

Evidence of Effectiveness, POL 307: Constitutional Law
II: Civil Rights & Liberties, Summer 2019

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Achievement of Course Goals

The syllabus for my Constitutional Law II course lays out five broad goals:

1. An ability to trace noteworthy constitutional arguments and the cases that shaped them
2. Critical assessment of these legal, political, and social arguments
3. Effective and clear communication of these assessments
4. Understanding of the intricacies of important Supreme Court cases and rulings
5. Recognition of the political influences and social implications of rights and liberties holdings

In an effort to determine if students meet these goals, I used a goals survey to assess pre- and post-course achievement of these goals. For instance, a student was asked how much she agreed, on a 5-point, strongly disagree to strongly agree scale, with items such as “I am able to apply legal precedent.” Students were asked a total of 10 items designed to tap various aspects of the course goals. A summary of both pre- and post-course responses can be found in Figure 1. Along the vertical axis is each survey item. Triangular plotting symbols represent the average response (from 1-5) on the pre-course goals survey, and circular symbols the post-course goals survey; horizontal lines are 95% confidence intervals around those values. Asterisks along the y-axis represent categories for which the post-course response average was higher than the pre-course average to a statistically significant degree (at the $p < 0.05$ level).

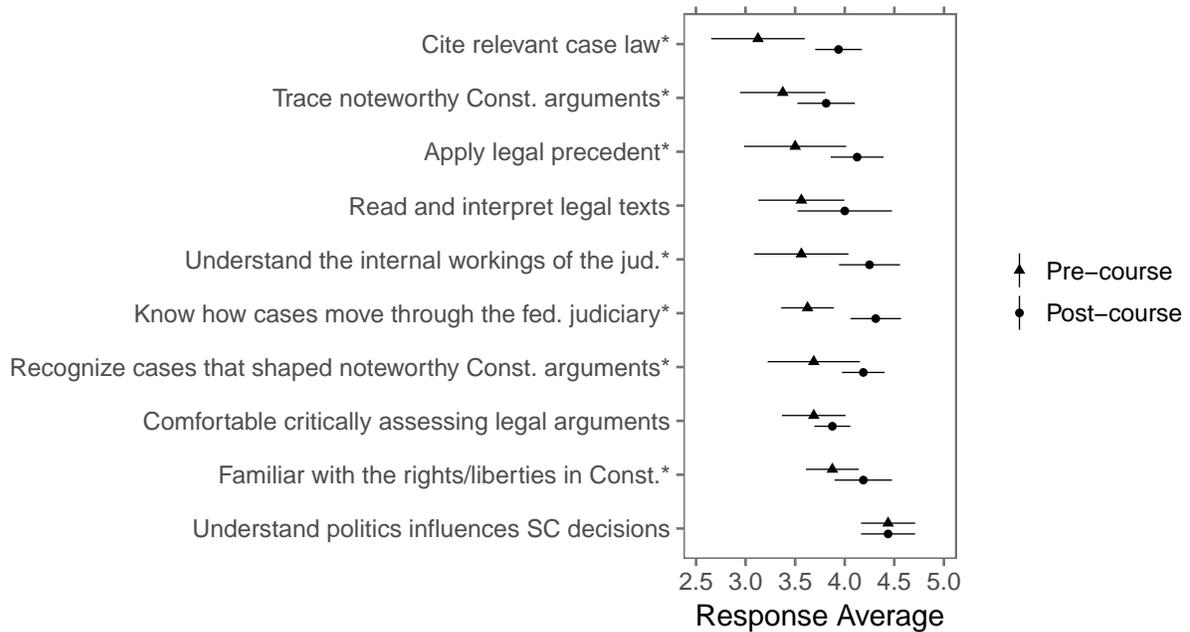


Figure 1: Average response to course learning goals, by pre- and post-course.

As can be seen, for 7 of the 10 items, students assess their skills to be higher after the course than before it. For two of those items, students were already relatively comfortable with their base ability, hence no increases. Overall, my instruction appears to be meeting the fundamental course goals. Nevertheless, quantifying goal achievement allows me to retool the course to focus on those goals that aren't so readily being met. For instance, I will devote more focus to teaching students to read and interpret legal texts in future iterations of this course.

Quantifying Learning

Beyond achieving course learning goals, it is also worthwhile to assess specific-learning. While exams are fruitful, they cannot distinguish between preexisting knowledge and newly

attained knowledge. So, I asked students 37 specific knowledge questions both before and after the course to determine how much they learned. Each was a true or false question, though students were able to hedge their bets. More specifically, the choice set was “definitely false,” “probably false,” “probably true,” and “definitely true.” Consider a question for which the correct response was true; a student would receive 0 points for responding “definitely false,” 1 point for “probably false,” 2 for “probably true,” and 3 for “definitely true.” This allows for students to still gain points for questions on which they are not totally certain, without having to guess.

Figure 2 displays the results of both the pre- and post-course assessments. Bar height indicates points scored relative to the maximum possible score (i.e., a student’s score divided by 111); horizontal bars are 95% confidence intervals around those percentages. As can be seen, students’ course specific knowledge was much higher in the post-course assessment than in the pre-course assessment.¹ In other words, students appear to have learned material in the course, increasing their knowledge by around 14%.

¹Note that, while it appears students “failed the exam,” as the average score is around 61%, this is a function of the scoring system.

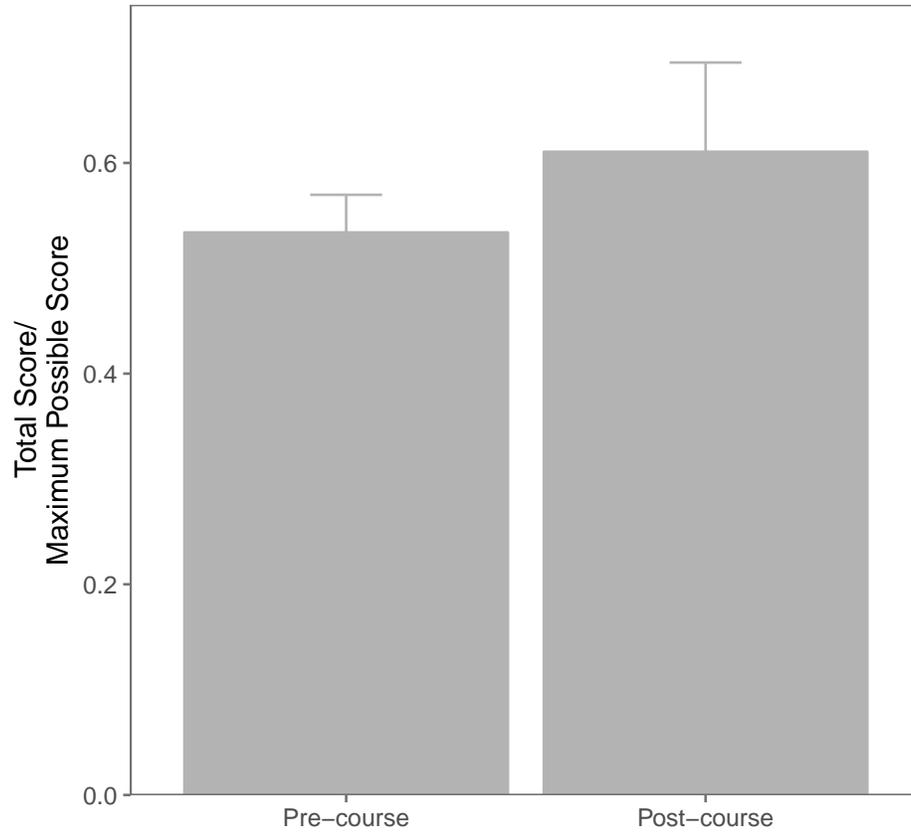


Figure 2: Pre- and post-course assessments of specific knowledge.