An Introduction to Perusall

Gary King

Institute for Quantitative Social Science
Harvard University
What’s **Perusall**?
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  - Developed at Harvard by Gary King, Brian Lukoff, Eric Mazur, Kelly Miller

Students:
- Complete readings; learn more
- Stay engaged and motivated; enjoy the experience

Instructors:
- No extra work; save considerable time
- Improve classroom teaching

No cost:
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They triage — let some courses die to save others

How many comply with reading assignments:

20-30%

How many buy the book:

< 50%

How to get them to read:

Frequent quizzes, extra homework
Make grades depend on them
Test very specific points from the readings
Spend huge amounts of your time!

Faculty

When motivated (preparing for class, or to learn):
we do all the reading
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Do you do human subjects research?
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So what’s wrong? Why don’t they read?

Intrinsic motivators are backwards: Humans value collective experiences (e.g., why the concert costs more than the iTunes download). Reading is a solitary experience (e.g., the stalling MOOC revolution: Collective $\Rightarrow$ Solitary).

Extrinsic motivators (grades) are weak, unless: Faculty waste time preparing quizzes, students waste time taking them, everyone wastes class or prep time.

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Transform the reading experience:

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- Extrinsic motivation (no instructor effort): Automated grading
How does it work?

Assign readings & annotations

Students share questions, answers, perspectives, external knowledge in threads

Can annotate text, images, or equations

Classmates motivate

Perusall grades engagement (better than TAs can)

Non-adversarial grading; Perusall nudges students not keeping up
Dominguez and McCann in the first place: the electoral outcome itself. In particular, if every voter thought the PRI was weakening, which candidate would have won the presidency? To answer this question, we coded each voter as thinking that the PRI was weakening and let other characteristics of the voter take on their true values. Then we used the predicted value algorithm to simulate the vote for each person in the sample and used the votes to run a mock election. We repeated this exercise 100 times to generate 100 simulated election outcomes. For comparison, we also coded each voter as thinking the PRI was strengthening and simulated 100 election outcomes conditional on those beliefs.

Figure 3 displays our results. The figure is called a “ternary plot” (see Miller 1977; Katz and King 1999), and coordinates in the figure represent predicted fractions of the vote received by each candidate under a different simulated election outcome. Roughly speaking, the closer a point appears to one of the vertices, the larger the fraction of the vote going to the candidate whose name appears on the vertex. A point near the middle indicates that the simulated election was a dead heat. We also added “win lines” to the figure that divide the ternary diagram into areas that indicate which candidate receives a plurality and thus wins the simulated election (e.g., points that appear in the top third of the triangle are simulated election outcomes where Cardenas receives a plurality).

In this figure, the o’s (all near the bottom left) are simulated outcomes in which everyone thought the PRI was strengthening, while the dots (all near the center) correspond to beliefs that the PRI was weakening. The figure shows that when the country believes the PRI is strengthening, Salinas wins hands down; in fact, he wins every one of the simulated elections. If voters believe the PRI is weakening, however, the 1988 election is a toss-up, with each candidate having an equal chance of victory.

The general idea is that the model is estimated by the regression a censored Weibull regression (a form of duration model) on a dataset in which the dependent variable, $Y_t$, measures the number of years that leader $i$ remains in office following the onset of war. For fully observed cases (the leader had left office at the time of the study), the model is

$$Y_t \sim \text{Weibull}(\mu, \sigma)$$

$$\mu_t = E(Y_t | X_t) = (e^{X_t \beta})^{-\sigma} \Gamma(1 + \sigma)$$

where $\sigma$ is an ancillary shape parameter and $\Gamma$ is the gamma function, an interpolated factorial that works for continuous values of its argument. The model includes four explanatory variables: the leader’s pre-war tenure in years, an interaction between pre-war tenure and demographic of battles per 10,000 inhabitants, a variable indicating whether the leader won the authors find that leaders who waged forced to lose their grip on power at home, but leaders with a long pre-war tenure were in office longer than others.

As it notes, the Weibull is a time to event model (a duration model), so it’s a natural fit for looking at the years someone remains in office following a war. More broadly, it’s related to the Exponential distribution, which is typical what you think of when you’re trying to model time. But unlike the Exponential, the Weibull has a shape and scale parameter (whereas in the Exponential the shape is always presumed to be 1).
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What are the advantages of using a Weibull model as opposed to kinds we have discussed in class (like Poisson, Normal, etc)?

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Assignment

Perusall is an application that assigns readings and annotations to students. Students can share questions, answers, perspectives, and external knowledge in threads. They can also annotate text, images, or equations. Non-adversarial grading is another feature, where Perusall nudges students not keeping up. The grading system is better than that of teaching assistants. The Perusall system motivates classmates to engage more effectively in the learning process.
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Figure 3  Simulated Electoral Outcomes

Coordinates in this ternary diagram are predicted fractions of the vote received by each of the three candidates. Each point is an election outcome drawn randomly from a world in which all voters believe Salinas’ PRI party is strengthening (for the “o”s in the bottom left) or weakening (for the “+”s in the middle), with other variables held constant at their means.

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where \( \sigma \) is an ancillary shape parameter and \( \Gamma \) is the gamma function, an interpolated factorial that works for continuous values of its argument. The model includes four explanatory variables: the leader’s pre-war tenure in years, an interaction between pre-war tenure and demobilization of battle deaths per 10,000 inhabitants, a variable indicating whether the leader won the war, and the authors find that leaders who waged for long periods of time to stabilize their power at home, but leaders with a long pre-war tenure were in office longer than others.

Pease, Mesquita and Siverson discuss the manner of their explanatory variables by computing “hazard” associated with each variable. Hazard interpretation of the hazard function in the understanding them requires considerable knowledge. Simulation can help us calculate
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What happens when motivated students get stuck?

Presently: Eyes off the page
- Stop reading, hope you get it in class
- Make believe you understand it and keep reading
- Wait until office hours
- Find another student
- Ask a question via email or a forum

Perusall: Eyes on the page
- Annotate the readings: ask questions in context
- Out-of-class experience centered on the readings
- Get response immediately from other students
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When students figure it out together: Learning is deeper and remembered longer
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At the start of class, “Any Questions?”

Presently:

Hearing questions and confusions: hugely important in learning

They have lots of questions, but no one moves

They’ve just trouped across campus, thinking about their last class,
plopped their backpacks and coats down, expecting to be entertained.

A big missed opportunity

Perusall

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Walk into class; skip the “any questions” game

Go through the topics, recognizing students with good questions or
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**Perusall:**
- Just before class, print a Student Confusion Report with the top 3–4 topics of confusion or engagement, and the best student annotations
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Confusion 1

Making the Most of Statistical Analyses: Improving Interpretation and Presentation

Gary King | Harvard University
Michael Tomz | Harvard University
Jason Wittenberg | Harvard University

Social scientists often do not take full advantage of the information available in their statistical results. In a consequence, these miss opportunities to present quantitatively testable substantive inferences from their data. This article offers some possible methods to improve this situation.

Confusion 2

What does a logit model look like and what makes it particularly useful in this case of binary data? Why would we know a logit model is better to use here than a normal distribution, for instance? Would we have to have some prior understanding of the nature of the data we are looking at to determine a logit model is optimal?

Intuitively, I have trouble understanding exactly how simulation helps us. Are we using parameters from the data to simulate potential outcomes that give us probabilities? More generally, how does the simulation relate to the actual data?
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Example Student Confusion Report

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See confusions or engagements in context
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Example Student Confusion Report

- One page, easy to digest before class
- See confusions or engagements in context
- Annotations remain live
- Highlights best student annotations
Automated Engagement

Classes of any size

"Annotation groups" (of about 20) constructed from your class automatically to optimize engagement

Perusall can seed your class with annotations from another predicted to generate engagement

If a student skips pp.61-67

Perusall checks for important concepts missed

Student gets a private nudge about the point on p.63

As class nears, Perusall monitors continuously

Who hasn't done the reading or isn't engaged

Who isn't going to get 100% on the annotation assignment

Carefully timed, unobtrusive private notes with help and direction

Instructor gets: a window on student learning

A dashboard with grading suggestions

Info about individual student engagement & performance

Alerts for students with serious problems
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  - Carefully timed, unobtrusive private notes with help and direction
- Instructor gets: a window on student learning
  - A dashboard with grading suggestions
Automated Engagement

- Classes of any size
  - “Annotation groups” (of about 20) constructed from your class automatically to optimize engagement
  - Perusall can seed your class with annotations from another predicted to generate engagement
- If a student skips pp.61-67
  - Perusall checks for important concepts missed
  - Student gets a private nudge about the point on p.63
- As class nears, Perusall monitors continuously
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  - Alerts for students with serious problems
Administrative
Administrative

- Works differently across fields:
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- Works differently across fields:
  - In technical fields, students use Perusall to understand what the text explains, to get past hurdles

Student identities not shared with corporate recruiters or anyone outside of class

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Publishers love it (keeps their content central; 100% sell-through, no resales, the ultimate solution to IP piracy)

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