

Evidence of Effectiveness, POL 307: Constitutional Law
II: Civil Rights & Liberties, Summer 2020

Instructor: Miles T. Armaly

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. The bluish hue represents the average response (from 1-5) on the pre-course goals survey, and reddish hue 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).

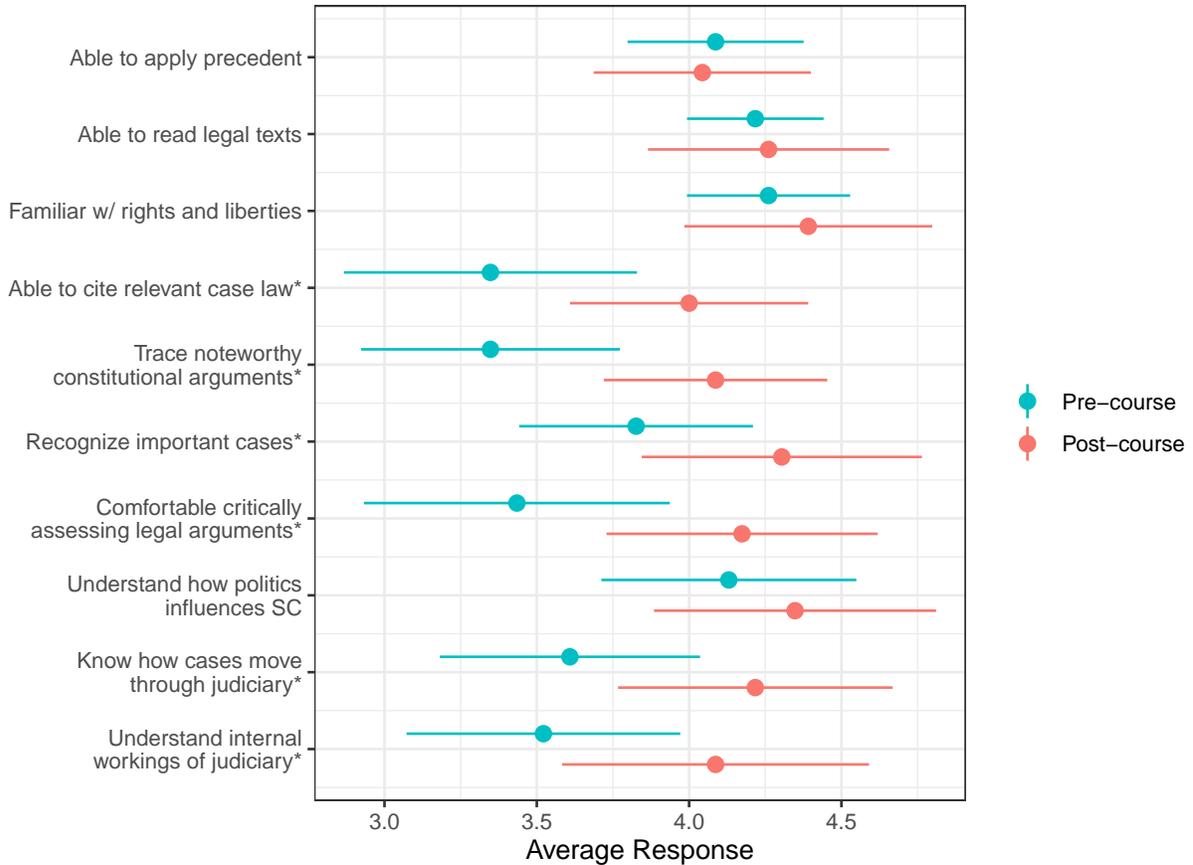


Figure 1: Average response to course learning goals, by pre- and post-course.

As can be seen, for 6 of the 10 items, students assess their skills to be higher after the course than before it. For the remaining 4 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 1 points for responding “definitely false,” 2 point for “probably false,” 3 for “probably true,” and 4 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 difference in the average response from pre- to post-course, and horizontal bars indicate 95% confidence intervals around the averages.¹ Of the 30 items included in the figure, students demonstrated significant improvement in learning in 23 of them. Overall (the topmost plotting point) demonstrates a significant increase in overall learning. These results indicate students have substantially increased their specific learning throughout the course.

¹Figure 2 only includes items which provided sufficient discrimination according to a item response theory graded response model.

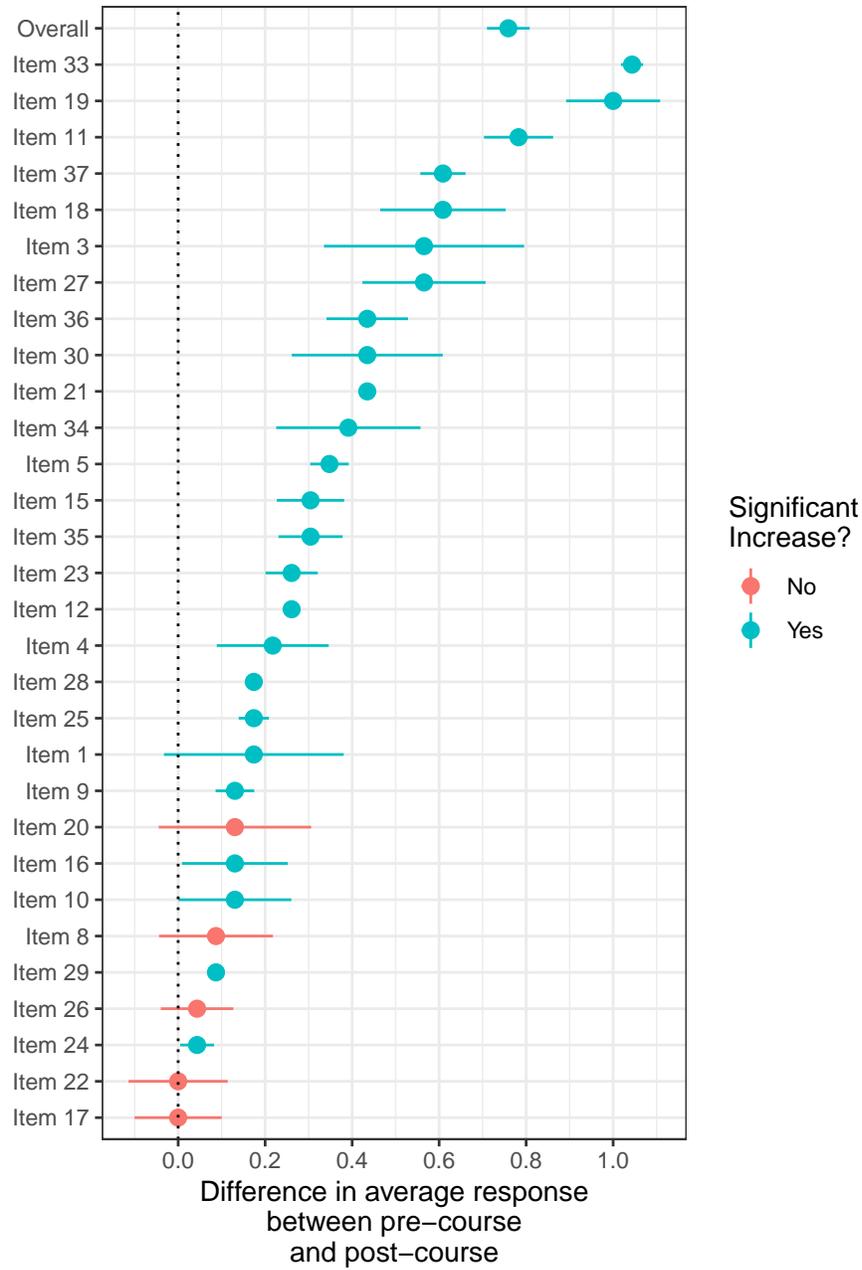


Figure 2: Pre- and post-course assessments of specific knowledge.