course Development and Delivery.” Because both are casually referred to as “Foundations,” I’ve chosen to refer to the certification workshop obliquely in most instances.}\]

\[\text{4} \text{ At the same time that I was authoring the proposal for the online version of the course, a different faculty member was preparing one for a hybrid version of the course.}\]
was approved during the winter of 2015, and the first online section of the course was added to the schedule for Fall of 2015.\(^5\)

A course change proposal is far from a finished course, so in the weeks and months prior to the semester’s start I worked to turn the skeleton of a proposal into a fully formed learning experience. While I had taught for the Political Science department in the past, I had never taught 206. Looking at syllabi and talking with faculty who had taught the course, I began to develop a picture of the course. Sitting in the 200 level of the catalog, American Constitutional Foundations is essentially an introductory course, explicitly listed as having no prerequisites. While Political Science majors can receive elective credit for the course, education students make up a large proportion of the roughly 100 students in the three or four sections offered each semester—the course having been designed, it would appear, to meet the needs of education students with a social studies emphasis.\(^6\)

PLS 206, however, is no ordinary introductory course. The catalog description for the course states that it “[i]ntegrates the perspectives of political science and constitutional law”. In practice, this translates into treating 206 as a condensed version of constitutional law. The course relies on a popular con law textbook (Epstein and Walker’s Constitutional Law for a Changing America: A Short Course), emphasizes knowing Supreme Court case law and reading court opinions, and makes frequent use of assignments common to con law courses (such as writing formal case briefs).

Those who have taught constitutional law should feel the tension inherent in the way PLS 206 was conceived. A detailed study of the law or judiciary, especially an emphasis on studying

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\(^5\) This would also be the first online version of any course the department offers.

\(^6\) For comparison, for Fall 2018 there are seven sections of PLS 102 “American Government and Politics,” with a total capacity of approximately 200 students, and five sections of PLS 103 “Issues in World Politics,” with a capacity of 150 students. Majors are also required to take PLS 211 “International Relations,” which currently has ten scheduled sections and a total capacity of 250 students.
case law, is usually reserved for upper-class Political Science majors who have self-selected into a con law course because it matches an existing interest or a possible career in the law. Having made it to the latter years of their program, such students are best prepared to handle the specialized jargon of legal language and the complexity of reading court opinions (whether from the 1790s or now). However, Political Science majors and students with an interest in the law are few and far between in PLS 206—at least in my online sections. In addition the average 206 student has the same stereotypical apathy or antipathy towards politics and government that other introductory students have, further tempering their patience for complex material.\footnote{Anecdotally, I find this is true even for education students who are group social studies majors. History appears to be the first love for many such students, and the fact that government is included in “social studies” is a cross they bear with resignation.}

In short, however well-intentioned the plan for American Constitutional Foundations might have been, there is a gap between its design and its general audience. While that gap offers a lot of potential for students to discover new interests and rise to academic challenges, it offers just as much potential for students to fall behind course expectations and end up frustrated—or worse.

**A Course Evolving: Bridging the Gap between Content and Students**

Including that Fall 2015 semester and the Winter 2018 semester currently in progress, I have now taught PLS 206 a total of five times. As I expected, treating the course as a con law seminar proved less than ideal. Students were unprepared for what such a seminar would entail, and the limited time available in a single semester could only do so much to get them up-to-speed. Other challenges arose from the online nature of the course—something I was prepared for, given that as an instructional designer I regularly counsel faculty that a face-to-face class can’t be turned into an online class with the wave of a magic wand. The goal of this paper is not to chronicle each
change I’ve made to the course over time. That said, I do want to note a few things about how the course as I now teach it is different from how it began.

**Fewer case briefs.** In my first offering of PLS 206, students hoping for an A were required to complete six written case briefs, while students earning a D needed to complete a single brief.\(^8\) In my current course, A students complete two briefs and B students complete one; students aiming for a C or D are not required to complete any briefs. For many purists, this might seem like I have fundamentally abandoned how a con law class should be taught. What I’ve come to realize, though, is that PLS 206 is not a con law class and its students are not con law students. Across all five times I have taught the class, I have had a grand total of one student express an interest in law school. The vast majority of the students are education students quite comfortable in their decision to become K-12 educators. They don’t need to learn how to brief a case to be prepared for law school. Preparing case briefs will not be part of their chosen career. I retain a limited number of briefs because the challenge of the assignment is suited to A and B level work.

**Fewer hypotheticals.** As with case briefs, it’s standard for con law students to write a mock court opinion in response to a hypothetical Supreme Court case. Currently my A students complete two hypotheticals, with B and C students completing one. I haven’t eliminated as many of these as I have case briefs for the simple fact that I believe hypotheticals are a much better

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\(^8\) Since the beginning, I have taught PLS 206 using a system known as “specifications grading.” In a traditional points-based grading system, the difference between an A and a D student is how many “points” they earned on their work. That numeric difference, though, is very difficult to translate into differences in what an A student has “learned” versus what the D student has “learned.” In specifications grading, students receive no points for their work and instead must complete all assignments to a passing level of quality as determined by the instructor (generally pegged at a B/80% level, with the expected “specifications” for quality work spelled out in advance). Students who do not receive a passing score do not receive partial credit. Instead, they receive no credit and are encouraged to revise their work based on instructor-provided feedback and then resubmit their work. The difference between students receiving an A, B, C, or D is that each letter grade requires the students to complete a different set of requirements, generally increasing in number and difficulty commensurate with the desired grade. This is, of course, a very quick and simplified introduction to specifications grading. I include at the end of this paper several of my documents related to grading in PLS 206. For more information on “specs grading” itself, please see Linda Nilson’s 2015 book, considered the seminal treatment on the subject.
general purpose assignment that shows students ability to integrate the knowledge they’ve learned across the semester.

**Less content breadth.** When it became clear that students were still struggling to grasp basic legal concepts towards the end of the semester, I decided that it would be better to pare down the total number of case law areas covered in the semester. There was no sense in exposing students to additional cases and decisions if they were still struggling to grasp the very basics. In my current course, A-level students must receive passing scores on seven case law modules; this number decreases by one for each grade level, with D students needing to pass four such modules.9

**More metacognitive assignments.** I strongly believe that all students benefit from learning what cognitive and neuroscience research has shown about the learning process. Very few students do a good job of managing or taking ownership of their own learning process. While most students can muddle through just fine in a traditional face-to-face class, many end up struggling to stay on top of their work in an online class where expectations and course structure are different. I’ve added a number of assignments that put students in touch with current research about learning and which ask students to examine themselves, their goals, and their progress in the course.

**Fewer case briefs, redux.** I want to mention the subject of case briefs a second time for a second reason. Beyond the question of whether case briefs are an appropriate assignment for students in PLS 206, I found that the structure of an online class made case briefs less valuable overall. The pedagogical value of case briefs lies in: 1) the way they require students to develop the skill of closely reading Supreme Court opinions with an eye towards critically identifying the most

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9 In my online class, I use the term “module” to refer to the bundle of readings, videos, activities, and assignments that constitute the work for a single week in the course. In addition to the eight case law modules, there is an initial “Getting Started” module in the first week of the semester, and then two “foundation” modules that focus on reviewing the Constitution and the basics of the legal/judicial system. All modules are one week long, except Case Law Module 1, covering case law about the judiciary itself (e.g. *Marbury v. Madison*). This module is stretched over two weeks to give students a more gentle introduction to reading cases and because I have a number of special activities related to the topic—more than would fit within one week’s work.
the most important information about the case and decision; and 2) their use as a proxy for showing that a student “knows” the content of a particular case. As my first semester of PLS 206 progressed, I came to realize that an uncomfortably large number of students seemed to be plagiarizing the content of their briefs from various online sources. While I could have certainly approached this as an issue of academic integrity, I was more concerned about what it said about my students and their struggle with the basic learning objectives of the course. Reading a court opinion is an incredibly difficult task, even with the edited versions of the opinion found in their textbook. If students were resorting to copying and pasting summaries of the assigned cases, they were entirely missing out on part of what makes PLS 206 distinctive: direct contact with the Court’s decisions. As noted above, part of my response to this problem has been to reduce the number of briefs required—hopefully freeing students to spend more time wrestling with the material. A more productive response these problems, though, came from my taking a bit of my own advice. As instructional designers, we regularly counsel faculty to look beyond simply translating a face-to-face class into the online environment. Part of the secret for success is looking for the new opportunities that are afforded by being online. In my case I’ve actually replaced some of the traditional “write a brief” assignments with what I call “judge the brief” assignments. In these assignments I give students a web page containing a pre-written brief for a case. The catch is that information in this brief is either deliberately missing or incorrect. Students then use tools built into the webpage to highlight where they believe there are errors in the brief. Having used this format for several semesters now, I find it to be a much better way to meet the course’s learning objectives, at least as related

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10 While the Epstein and Walker textbook is, arguably, one of the best undergraduate Political Science textbooks on the subject, students regularly complain about the textbook itself. Part of this is no doubt a reaction to the difficulty they have with the material. I remain on the lookout, though, for a textbook that is aimed at a bit more general audience.

11 At the moment I do this using a “collective annotation” tool called Hypothes.is (http://hypothes.is). I am working on a newer version of this assignment which has the ability to randomly generate these mangled briefs and to automatically score students’ submissions.
to knowledge of Supreme Court case law. Because there’s no way for students to complete the assignment through copy and paste, they need to actually spend time reading and learning the Court’s opinion. These assignments also give me a good sense of which students haven’t done their reading or who are struggling with the material; such students are usually quick to identify the “simple” mistakes I put in the mangled brief but rarely try to identify any in the Court’s reasoning section.

**An Instructional Design Interlude**

The chance to teach PLS 206 online came with great responsibility as well—namely, I would need to practice what I preached and be willing to share what resulted. Even if this pressure is entirely self-imposed, I’ve taken it seriously. While my colleagues and I emphasize that technology is a means to an end, not an end in itself, I’ve tried to make sure my course demonstrates what’s possible with the tools available in 2018. In addition to the features within Blackboard Learn (our campus learning management system) I make use of additional web-based tools for special situations beyond what Blackboard can provide:

- As mentioned above, I use Hypothes.is (http://hypothes.is) for my “judge the brief” assignments. I also use it so that students can share a copy of a Supreme Court opinion, highlight passages where they have questions, and then hold a discussion about the text right next to the text itself—my replacement for how the students in a face-to-face class can open their textbooks and discuss a passage together.

- I use Trello (http://trello.com) and its bulletin-board style interface to conduct structured debates. It would be possible but awkward to do this with a traditional text-based discussion board. Trello allows students to easily see who is arguing for
which side of the debate, with the major concepts of the debate visible without needing to dive into nested threads.\footnote{12}

- And for the last two semesters I’ve been using FlipGrid (http://www.flipgrid.com) to host video-based discussions. FlipGrid provides an easy-to-use interface that allows students to record short (e.g. ninety second) videos within their web browser. While the same thing could be accomplished with purely text-based discussion, both I and my students have reported that the addition of video enhances the sense of community within the course.

More fundamental than any particular technology, I also feel a pressure to ensure that my online courses are faithful to the pedagogical concepts my colleagues and I talk about in our online and hybrid certification workshop. Many faculty still receive minimal training in how to teach, so our quick introduction to the subject is the first time many faculty have heard anything about pedagogy. Given the short nature of the workshop, we focus on two pedagogical topics with faculty.

First, we introduce them to the concept Wiggins and McTighe’s “understanding by design,” which is often better known as “backward design.” An approach to overall course and curricular design, this method often strikes faculty as being “backwards”—at least compared to how they’ve normally designed a course. In understanding by design, the process of designing a course begins with identifying the learning outcomes or objectives that a successful student should have met at the end of the semester.\footnote{13} Designing the course is then a process of moving “backward”

\footnote{12 For those curious about how I use Trello in this regard, I point to the following YouTube videos:  
1) https://youtu.be/gbfqVMOgd0  
2) https://youtu.be/r4lNUeQGFc  
3) https://youtu.be/ESXCSiDNwNRo  
4) https://youtu.be/v7hnK2iVhA  
\footnote{13 Writing learning objectives is itself a fine art that requires a great deal of practice. For faculty who have never written learning objectives, we provide a brief introduction to the taxonomy/hierarchy developed by Benjamin Bloom and colleagues, as revised by Anderson and Krathwohl.}
from those objectives. Faculty next design or select assessment mechanisms that will allow them to know that students are achieving the desired outcomes. Finally, faculty choose the content, delivery methods, and learning experiences that will provide students what they need to demonstrate their mastery of content on the course assessments. I often compare course objectives to the destination one takes on a trip (e.g. Grandma’s house), assessments to the landmarks that let you know you’re getting close to your destination (e.g. the river, the woods), and the content of the course to the vehicle you travel in.

Understanding by design provides a clear and manageable process for putting together a hybrid or online class. It does not, however, say anything about what should be covered in such a course. To that end we also introduce faculty to the “Community of Inquiry” (aka CoI), a model/framework that draws upon a long history of educational research stretching back to John Dewey (Garrison, Anderson, and Archer 2000). The central focus of the Community of Inquiry model is the claim that the most worthwhile educational experiences take place in an environment that is characterized by high levels of three factors: cognitive presence, social presence, and teaching presence.¹⁴

Cognitive and social presence are fairly easy to explain. When a course is designed to emphasize cognitive presence, learners have ample opportunities to engage with the content of the course, conduct critical reflection, and integrate the material in a personally meaningful way. Social presence works to support and promote cognitive presence by helping learners feel like they

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¹⁴ Garrison, Anderson, Archer, and the others who represent the CoI model conducted their research to look specifically at online education—which they referred to as “computer-mediated communication.” Nothing in their framework, though, prevents the concepts from being applied to face-to-face instruction as well.
belong to an open, trusting community that values their presence and where all learners work together to create knowledge and understanding.\textsuperscript{15}

Perhaps the largest conceptual struggle that faculty have in our online and hybrid certification workshop is the fact that they won’t be physically present with their students. Removing most or potentially all of that contact time throws many faculty for a loop. It also opens up an excellent opportunity to discuss the third component of the Community of Inquiry model, which is teaching or instructor presence:

“the design, facilitation, and direction of cognitive and social processes for the purpose of realizing personally meaningful and educationally worthwhile learning outcomes. Teaching presence begins before the course commences as the teacher, acting as instructional designer, plans and prepares the course of studies, and it continues during the course, as the instructor facilitates the discourse and provides direct instruction when required. Through adequate teaching presence, formal learning that facilitates personally relevant and educationally defined outcomes is achieved.” (Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, and Archer 2001, 5)

Time spent at the front of the classroom may seem the very definition of the instructor’s “presence,” but the Community of Inquiry emphasizes that physical visibility is only the tip of the iceberg. Almost every behavior or action a faculty member takes in the context of a course—from the curricular choices made in selecting a textbook or writing assignments, down to the type of feedback provided on submitted work—embodies a kind of instructional presence.\textsuperscript{16} And when

\textsuperscript{15} These general statements can take a lot of different practical forms in an actual course. Cognitive presence involves: offering students multiple different activities related to learning course content; encouraging students to go beyond rote memorization and regurgitation; the use of active learning and scaffolded assignments; self-testing and practice assignments; and more. Social presence is encouraged by practices that allow learners to present themselves authentically to other learners, such as the use of learner profiles, introductory videos, and discussion fora where students with each other apart from course content.

\textsuperscript{16} Interestingly, the fact that teaching presence is so easily tied to a long list of instructional activities has made it difficult for Community of Inquiry scholars to define it quite as precisely as the other two presences (Garrison, Anderson, Archer 2010, 7).
these various forms of presence are lacking, what results is the worst kind of online education, the kind easily and quite appropriately criticized in the media (c.f. Morris 2018).\footnote{Morris’ blog post was published as I was finishing this paper, and captures the problem well. “In the almost 20 years I’ve been working in digital learning and instructional design, I have seen overwhelmingly that students who prefer to learn online do so because it’s ‘easier, ‘more convenient,’ while at the same time agreeing that online learning feels like ticking boxes for a grade (this at both the undergraduate and graduate level). Teachers I’ve spoken with have said that online courses can ‘run themselves,’ and that students get higher grades in online courses because it’s easier to game the system when no one’s watching” (Morris 2018).}

**Mind the Gap: Teaching Presence Reconsidered**

Despite the literature’s “big picture” perspective about teaching presence, I’ve started to see an imbalance in the advice offered to faculty about this aspect of the Community of Inquiry. A lot of the practical advice that my colleagues and I offer boils down to the strategic use of video, such as the creation of personal welcome videos or course tours that introduce students to the structure and content of a course. To be fair, it’s hard to overemphasize the use of video. On the one hand, video hardware and software are no longer beyond the reach of most faculty, either in terms of financial cost or training time. On the other hand, research is showing clear benefits to the use of video—especially on students’ affective response to their courses (Szeto 2015; Borup, West, and Graham 2012; Clark, Strudler, and Grove 2015).

Video may be the particular tool of choice, but I believe it’s actually just a symptom of a broader tendency to focus on teaching presence as a question of “immediacy” (Gorham 1988; Griffiths and Graham 2010; Baker 2010). This is understandable. If an online class can be defined by a loss of the most basic form of immediacy—face-to-face contact in the classroom—it makes sense to use technology in ways that shrink the temporal and emotional distance separating faculty and students.
Immediacy, however, is only part of what teaching presence entails. In the case of improving my own PLS 206, I’ve come to believe that my students will be best served by working to bridge a different gap: the knowledge and experience gap between myself as a subject matter expert and my students, who are subject matter novices. A quick observer might observe that at its most basic level, education in general is aimed at addressing this gap—and they would be correct. However, I believe that a lot of what happens in education takes place based on the presumption and not the reality of this novice/expert gap. When we choose textbooks or develop assessments, we act on the implicit presumption that we have an expert-level of knowledge. When we present content in lectures or engage in discussion with students, the presumption is that we do so from the perspective of an expert.

A careful reading of Community of Inquiry research shows that expertise is supposed to be more than a passive fact:

“The students and the teacher have expectations of the teacher communicating content knowledge that is enhanced by the teacher’s personal interest, excitement and in-depth understanding of the content…. Although many authors recommend a ‘guide on the side’ approach…this type of laissez faire approach misinterprets a fundamental element… A key feature… is the adult, the expert or the more skilled peer who scaffolds a novice’s learning” (Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, and Archer 2001, 8)

A passive acceptance of instructor expertise leads faculty to create engaging and informative instructional videos—and to possibly create multiple videos if the first ones didn’t get their point across. That falls far short, however, of the real scope of the “cognitive apprenticeship” and scaffolding that Anderson and his colleagues discuss. Students and faculty differ on more than just factual “domain knowledge,” and acquiring a body of facts by itself doesn’t make one an expert. Experts also have heuristic strategies that allow them to make sense of knowledge and concepts in their field, metacognitive control strategies that streamline and focus the task of problem solving,
and learning strategies that help them complete gaps in their own knowledge (Ramdass 2012; Collins, Brown, and Holum 1991).

What does it look like when a course is designed to emphasize cognitive apprenticeship? The literature suggests six strategies, of which I’ll explain four. First, the content expert engages in modeling, showing novices how they “do” the work of their field. Second, the experts provide feedback to novices as they do try to perform like experts. Third, work and expectations are kept proportional to the novice’s skill and knowledge level, scaffolding the learning experience. Finally, learners are expected to be explicit about articulating their own thinking and knowledge.¹⁸

**Online Tools for Interactive Learning Experiences**

My initial attempts at seriously bridging the novice/expert gap have involved the use of two different web-based tools. Both tools are free, both for the instructors who use them to create content and for students who then view that content. Admittedly, neither is as easy to use as a FlipGrid or Hypothes.is. Both, however, allow me to design interactive learning experiences that go beyond the static delivery of content I can provide in an instructional video.

Oppia (http://oppia.org) began as a Google engineer’s side project and has evolved into an open source tool that lets faculty lead students through an interactive dialog. My PLS 206 course currently features two Oppia “explorations.” The first walks students through the Supreme Court’s 2015 decision from *Zivotofsky v. Kerry*. After presenting specific portions of the opinion, I ask students to interpret the types of arguments Justice Kennedy’s majority opinion makes in light of Philip Bobbitt’s typology of constitutional arguments. Students frequently struggle at understanding the differences between the argument types, and by using an interactive format I can provide specific

¹⁸ The fifth and sixth strategies, respectively, are encouraging learners to reflect on their progress and then offering them the opportunity to explore in directions of their own interest.
feedback for wrong answers and can illustrate what I as a subject matter expert think through when reading a Court opinion. As with everything, of course, there are other ways I could accomplish the same task. I have had faculty suggest that I could keep this activity within Blackboard by using a quiz or test with detailed feedback for each question. While technically true, there are a number of things about Oppia that go beyond Blackboard’s capabilities. In particular, Oppia explorations can have complex branching pathways, with any given answer leading students to additional instruction and questions; quiz questions in Blackboard only offer feedback for the correct answer and for all incorrect answers together. Oppia explorations also have the benefit of appearing to students as learning activities, designed to provide formative feedback on student progress in a failure-tolerant environment. Even with adequate assurances, students have a hard time not interpreting a Blackboard quiz as anything other than a grade-threatening summative assessment.

A second Oppia activity is tied to understanding the factors that lead the Court to grant certiorari. With experience, the basics of cue theory aren’t hard to understand. Giving novice learners that experience, though, is the challenge. The Oppia exploration in question presents students a series of hypothetical court cases and asks them to predict how likely the Court would be to grant certiorari in the case. Targeted feedback gives me the opportunity to explain why the Court overlooks some cues, like frivolous claims of violated free speech rights, and focuses on the importance of other cues like disagreement among circuit courts.

The second tool that I’ve used to create interactive learning experiences is Twine (http://twinery.org). Unlike Oppia, which was designed specifically for education, Twine is a tool for creating interactive, nonlinear stories—aka “choose your own adventures” stories. As a tool, Twine is far more complicated to use, with fairly powerful features hidden behind a minimal and somewhat off-putting user interface. Using Twine I’ve created a “Read Together” activity that walks students through the Court’s opinion in *Hammer v. Dagenhart*, asking them factual questions
about the case and the Court’s commerce clause jurisprudence. Underneath that, the real purpose of the activity is to show students how an expert reads a Supreme Court opinion, providing specific glimpses inside my thought process.\textsuperscript{19}

**Conclusion and Next Steps**

Unfortunately it’s still very early in my use of these tools. Initial feedback from students is optimistic but entirely anecdotal, and given my limited teaching schedule I have yet to devise a good empirical study to measure how these learning experiences fare compared with more traditional instructional methods. From my perspective they do a good job replicating cognitive scaffolding and bridging the gap between students and content which I’ve struggled with in PLS 206 from the beginning. Without actual data, though, it’s hard to provide anything more than a gut feeling about what constitutes best practices.

My long term goal is to create more and more such activities. The main obstacle to my doing so is time. There’s nothing particularly complicated or time intensive about using Twine or Oppia. But they’re also not instructional silver bullets. Each tool, each learning experience built with them, is valuable only to the extent that it represents a concerted and detailed effort to capture expert-level knowledge. This entails anticipating student misunderstandings and misperceptions as well as addressing while providing the appropriate corrective. Complicating the whole effort is the painful irony that becoming an expert in a given subject makes it tangibly more difficult to assume the perspective of a novice. Taking that step backwards, however, is a critical component of helping students take their own steps forward towards expertise.

\textsuperscript{19} One of the things that students struggle with most when it comes to reading Court opinions is the fact that justices move very quickly and very fluidly through multiple modes of discourse—narrating the background of the case, discussing legislative or procedural history, describing the arguments made by the litigants, providing a rationale for the judgment of the Court, and addressing criticisms of that judgment. In one particular passage of the *Hammer v. Dagenhart* activity, I use different colors to highlight keywords that serve as transition points between different types of discourse.
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