

Political Literacy and Communication Module

Dr. Henning and Erin McKibbin

Module length: 2 weeks or 4 class periods

Guiding Question

How do the ways we speak about politics reveal our biases and further/hinder change, and how can we leverage language to create effective compromise and progress?

Course Context

The idea behind this module arose while I was with my family in Michigan during the summer of 2023. I realized that, when we talked about politics or current news, there was a disconnect in the language we used: going into my senior year of a Political Science program, I was using terms and phrases I learned from my courses, which tended to be jargon-y and complicated. This, in turn, put my relatives on the defensive, as it felt like I was talking down to them or that I knew better because of the way I spoke. In this module, students will observe a Portland City Council meeting in order to observe the way local politicians interact with each other and the ways that productive dialogue can create progress or combative speech can hinder it. Then, through clips of politicians and news headlines, the class will discuss the ways we speak about politics and law in our modern society, and how word choice can create positive or negative connotations in the media. Finally, to demonstrate the skills learned in the previous classes, students will participate in a guided conversation/debate in which they will utilize the language skills they've been discussing and, subsequently, write a short reflection of how it went.

Course Objectives

1. Learn about the governmental structure in Portland and engage with the community by attending a Portland City Council meeting
2. Be able to identify productive and reductive forms of speech in political settings
3. Analyze speeches and headlines to identify how connotations and internal biases affect word choice
4. Participate in a group discussion with a common goal, emphasizing use of compromise and productive action

Assignments

Students will be evaluated in the form of three assignments, two of which will be short reflection papers:

1. The first will be a 1-2 page reflection on the Portland City Council meeting that the student either attended or watched virtually through the Portland City Council’s archive. To receive a good grade, the student must reference specific moments from the meeting where either communication was good and furthered the group’s agenda, or bad communication created misunderstandings and hindered progress. The aim of this piece is to get the class thinking about how political leaders talk to each other, and how this is either similar or dissimilar from how the student talks in their own life.
2. The second is an in-class group assignment. Students will, in small groups, utilize skills discussed in the first half of the module to identify which word(s) in a headline or speech have positive or negative connotations and change the meaning of the overall headline. If the student is successful, they will be empowered to think more critically about the biases used when reporting news, as well as have cooperated with a group effectively.
3. A final reflection paper will be assigned at the conclusion of the module. The student will be able to use this opportunity to discuss how the final conversation went, as well as what they thought worked and what didn’t. How was their discussion similar to the Portland City Council Meeting? How was it different? Was it easier or more difficult than the student initially anticipated? This should be 2-3 pages in length and should be an opportunity to reflect, synthesize and for the student to demonstrate what they have learned and what they will take away from the module upon its completion.

Module Outline

	Mastery Q’s	Agenda	Assignments and Readings
Class 1	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What is the Portland City Council? 2. When are Portland City Council 	<p>Students will learn about the structure of the Portland City Council and the changes it has recently undergone. In addition, they will learn when these meetings are and how to access</p>	<p>First reflection paper assigned, to be completed after students have a chance to attend a City Council Meeting. The class should only need about a week to complete this.</p>

	meetings?	them and the City Council's archive of past meetings	
Class 2	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Are news headlines always unbiased? 2. How can charged language affect how progress is made? 3. How do politicians use language to get what they want? 	<p>Clips of political and/or persuasive speeches, as well as news headlines and campaign posters, will be used to demonstrate how language can be a powerful tool for progress and persuasion. Students should be able to identify subliminal opinions and underlying motivations, as well as gain a more critical understanding of media and communications' roles in politics.</p>	<p>Reading: Graber, Doris Appel, Denis McQuail, and Pippa Norris, eds. The politics of news: The news of politics. Washington, DC: CQ press, 1998. http://ereserve.library.utah.edu/Annual/COMM/7510/Coe/unmask.pdf</p>
Class 3	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How do we ensure that we are critical and thoughtful consumers of media? 2. How can bias in media be harmful? 	<p>The class will be divided into small groups of 2-4 people, each of which has the task of completing a graded worksheet/informal quiz. They will be asked to work together in a productive and thoughtful way to identify media and politician biases, as well as short-answer questions about earlier readings that intend to get the student thinking about the end goal and how the different threads in the module will work together.</p>	<p>In-class graded worksheet</p>
Class 4	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How can we use 	<p>Students will be asked to create</p>	<p>Second reflection paper, due one</p>

	<p>language to create forward progress and meet each other as equals?</p> <p>2. How must politicians balance their individual motivations and the good of the group/their constituencies?</p>	<p>a comprehensive set of policy recommendations for Portland to implement surrounding one of the following themes: sustainability, homelessness, racial equity, or education. This package of recommendations must be devised and agreed upon in large group discussions where members have different assigned roles (and, thus, contradictory priorities).</p>	<p>week after conversation</p>
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