Polling Literacy: An Overview

Public opinion polls are everywhere. They say anything about everything, and they supposedly represent the thinking of the American people. Virtually every day, a poll is published, purporting to tell the powers in government, politics and business what people want.

Their impact is enormous. New technology is spreading pollsters’ reach and has opened the field to a plethora of new practitioners. Journalists and the public face a daunting challenge in trying to distinguish the credible surveys from the pseudo-polls that advocate rather than inform or pursue self-interests over the public interests. They decide which candidates for president get taken seriously. To go to war or not to go war is decision that is sometimes fatally decided partly by what the polls say. As for citizens, we often vote for politicians, take sides on complex controversies, join causes or buy consumer products based on information from polls.

The problem? So much of what public opinion polls report is wrong, or, they hide, manipulate or distort what the populace knows or says. Polls can give us a chance to speak to power, but they often misguide those in business and government who then pass laws and policies or create new products based on those findings. In this course, we are going to do what pure journalism has always demanded – to seek the truth and report it. But this time, our focus will not be on the traditional targets of government and business but on public opinion polling that drive so much of what they do.
Class Objectives

This class will be substantially hands-on in nature. Although the first month will involve a considerable amount of lecture time, the remainder of the semester will be devoted substantially to in-class activities, evaluating polls, peer editing workshops, field work and polling activities.

We are going to work with a nationally recognized pollster and polling critic, David W. Moore, and iMediaEthics editor and publisher Rhonda Shearer.

Under Moore’s guidance, we will design and conduct a 600-student campus poll to learn how polls should be done in accordance with the standards of good journalism and the demands of the investigative mentality. You will choose the topic, do phone and face-to-face interviews, shoot video and record audio, compile the data and write the story.

We also are going to learn to critique polls to learn to identify biased questions, poor design.

And, with our participation and Moore’s additional guidance, iMediaEthics.org also will commission a national poll check survey for this class, using a survey design that we help develop and on a topic that we help choose.

Collaboration with iMediaEthics.org.

By joining this class, you become part of a unique, perhaps groundbreaking, partnership that seeks to convert what you and I do and learn in this classroom into learning modules that future educators will use to teach their students. Because of this collaboration, iMediaEthics.org, which is the award-winning media watchdog website published by the non-profit Arts and Science Research Laboratory in New York, N.Y., is working with us and plans to publish our learning modules on its website.

Class Requirements and Policies

Engagement and Attendance

1) **Engagement**: You meet this requirement by giving me and your classmates 100 percent of your attention during lectures and discussions. You do this by listening and providing relevant responses during class discussions either voluntarily or when I call on you to contribute your thoughts or opinions. If you are texting, sending or checking message, checking your calendar or browsing the internet or disengaged in any other, I will assume you are not engaged in class.

2) **Attendance - It Is Mandatory.**

   **Unexcused Absences**: You get two unexcused absences. After that, you lose five points for every unexcused absence up to the 100 points assigned to this requirement. Examples of unexcused absences that I have rejected in the past: I had a bad cold or I was under the weather; I had a migraine headache; I had to do an assignment for IowaWatch or the Daily Iowan or for another class; I had to study for a test; I overslept; I went to a wedding of my friend; it was my birthday.

   **Excused Absences**: They must be approved. Examples of excused absences include: for an assignment, such as an interview, for this class; death in your immediate family; you have a fever and are contagious or are physically unable to get to class; you have a written excuse from your doctor. I will consider written request for an excuse from other professors or a job interview that could not be scheduled at another time.

3) **Make-up Work** – For excused absences, I will – at your request – help bring you up to date on what we covered and make up any quiz. For unexcused absences, you do not get a make-up quiz and you must contact classmates to find out if you missed any assignments and to learn what material was covered.
Class Rules.

**Courtesy**: Being attentive to me and to your classmates, polite and respectful to all members of the class and getting to class on time.

**Roll Call**: Be on time. You are counted absent if you aren’t here for roll call, so notify me know if you come in after roll call has started so I will not mark you absent.

Academic Fraud

Plagiarism and any other activities when students present work that is not their own constitute academic fraud. Academic fraud is a serious matter and is reported to the departmental DEO and to the Associate Dean for Undergraduate Programs and Curriculum. Instructors and DEOs decide on appropriate consequences at the departmental level while the Associate Dean enforces additional consequences at the collegiate level. See the CLAS Student Academic Handbook.

Assignments: 1,000 Points.

250 points – Campus Poll of 600 U.I. students. Begin work Feb. 5; stories due March 12.
150 points – Two tests and one graded draft questionnaire (50 points each).
300 points – Poll Critiques (two drafts critiques at 50 points each; two final versions at 100 points each).
200 points – National Poll Check Story w/SurveyUSA and iMediaEthics.org. Begin work March 28; Stories Due May 10 (50 points for draft questionnaire; 150 points for poll check story).
100 points – Engagement & attendance. These points are yours if you meet two conditions: remain engaged in each class and accumulate no more than two unexcused absences.

Grading Scale.

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Tentative Class Schedule
(dates subject to change)

Jan. 22, Tuesday, in Week 1

Homework for Thurs, Jan. 24:
- Read and be ready to discuss the first half of Moore-3: “Telling Americans What They Think,” pp. 39-49 (some history). What was the early doubt about the value of public opinion polling during the early days of Gallup’s work? What was the perceived value of polls? Why did the polls get it wrong when they said Alf Landon would beat FDR?

Homework for Tue, Jan. 29:
- Read and be ready to discuss Moore-3, pp. 50-57 (history from “Dewey defeats Truman” to Bush hits lowest approval rating’). What was the original purpose of public policy polling back when Gallup first started doing public opinion polls and what does David Moore think about status of public policy polling today?
- Read and be ready to discuss Asher 2, “The Problem of Non-attitudes,” pp. 51-60. What sorts of influences does this article say cause “mushiness” of public opinion? And what two broad types of issues is public opinion most volatile?

Today in Class: Introduction to Polling & Polling Literacy.
Introductions, course overview, class goals and objectives, assignments, grading system, class rules.
Assignments:

Readings from Moore, Asher, polls, daily news.
Graded Quizzes – They will be periodic – one every 3 to 5 weeks on my lectures and on the reading material – designed to ensure that you are equipped to successful carry the assignments below.
Campus Poll: You will decide the topics, write the questions, do the sampling, conduct the interviews, and write the stories using the skills that I will teach you in lecture, through the text and classroom discussions and exercises.
National Poll Critique: Critiques of three national issue polls by the most reputable polling firms using the criteria that I will teach you during lectures, through the text and the classroom exercises.
National Poll Check: Here’s what a Poll Check is: http://www.imediaethics.org/PressBox/2/Imediaethics_announces_pollcheck_the_first_project_and_mission_to_fact-check_media_polls.php. For examples of Poll Check surveys, see http://www.imediaethics.org/Poll/12/Gun_laws_post-sandy_hook.php. See other Poll Check stories at http://www.imediaethics.org/PollCheck.php. We will propose a topic on which one or more prominent national polling organizations have surveyed, design a proposed questionnaire on the same topic, submit it to poll critic David Moore at iMediaEthics.org, which will commission a professional pollster, Survey USA, to conduct it. When we get the results back, you each will write a poll check story using SurveyUSA results for comparison with the results that the comparison poll found.

Engagement and Attendance: You meet this requirement by giving me and your classmates 100 percent of Class Rules and Policies.
Lecture:

Role in democracy. Do polls reflect public opinion? What is public opinion: a quantifiable aggregate of people’s views? The voice of the powerful? The voice of individuals in blogs, letters to editor? Town hall meetings?
Importance of polls in politics, public discourse. Pervasiveness of Polls.
Psuedo polls: FRUGing, SUGing, ideologues- Shultz & Hannity.
Definition of Poll. People have poor opinion of polls.
Jan. 24, Thursday, in Week 1

**Homework: Pondering Poll Topics to discuss Tuesday.**

**Student Poll Topic:** Begin thinking about questions for our poll of 600 UI students on issues of importance to them.

**National Poll Check Topic:** Peruse the sites of any prominent polling organization such as Gallup, Pew Research Center, National Opinion Research to get an idea of the type of national issues that you would do in a poll check survey. Or got to the RealClearPolitics and look at any of its reports – like this one on Obama’s approval rating, [http://www.realclearpolitics.com/epolls/other/president_obama_job_approval-1044.html#polls](http://www.realclearpolitics.com/epolls/other/president_obama_job_approval-1044.html#polls), and you will see a long listed of hyperlinks to a dozen or more polling organizations that RealClearPolitics regularly follows.

**Homework Assignment for Tuesday.**

Reminder to read & be ready to discuss Asher 2, “The Problem of Non-attitudes,” pp. 51-60 and the second half of Moore-3, pp. 50-57 (history from “Dewey defeats Truman” to Bush hits lowest approval rating’). Be ready to discuss what was the early doubt about the value of public opinion polling during the early days of Gallup’s work? What was the perceived value of polls? Why did the polls get it wrong when they Dewey would beat Truman?

**Today’s class activities**

1. Discuss readings.
2. Discuss polls showing widely differing results.
3. Discuss reading first half of Asher-2:37-51 on respondents’ expression of non-attitudes; use of screening questions, responses that show non-attitudes and the middle position, how to deal with non-attitudes in your questionnaire.
4. Asher and Moore on non-attitudes.

Jan. 29, Tuesday, in Week 2

**Homework:**

Read the iMediaEthics.org press release on the poll that it commissioned SurveyUSA to conduct on June 25, 2012, about same-sex marriage. Use it to see an example of David Moore’s basic arguments about asking questions that screen out or measure non-attitudes. Then click on the hyperlinks to its questionnaire and to the questionnaires of the CNN and ABC poll on the same topic. Study the difference between the two television polls’ forced choice questions and Moore’s questions. We will discuss them in class Thursday.

**Today In Class:**

- **Discuss topic ideas** for our Campus Poll.
- **Discuss topic ideas** for National Poll Check Survey.
- **Poll Review:** Read the most recent poll in class and discuss.
- **Discuss readings assigned for today.**

Lecture/Discussion.
Jan. 31, Thursday, in Week 2.

Homework Assignments.
- Test, Thursday, Feb. 7. It carries 50 points, and it will be at least five brief discussion questions covering everything we covered in lecture and in the readings.
- For Tuesday, Feb. 5: Read and be ready to discuss Asher-3:78-88 on wording and the context of questions; Moore-2:29-38 Wording in general, flawed wording, primer questions, which are sometimes called tutorial question.

Today’s Class Activities.
Tips for Test: The content of your answers must cover material that we have covered in lecture, discussions and the textbook. If your answer covers any material we have not covered, you must cite a credible source for that information. I don’t want any personal opinions, because this is test of whether you have retained the knowledge that has been imparted to you and will be able to apply it when you develop and design the UI campus poll and the national poll check survey. Be ready to talk about non-attitudes, intensity questions, and the public policy purpose of issue polling.
- Discuss readings assigned for today: Comparing iMediaEthics.org/SurveyUSA same-sex marriage questionnaire with CNN and ABC questionnaires.

Feb. 5, Tuesday, in Week 3

Homework:
- Reminder for next class: Test Thursday.
- Homework for Feb. 14: 50-point graded homework assignment due Feb. 14. Bring printouts at start of class for me and the students in your group. In preparation for our 600-student campus poll, think of a topic and develop a questionnaire of 4-8 questions that solicit student opinions. In designing this questionnaire, apply what you have learned about asking questions that obtain a response, questions that measure non-attitudes and/or lack of knowledge and intensity of opinion; that use unbiased and neutral wording; arrange the question in an unbiased order. Feel free to use any of David Moore’s questionnaires as a template. We will divide up into three groups of four-to-five students for class workshop on Feb. 14 with the hope of settling on a list of three finalists, from which we will pick our survey topic.

Today’s Class Activities:
- Review homework reading
- Guest via Skype, David W. Moore.

Feb. 7, Thursday, in Week 3

Homework:
- Reminder for Feb. 14, Tuesday: Work on the questionnaire.

Today’s Class Activities:
- Lecture/Text Test (50 points): 1 hr.; covers everything since the start of the semester through Feb.5.
Feb. 12, Tuesday, in Week 4

**Homework:** Complete Questionnaire for Campus Student Poll, email to me before class Thursday for grading; bring four copies to class to distribute to the students in your workshop group.

**Today’s Activities:**
- Review reading assignment.
- Explain workshop for Thursday on Campus Poll Questionnaire; assign students into workshop groups.
  1. Each group elects a chair to watch the clock and run the meeting.
  2. Begin talking about pros and cons of the topic ideas.
  3. Vote on the top two topic ideas.
  4. Discuss the draft questions for those two ideas. Discuss the wording and order and agree on a final draft questionnaire of each topic and turn them in to me at the end of class.
  5. I will use the groups’ recommendations, review the others, pick the top six, edit them and send them to David Moore by Feb. 16. David will make the final selection, do the final editing of the selected questionnaire and send it to me between Friday, Feb. 22 and Monday, Feb. 25.
- Examine several mainstream polls and analyze their question wording and question order.

Feb. 14, Thursday, in Week 4

**Homework Assignment for Tuesday, Feb. 19:** Read Asher-4: Sampling techniques, 97-107.

**Today’s Class Activity:** Workshop Campus Poll Questionnaire.

Feb. 19, Tuesday, in Week 5.

**Today’s Activities:**
- Lecture on Sampling.
- Review reading assignment on Sampling.
- Conduct random sampling for first hour of class.

Feb. 21, Thursday, in Week 5.

**Homework:** Read first half of Asher 6: Media and the Polls – 137-146.

**Today’s Class Activity:**
- Lecture on Media and the Polls
- Review homework reading assignment from Thursday on Media and the Polls, Standards for Reporting poll results, effectiveness of standards, observing standards.
- Discuss interpretation of polls & media, polls & news reporting emphasis.

Feb. 26, Tuesday, in Week 6.

**Homework:** Survey students from assigned student directory list.

**Today’s Class Activity:** Begin surveying: emailing for responses, refer to survey website, call & interview or refer to survey website. Arrange several face-to-face interviews for more depth questioning & video recording.

Feb. 28, Thursday, in Week 6.

**Homework:**
- Compile results into a table, double-check accuracy; email to me before Friday, March 1, at 5 p.m. I will try to compile them into a final report by Tuesday, March 5.
- Read & be ready to discuss Tuesday Asher-8, Analyzing & Interpreting Results: 225-234.

**Today’s Class Activity:** Complete Surveying or compile results into a table; double check accuracy, be ready to discuss your subsection findings Tuesday.

March 1, Friday, students email, Campus Poll results to me by 5 p.m.
March 5, Tuesday, in Week 7.

Homework: Do follow-up reporting on results, write a story based on results & reporting. Do depth interviews with two or three respondents; arrange with Shawn Harmsen to shoot video/photos. Due March 12.

Today’s Class Activity:

- Polling war stories: Discuss students’ surveying experiences.
- Go over what students found in their individual 40-student subsection of the survey.
- Discuss results of composite results of Campus Survey: what are the key findings? Do the answers contain contradiction? Shades of Gray? Nuances? What follow-up reporting is needed?
- Compare the subsection findings with the overall findings.
- If time permits, go over reading on Analyzing & Interpreting Results.

March 7, Thursday, in Week 7.

Homework:

- Read Moore-6, “Damaging Democracy, pp. 102-118, for Tues, March 12 (will in March 14 test).
- Reminder: Poll stories due March 12 at 11:55 p.m.
- Lecture-Text Test, Thursday, March 14.

Today’s Class Activity.

- Discuss has press tainted polling profession?
- Review assigned reading.

March 12, Tuesday, in Week 8.

DUE TODAY: CAMPUS SURVEY STORY at 11:55 p.m.

Homework:

- Study for Thursday’s Lecture/Text Test.

Today in class:

- Review for Test.

March 14, Thursday, in Week 8.

Homework: For Tuesday, March 26, Read Moore-8, A New Direction, pp. 143-163.

Today in Class: Test on lectures and text.

SPRING BREAK in Week 9

March 26, Tuesday, in Week 10

Homework: Study recent national polls to select 2 topic ideas for National Poll Check survey. Begin working on a draft questionnaire.

Today in Class:

- Critique several campus poll stories (names will be blacked out).

March 28, Thursday, in Week 10

National Poll Check Class 1:

- Homework: For Tuesday, April 2, finalize your drafts of National Poll check questionnaires for grading (counts as a 50-point test grade) and send it to me and to your workshop group.

Today in Class:

- Discuss plans for National Poll Check Assignment.
- In-class assignment: Read national polls and select two topics for workshop next Tuesday on National Poll Check Survey. Work on a 4-6 question questionnaire for each topic. You are not expected to complete it, but email your work-in-progress to me at the end of class so that I can keep tabs on your progress. Your final draft questionnaire for a grade is due Tuesday, April 2. Bring printouts to class for me and your group mates.
April 2, Tuesday, in Week 11.

Today in Class: Draft of National Poll Check questionnaire due to me and the classmates in your workshop group. It counts as 50 of the 200 points allotted to this assignment.

Workshop National Poll Check Survey questionnaire in your student groups using the same procedure that we used for the campus survey last month.

1. Class begin workshop on Campus Poll Questionnaire by electing a chairperson. From the recommendations of your group-mates, select the top two topic ideas in your group.
2. Begin talking about the pros and cons of the topic ideas. Vote on the top two topic ideas.
3. Using the draft questionnaires of your group mates, discuss questions regarding wording, question order, possible bias or value-judgment wording, clarity for those two ideas. Agree on the final wording and order, write a final draft for each topic idea and turn them in to me at the end of class.
4. I will take your recommendations and review all of the others, pick what I consider the top three questionnaires send them to David Moore by April 5 or 7. David will make the final selection & do the final editing of the selected questionnaire and send it to SurveyUSA, who will conduct the poll for us and return it no later than April 26.
5. I distribute the results in class no later than April 30, and prompt class discussion with prompter questions.

April 4, Thursday, in Week 11.

Homework: Graded Assignment for Tuesday. First draft of Poll Critique-1 (50 of the 150 maximum points allotted to Poll Critique-1). Email to me and to the six peer editors assigned to you by Sunday night, April 7, at 11:55 p.m. Each student peer edits three critiques that will be assigned to you and be ready present your critique in workshop Tuesday.

Today in Class:
- Explain poll critique assignment and workshop process.
- Read several of David Moore’s Poll Skeptic Columns and discuss.

April 7, Sunday: Draft of Poll Critique-1 due. Email to me and to your peer editors.

April 9, Tuesday, in Week 12

Homework: Poll Critique-2. Critique a second national poll; draft due Sunday night, April 14 at 11:55 p.m.

Today in Class: Workshop for peer editing of Poll Critique-1 for students in Group 1A & Group 2A. Final version due April 19.

April 11, Thursday, in Week 12.

Homework: Continue working on Poll Critique-2: Due Sunday, April 14 at 11:55 a.m.

Today in Class: Workshop for peer editing of Poll Critique-1 for students in Group 1B and Group 2B. Final version due April 19 at 11:55 p.m.

April 14, Sunday: Graded Draft of Poll Critique-2 due to me and to your peer editors. (50 of the 150 points allotted to Poll Critique-2

April 16, Tuesday, in Week 13.

Today in Class: Peer editing workshop for Poll Critique-2 for students in Groups 1A & 2A. Final due 4-26.

April 18, Thursday, in Week 13.

Today in Class: Workshop for peer editing of Poll Critique-2 for students in Group 1B and Group 2B. April 26.

April 19, Final Version of Poll Critique-1 is due to me at 11:55 p.m.
April 22, Tuesday, in Week 14.

Today in Class:
To Be Assigned: Depending on return of SurveyUSA Poll Check survey results.

April 24, Thursday, in Week 14.

Today in Class:
To Be Assigned.

April 26: Final Version of Poll Critique-2 due to me.

April 29, Tuesday, in Week 15.

Homework: Tentative: pending on date of return of SurveyUSA results. Write Poll Skeptic Check Story.
Today in Class: Go over National Survey results

May 2, Thursday, in Week 15.

Today in Class: To Be Assigned.

May 7, Tuesday, in Week 16

Today in Class: To Be Assigned.

May 9, Thursday, in Week 16


May 10, Friday. POLL CHECK SURVEY STORY DUE

The Iowa Dozen

As one of more than 104 programs in journalism and mass communication accredited by the Accrediting Council for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (ACEJMC), we must assess student learning to assure that each of our graduates meets the following standards.

Note that the first 3 points will be a part of how the mid-term paper, final paper and in-class presentations will be evaluated. Points 6 onward are values that the course aspires to support.

We learn to ...
1. Write correctly, clearly and well. (papers, presentations)
2. Conduct research and gather information responsibly. (papers, presentations)
3. Edit and evaluate carefully. (papers, presentations)

We value ...
6. Free speech and First Amendment principles for all individuals and groups.
7. A diverse global community.
8. Creativity and independence.
We explore ...
10. Theories and concepts.
11. The history, structure and economy of media institutions
12. The role of media in shaping cultures.

The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences:
Policies and Procedures

Administrative Home
The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences is the administrative home of this course and governs matters such as the add/drop deadlines, the second-grade-only option, and other related issues. Different colleges may have different policies. Questions may be addressed to 120 Schaeffer Hall or see the CLAS Student Academic Handbook [www.clas.uiowa.edu/students/ academic handbook/index.shtml].

Electronic Communication
University policy specifies that students are responsible for all official correspondences sent to their University of Iowa e-mail address (@uiowa.edu). Faculty and students should use this account for correspondences. (Operations Manual, III.15.2. Scroll down to k.11.)

Making a Suggestion or a Complaint
Students with a suggestion or complaint should first visit the instructor, then the course supervisor, and then the departmental DEO. Complaints must be made within six months of the incident. See the CLAS Student Academic Handbook.

Accommodations for Disabilities
A student seeking academic accommodations should first register with Student Disability Services and then meet privately with the course instructor to make particular arrangements. See www.uiowa.edu/~sds/ for more information.

Understanding Sexual Harassment
Sexual harassment subverts the mission of the University and threatens the well-being of students, faculty, and staff. All members of the UI community have a responsibility to uphold this mission and to contribute to a safe environment that enhances learning. Incidents of sexual harassment should be reported immediately. See the UI Comprehensive Guide on Sexual Harassment at www.uiowa.edu/~eod/policies/sexual-harassment-guide/index.html for assistance, definitions, and the full University policy.

Reacting Safely to Severe Weather
In severe weather, class members should seek appropriate shelter immediately, leaving the classroom if necessary. The class will continue if possible when the event is over. (Operations Manual, Part IV, 16. See items e, h, and i.)

*The CLAS policy statements have been summarized from the web pages of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences.