

Broad Inclusion, Deep Engagement: Teaching with Critical Content and AI

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Abstract: This paper explores the redesign of the Introduction to U.S. Politics and Government course at Northern Virginia Community College (NOVA) and its asynchronous delivery wing, NOVA Online. The primary goal was to create an inclusive, engaging, and accessible learning environment by integrating active learning strategies, open educational resources (OER), and artificial intelligence (AI)-driven tools to enhance critical thinking and engagement. At first glance, there may appear to be a disconnect between adopting an AI-driven discussion tool like Packback in a course that centers on a textbook critical of entrenched power structures. However, this intersection highlights the fundamental mission of community colleges: meeting students where they are while also challenging them to think critically in spaces they may not expect. AI-assisted tools, when used thoughtfully, do not replace human engagement but rather scaffold the learning process, helping students refine their analytical skills and deepen their understanding of political systems.

Faculty and Student User Experience

This paper will explore the ways in which the redesign of the U.S. Government and Politics course, centered around *Attenuated Democracy*, fosters a more engaged and critically aware student body. Through a synthesis of faculty reviews, pedagogical research, and practical course design strategies, it will provide insights into how OER texts and digital discussion tools can collectively enhance the teaching and learning of political science at the community college level.

The redesigned course centers on David Hubert's *Attenuated Democracy: A Critical Introduction to U.S. Government and Politics*, an OER textbook that critiques systemic power imbalances in American democracy. Unlike conventional textbooks that take a celebratory stance toward U.S. governance, *Attenuated Democracy* foregrounds

structural inequalities and calls for increased civic participation to counteract elite control.

Community college faculty have praised the text for making government education relevant and empowering students to take action. One review noted that *Attenuated Democracy* “addresses the built-in problems of democracy in the U.S., and it encourages students to take action based on the knowledge they are deriving from the text and the course.” To complement this critical approach, the course integrates Packback as a discussion platform that promotes analytical reasoning, civic engagement, and interrogation of political power structures. Both *Attenuated Democracy* and Packback encourage students to critically assess American governance while practicing democratic deliberation in their learning.

Packback as a company has existed largely since 2014 and its appearance on the hit television reality show *Shark Tank*, but it has shifted its main business model in that time from textbook rental to AI support for student writing and engagement¹.

The core of Packback’s pedagogical approach is rooted in *Self-Determination Theory*, which emphasizes that students are more likely to engage in learning when they feel autonomy, competence, and relevance in their coursework. Through its *Discussion Assignments*, students generate discussion posts and receive real-time AI feedback, which improves the depth and clarity of their writing. Faculty users such as Dr. Amy Cruz of the University of North Alabama and Dr. Katie Stoddard of Texas A&M University use Packback to guide students toward application-based inquiry rather than rote memorization. Stoddard, for instance, replaced reading quizzes with open-ended

Packback discussions, allowing students to connect textbook content to real-world environmental issues (Packback Webinar, 2024).

In addition to discussion-based learning, Packback's Writing Assignments supports long-form writing by providing AI-powered writing feedback before submission. This feature has proven particularly useful in large-enrollment courses, where grading time is a major constraint. Packback Writing Assignments allow students to refine their writing structure, argumentation, and citation practices, ensuring a level playing field for students with varying educational backgrounds (Packback Webinar, 2024).

The success of Packback extends beyond higher education. Research on AI-driven discussion platforms indicates that tools like Packback help students develop critical thinking and writing skills, increase engagement, and improve academic performance (Lantz, Liu, and Basnyat, 2022). Faculty who have implemented both Packback Discussion Assignments and Writing Assignments in their courses find that students are more willing to express original ideas, use high-quality sources, and engage with course material beyond the classroom setting. The integration of AI feedback reduces grading time for instructors while providing personalized coaching for students, making Packback a valuable tool for fostering inquiry-based learning in both K-12 and higher education.

The course is organized into six thematic modules based on essential questions borrowed from the best practices of journalism²: Who, What, When, Where, Why, and How. These themes explore, respectively: key players in American government, government actions and societal implications, historical evolution of political

institutions, federalism, motivations behind government operations, and pathways for political participation and advocacy. This modular approach aligns with chapters from David Hubert's "Attenuated Democracy: A Critical Introduction to U.S. Government and Politics," providing a cohesive learning framework and seamless integration of activities and assignments.

Packback, in particular, serves as more than just a discussion forum—it is a platform that fosters inquiry-based learning. By prompting students to ask open-ended questions and engage with each other's ideas, it facilitates a space where critical perspectives emerge organically. While *Attenuated Democracy* critiques undemocratic structures, Packback encourages students to practice democracy in their own learning, exchanging ideas, debating viewpoints, and refining arguments through structured discourse.

A significant consideration during the course redesign was ensuring inclusivity and flexibility. The asynchronous format accommodates students with varied schedules, including those balancing work, family, and education. Integrating OER materials eliminates cost barriers, while AI-driven tools like Packback provide equitable access to writing and analytical support, funded by a contract between Packback and the institution that guarantees the full benefits of the platform at no cost to the student. In the pilot iteration of the course, simulations were carefully designed to reflect real-world political challenges. Each simulation ties directly to a module's theme, encouraging students to connect theoretical knowledge with practical applications. By placing students in roles such as legislators or journalists, these exercises cultivate empathy and a deeper understanding of diverse perspectives. The decision to adopt somewhat of an

Ungrading approach stems from research highlighting the benefits of intrinsic motivation. Students are encouraged to focus on their learning journey rather than solely on grades.

To combat misinformation, the course emphasizes information literacy. Students learn to evaluate credible sources such as "PBS NewsHour" and "OpenSecrets.org." Assignments connect course concepts to current events, fostering analytical skills and real-world application. Students are only permitted to derive information for their Discussion Assignments and Writing Assignments from a finite array of sources, including the textbook, instructor's lectures and supplementary content, and the two websites mentioned above. For instance, a module on campaign finance might involve analyzing Federal Election Commission data to explore the influence of money in politics. These activities empower students to navigate complex information landscapes confidently. A student shared, "Learning to evaluate sources has been one of the most valuable skills I've gained from this course. It's helped me become more critical of the information I consume daily."

This course redesign is ultimately about creating learning opportunities in unexpected places. By pairing a text that critiques social power structures with a digital tool that promotes critical engagement, we position students to not only understand the flaws in American democracy but also to develop the skills needed to actively participate in its improvement.

The integration of AI-powered tools like Packback represents a forward-thinking approach to education. By providing real-time feedback, these tools support students in developing critical writing and analytical skills. Packback's emphasis on curiosity and

engagement aligns with the course's goal of fostering active citizenship. Additionally, the modular structure facilitates continuous updates to course content. As political dynamics evolve, instructors can integrate current events and new case studies, ensuring the material remains relevant and engaging.

Challenges in Political Science Education

Political science education faces numerous challenges, including polarization, misinformation, and skepticism toward political science's relevance. Many students enter introductory courses believing they already understand the U.S. government or doubting its practical application. This redesign aimed to foster political literacy by making the course directly relevant to students' experiences.

One persistent challenge in introductory American Government courses is fostering meaningful discussions. Many students approach discussion boards with a transactional mindset, offering perfunctory responses rather than engaging in substantive dialogue. In introductory U.S. government courses, students also bring partisan expectations, assuming discussions will become ideological conflicts rather than critical inquiries. Additionally, traditional discussion prompts may fail to capture what students find compelling about political science.

Packback helps transcend these difficulties by encouraging students to take ownership of their learning. Instead of responding to static prompts, students generate their own questions, shifting the focus from passive response to active inquiry. This

approach reduces generic responses and promotes substantive dialogue by requiring students to craft questions that meet a “curiosity” threshold. Moreover, by emphasizing open-ended inquiry rather than ideological debate, Packback helps mitigate the adversarial tendencies that often emerge in political discussions.

Packback stands out in its ability to cultivate the best qualities in students: teaching one another, learning collaboratively, and connecting classroom concepts to current events and broader online discussions. Its design fosters meaningful back-and-forth dialogue among classmates, providing a dynamic learning experience that extends far beyond traditional methods. One of the unique features we have particularly appreciated is the Discussion Assignments Leaderboard, which encourages a friendly sense of competition among students, albeit anonymously. Students genuinely enjoy tracking their performance and comparing their progress with their peers, adding an element of engagement that feels natural and motivating.

Another notable feature is Packback’s “Writing Assignment” functionality (formerly called “Deep Dives”), which acts as a built-in writing coach for students. This tool shifts the focus from punitive corrections to proactive guidance. Students receive constructive advice on their work before submission, alleviating the anxiety of public critique and fostering a sense of confidence in their ideas. The result is writing that reflects their best effort, allowing their instructor to focus on the substance of their content and ideas rather than serving as a grammar or language specialist, which not every instructor is.

Dr. Kirsch has some of his own sentiments to share about the platform:

“Packback has not only enhanced the quality of student work but has also fundamentally

improved the teaching and learning experience in all of my courses, which now allocate over half of the course credit to activities on this platform. The positive impact of Packback on student engagement, dialogue, and overall learning outcomes cannot be overstated. It has become an integral part of my teaching practice, and I am thrilled that more educators are adopting this tool to enrich their classrooms.

“I do not mean to view all AI integration with rose-colored glasses. Recently, I guest-lectured in a Humanities-coded course at my institution, where the cohort of students read, write, and discuss materials related to the concepts of technology and democracy. During my lecture and discussion, the students and I engaged in a thought-provoking discussion on the intersection of AI and society. Drawing from materials like Harper’s Magazine’s recent “Resisting Artificial Intelligence” issue and real-world case studies, students grappled with questions about privacy, creativity, and the societal impacts of automation. We discussed the historical roots of AI through George Boole’s logical systems, which laid the groundwork for electronic circuits. Students explored how these foundations evolved, noting Boole’s descendant, Geoffrey Hinton, who later became a leading AI developer. Hinton’s warnings about the rapid pace of AI development spurred debates on ethical concerns, including privacy invasion, job displacement, and the erosion of human creativity. Students also examined local impacts, such as the proliferation of data centers in Northern Virginia. These discussions tied AI to broader political and economic implications, emphasizing its role in shaping local governance and infrastructure. In reflective posts, students expressed concerns about the “blandness” AI might bring to art and communication, citing examples from Hollywood’s reliance on formulaic scripts to the homogenization of

creative expression. They also debated the ethical use of AI in journalism and political campaigns, echoing themes of authenticity and accountability. Such conversations are vital to move clear-eyed into this new world of automated work. In order to maintain meaningful learning opportunities that will equip students not only with the skills necessary to work and live, students must also develop the independent critical-thinking capacity necessary to address the shortcomings of technology as it relates to their material interests. When working with AI systems, that human capacity is often the first step in a thoughtful engagement as a citizen.”

Simulations as a Teaching Tool

The course features simulations linked to the modules, placing students in realistic political scenarios such as legislative debates or media briefings. Students assume roles like legislators or journalists, producing deliverables such as video presentations or written analyses. These simulations develop skills in public speaking, negotiation, and critical decision-making. For example, a healthcare reform simulation might require students to advocate for or against policy proposals, fostering an understanding of diverse perspectives and policymaking implications. In response to earlier feedback, simulations are now integrated into the final module’s Packback experience rather than as a separate series of assignments within the LMS across the modules of the course. This allows for a more balanced course design and provides students with the opportunity to apply their cumulative knowledge in a comprehensive exercise. Students have expressed appreciation for the engaging nature of these simulations. A student noted, "The simulation on legislative debates helped me

understand the complexities of policymaking and gave me a chance to see things from multiple perspectives. It was both challenging and rewarding."

Packback also enables instructors to tap into student curiosity. Because students pose their own questions, faculty can identify emerging themes and expand upon them in synchronous or asynchronous settings. This enhances engagement by ensuring discussions are student-driven rather than instructor-dictated. Packback fosters a more dynamic learning environment, transforming discussions from a perfunctory requirement into an intellectual exercise that encourages critical thinking and meaningful interaction.

Bridging Organic Teaching and Digital Pedagogy

Kirsch's Professional Experience Influences the Choices Made in This Course:

"Throughout my career, I have navigated the tension between the irreplaceable value of human interaction in teaching and the strategic use of digital tools to maximize student engagement. My time at Aplia, a leading digital learning platform in the early 2000s, shaped my understanding of this balance. When I joined Aplia in 2009, internal research revealed that students in American Government courses spent a median of zero minutes per week completing homework outside of class. This statistic underscored a critical engagement problem. Aplia sought to address this by providing interactive problem sets and real-time feedback, increasing student participation in structured assignments.

"However, my experience teaching institutions such as state universities and community colleges highlighted the necessity of organic, in-person instruction that met students where they were. Community college students often arrive with diverse

backgrounds, varying academic preparation, and significant life responsibilities. Engagement was most effective when students saw coursework as meaningful intellectual challenges rather than obligations. This realization reinforced the importance of blending structured digital support with moments of authentic exploration.

In 2022—before the launch of ChatGPT—I independently sought out Packback, intrigued by its potential to facilitate inquiry-based discussions. A former Aplia executive had transitioned to Packback, and recognizing his expertise, I reached out to him for insights. His connection to Packback’s team led to a demonstration that immediately convinced me of its value. Unlike traditional discussion boards, Packback encouraged students to generate their own questions, engage with peers, and refine their arguments through structured feedback. This approach synthesized lessons from Aplia’s structured engagement and Berkshire’s student-centered pedagogy, offering a tool that aligned with my evolving teaching philosophy.”

Adapting to the Rise of Large Language Models in Higher Education

Since 2022, the rise of Large Language Models (LLMs) like ChatGPT has transformed student engagement with digital tools. Packback has responded by integrating AI-detection and plagiarism prevention features that assist faculty in navigating this reality. Rather than simply policing AI-generated content, Packback provides real-time feedback on writing quality, originality, and depth of thought. When AI usage is detected, instructors receive alerts and recommendations for follow-up conversations, ensuring that students engage meaningfully with the material.

Packback's approach acknowledges that students will use AI and instead focuses on ensuring they engage critically with their work. The structured question-and-response format makes it difficult for students to copy and paste AI-generated text without engaging in intellectual effort. Additionally, Packback offers resources to help faculty integrate discussions about AI literacy into their courses, ensuring students understand both the limitations and ethical considerations of using LLMs.

This strategy aligns with the course's broader goal: maximizing moments where students must actively think, reflect, and contribute. By combining Packback's discussion-based AI feedback with *Attenuated Democracy's* critical approach, students are not only learning course material but also refining the analytical skills that AI cannot replicate—argumentation, reasoning, and civic awareness.

This course redesign also reflects the influence of the ungrading and contract grading movements, which prioritize active student learning and authentic assessment over rigid point-based grading. While formal grading remains a requirement, the emphasis shifts toward skill acquisition, intellectual bravery, and participatory engagement with the course content toward the student learning objectives.

Assessments consist of discussion and writing assignments in each of the six modules, allowing students to develop their critical thinking skills in a collaborative and iterative environment. The final module includes a modified simulation that applies theoretical concepts to real-world scenarios. Future iterations of the course may integrate tools like VoiceThread to enhance faculty-student and student-student interaction to mimic some of the more humanizing elements of in-person instruction and learning. By emphasizing reflection and improvement rather than rigid penalties,

this approach aligns with the course's broader goal: fostering intellectual engagement rather than simple retention of factual knowledge.

Students offered overwhelmingly positive feedback on the redesigned course, frequently noting its engaging and accessible instruction. Many praised the instructor's ability to make complex concepts in U.S. Government and Politics both "engaging and accessible," with one student remarking, "The professor provided a constructive learning environment that sparked a genuine interest in political science." The course structure was another widely celebrated feature, as students appreciated its clarity and consistency. "I enjoyed the course setup and how it was easy to navigate," one student noted, while another highlighted that "each module was set up the same, so it was easy to follow and structure my work each week." This predictability allowed students to manage their workload effectively while ensuring that each component of the course felt connected to the broader learning objectives.

In addition to its design, students valued the supplemental resources that enhanced their understanding of the material. The inclusion of extra video content and instructor-recorded lectures contributed to a stronger sense of connection in the online setting. "His extra content videos were also a very nice resource on his end in addition to the textbook," one student wrote, while another noted, "I liked the videos that he posted; it was helpful to put a face with the name and made me feel more engaged in the class." Many students also pointed to the instructor's clear guidance and support as a highlight of the course, with one expressing appreciation for how "he was very clear and gave great instructions on how to complete the course," and another simply stating, "His cooperation and assistance were great."

Beyond its organization and instructional clarity, the course fostered an interactive and collaborative learning environment that many students found particularly valuable. They described the discussion-based format as “engaging and interactive,” emphasizing that it facilitated productive conversations on real-world political issues. One student shared that “this course design was very engaging and interactive with other students; we all got to share our ideas and communicate maturely about real-world topics.” Others echoed this sentiment, appreciating the opportunities for peer-to-peer engagement, with one remarking, “Lots of discussion between classmates.” The course also encouraged students to think critically, which they found intellectually stimulating. “The course is not like any other courses I’ve taken, and I liked how it made me think outside the box,” a student reflected. Another student noted the variety of learning opportunities, stating, “I liked that there were multifaceted ways to learn the information,” while another observed, “Plenty of challenging material that was provided in an easy-to-learn format.”

While students were highly positive about the overall course design and structure, a few noted areas where improvements could be made, for instance, in terms of replying to original questions from other students in the Discussion Assignments: “The reliance on other students to do their work is imperative to succeeding in this class.”

Overall, the student feedback overwhelmingly affirmed that the redesigned course succeeded in creating a meaningful and engaging learning experience. The structured modules, engaging discussions, and supportive instructional approach fostered a dynamic environment that encouraged critical thinking and collaboration.

Students left the course not only with a stronger understanding of American government but also with a deeper appreciation for the ways in which political structures shape their lives.

Conclusion

The integration of *Attenuated Democracy* and Packback represents an evolution in digital pedagogy, building on lessons from earlier platforms like Aplia. While Aplia sought to increase student effort through structured assignments, Packback fosters inquiry-based learning and student-led discussions. This redesign creates an environment where students actively interrogate the structures that shape their political reality rather than passively consuming content.

The success of the redesigned course highlights the potential for innovation in political science education. Future iterations of the course could explore additional technologies, such as virtual reality simulations or interactive case studies, to further enhance engagement. Expanding partnerships with organizations like PBS NewsHour or incorporating guest lectures from political practitioners could also enrich the learning experience. Moreover, the principles underlying this redesign—active learning, inclusivity, and critical engagement—can serve as a model for other disciplines. By prioritizing student-centered approaches, educators can better prepare students for the complexities of the 21st-century world.

Through a synthesis of digital tools, open-access resources, and critical pedagogy, this redesign empowers students with analytical skills and civic awareness necessary to navigate and challenge the democratic process in meaningful ways. As political science education continues to adapt to technological and societal changes, this model offers a

pathway for fostering engagement, inclusivity, and deep learning in introductory courses.

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¹ Packback's current AI-driven platform aims to foster inquiry-based learning, a student-driven discussion format that encourages autonomy and curiosity. Research demonstrates that students using Packback show improved academic outcomes, with higher A grades and lower D and F grades compared to those in traditional LMS discussions (Reed, 2021). Faculty members using Packback in a variety of disciplines—from biology to environmental science—report increased engagement, deeper student inquiry, and more meaningful classroom discussions. Shark Tank Recap. 2014. "Packback Books Update – Shark Tank Season 5." Accessed January 30, 2025. <https://sharktankrecap.com/packback-books-update-shark-tank-season-5/>.

² International Journalists' Network (IJNet). n.d. "Digging Deeper: The 5 W's of Journalism." *International Center for Journalists*. Accessed January 30, 2025. <https://ijnet.org/en/story/digging-deeper-5-ws-journalism>.