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**Georgia
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Essays on Teaching and Learning from The Georgia Political
Science Association's Teaching and Learning Workshop and Panel

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I am pleased to edit and offer the 3rd and final GPSA Teaching and Learning Consortium. The Consortium is a peer-edited, conference preceding publication focusing on the innovation of teaching and learning. The papers presented in this edition cover presentations from the 2017, 2018, 2019, and 2020 Georgia Political Science Annual Conference Meeting.

The growth in the interest of SoTL (Scholarship of Teaching & Learning) research has been strong over the past decade but has reached an all-time high due to the COVID-19 pandemic. As universities closed and instruction moved to an online format, many academics have sought to learn more about pedagogy, course design, and instruction. Although this seems like the most opportune time to keep the Consortium running, it truly is the best time to combine the conference proceedings with *Questions in Politics*, the Journal of the Georgia Political Science Association. As *QiP* already publishes SoTL works, this merger will allow for more submissions of SoTL research presented at the annual meeting and provide a greater distribution of these pieces. It is therefore my great pleasure to offer the Teaching & Learning Consortium, one last time, and present five great SoTL pieces presented over the past few conferences.

Joshua R. Meddaugh Ph.D.
Teaching & Learning Coordinator, GPSA



“More is Better. The Effect of Exam Frequency on Student Learning *Outcomes*”

John Powell Hall Ph.D

Middle Georgia State University

Undergraduate students face many challenges over the course of their college careers. Preparing for and taking regularly scheduled exams are two of the more stressful events in the life of most college students. This research explored whether the number of exams given to undergraduate students over the course of an academic semester could have a positive impact on student learning outcome success.

Introduction

Undergraduate students face many challenges over the course of their college careers. Preparing for and taking regularly scheduled exams are two of the more stressful events in the life of most college students. This research explored whether the number of exams given to undergraduate students over the course of an academic semester could have a positive impact on student learning outcome success. This paper briefly summarizes the ability of higher exam frequencies to improve student grades and knowledge retention in introductory American government classes.

High-frequency testing refers to exam schedules that exceed the normative two-to-three exams (followed by a final comprehensive exam) method of evaluation used in many college courses (Basol and Johanson 2009). This research examined the effect of higher exam frequency on undergraduate students taking introductory American national government courses at a public university in the American South. The key explanatory variable is the frequency of exams given to students over a semester-long course. Experimental group students were given double the number of exams (each covering half the material) of control group students. This paper details the positive impact of increased exam frequency on improved student learning outcomes by comparing students who had more exams (experimental group) with those who had fewer (control group).

Literature Review

The existing literature offers several causal factors related to exam frequency and student learning outcome success. Frequent testing has been linked to higher levels of

communication between students and professors (Selakovich 1962). Increased examinations correlate with higher levels of student motivation to succeed in their course work. The higher number of exams is thought to provide motivation to students required to study more frequently (Standlee & Popham 1960; Curo 1963; Dustin 1971; Khalaf & Hanna 1992). Frequent exams are believed to afford students a better opportunity to identify areas of study that require more academic work. Having access to an improved understanding of academic progress throughout the semester allows students more time to focus on improving their understanding of the course material (McDaris 1984; Bangert-Drowns et al. 1986, Standlee & Popham 1960). Preparing for and taking exams is believed to improve the student's understanding of the material. An elevated frequency of exams increases the number of times students are required to study the material covered in the classroom (Standlee & Popham 1960).

Several fields of study have evolved in the attempt to determine the effect of exam frequency on student learning. Mastery testing involves increased exam frequency and refers to exams that are given to students at regular intervals to determine if they can demonstrate a mastery of the material covered in a particular course. If students display a required level of understanding, they can move on to additional material. Students that fail to show proficiency are required to further study the material and are given the opportunity to take the exam again. The principal rationale behind this form of testing is that it provides instructors with the opportunity to identify and correct weaknesses in the student's understanding, or mastery, of the material (Bangert-Drowns 1991).

Several studies have identified the value of mastery testing in improving student learning outcomes. Keller (1968) created a mastery-oriented teaching methodology that proved highly effective when used on college students (Cohen 1977). Bloom's (1968) Learning for Mastery method is like Keller's but provides limits to the number of exams that may be given before moving on to additional material. The effectiveness of Keller and Bloom's methods has been reinforced by meta-analysis studies that identified a significant drop in testing scores at academic institutions that dropped Keller and Bloom-style high-frequency exam courses (Kulik & Kulik 87).

Hypotheses

My first hypothesis involves improved student success on individual exams that cover less material from the class lecture and textbook. Students in my experimental group took two exams covering the material for six chapters in the course text while students in my control group took only one exam covering the same six chapters. I expected the mean scores for exams one and two (experimental group) to be higher than the scores for exam one (control group).

Hypothesis One: Mean scores on two exams (experimental group) will be higher than mean

scores on one exam (control group) covering the same material.

My second hypothesis involves the student's ability to retain information learned during an academic semester. Students who experienced more exams over the semester were expected to retain information better than students who had received fewer exams. Increased exam frequency leads to increased opportunities to study the material. This higher level of study improves the student's general understanding of the material which leads to higher grades on comprehensive final exams.

Hypothesis Two: Experimental group students will have a higher comprehensive final exam scores than control group students.

Methods

In order to examine the effect of exam frequency on undergraduate students, I gave a different number of exams, each covering a different number of chapters from the text, to multiple American national government classes over the course of three academic semesters. Experimental group classes were given twice the number of exams throughout the semester compared to control group classes. Both experimental and control group classes were given comprehensive final exams at the end of the academic semester.

Two introductory American government classes (n = 70) were given three exams over the course of the 2018 Fall semester with a comprehensive final exam at the end. These American government classes serve as my control group. Each of the three exams covered six chapters from the textbook. I recorded the mean scores from exam one (covering chapters one through six), exam two (covering chapters seven through twelve), exam three (covering chapters thirteen through eighteen), and the comprehensive final exam (covering chapters one through eighteen). The exam format for the control group can be seen in Figure 1.1.

Figure 1.1

Control Group Exam Format

Chapters 1 – 6	Exam One
Chapters 7 – 12	Exam Two
Chapters 13 – 18	Exam Three

Six classes (n = 168) were given six exams over the course of the 2019 Spring and 2019 Fall semesters with a comprehensive final exam given at the end. These American government classes serve as my experimental group. The experimental group students received six exams, each covering three chapters from the text. I recorded the experimental group mean scores for exams one and two (covering chapters one through three and chapters four through six, respectively), exams three and four (covering chapters seven through nine and chapters ten through twelve, respectively), exams five and six (covering chapters thirteen through fifteen and chapters sixteen through eighteen, respectively), and the comprehensive final exam (covering chapters one through eighteen). The exam format for the experimental group can be seen in Figure 1.2.

Figure 1.2
Experimental Group Exam Format

Chapters 1 – 6	Exam One (1-3)	Exam Two (4-6)
Chapters 7 – 12	Exam Three (7-9)	Exam Four (10-12)
Chapters 13 – 18)	Exam Five (13-15)	Exam Six (16-18)

By giving some American government classes fewer exams (each exam covering more material) and other American government classes more exams (each exam covering less material), I was able to identify differences in student learning outcome success attributed to exam frequency. I tested my primary dependent variable, student success on American government exams, by comparing the mean scores of students taking more exams with the mean scores of students taking fewer exams. I compared experimental group exam grades covering chapters one through six (mean score for exams one and two) with control group exam grades covering the same chapters (mean score for exam one). I repeated this process for exams covering chapters seven through twelve and for exams covering chapters thirteen through eighteen. The comparison of experimental/ control group grades is summarized in Figure 1.3.

Figure 1.3
Comparison of Experimental Group (E.G.) and Control Group (C.G.) Exams

<u>Chapters 1 – 6</u>	<u>Chapters 7 – 12</u>	<u>Chapters 13 – 18</u>
E.G. (μ of Exam 1/Exam 2) C.G. (Exam 1)	E.G. (μ of Exam 3/Exam 4) C.G. (Exam 2)	E.G. (μ of Exam 5/Exam 6) C.G. (Exam 3)

Data Analysis

My univariate analysis showed promising results. The mean test scores for students taking two exams (experimental group) are higher than the test scores for students taking one exam (control group) with both groups being tested on the same material. Higher experimental group grades on multiple exams support my first hypothesis. In addition, the experimental group's final comprehensive exam scores were higher than the control groups, supporting my second hypothesis. The univariate results are summarized in Table 1.1.

Table 1.1
Mean Exam Scores for E.G. and C.G.

<u>Experimental Group</u>	<u>Control Group</u>
Exam 1 & 2 (combined) = 81.63%	Exam 1 = 69.24%
Exam 3 & 4 (combined) = 80.05%	Exam 2 = 72.60%
Exam 5 & 6 (combined) = 77.83%	Exam 3 = 66.80%
Comprehensive Final Exam = 76.72%	Comprehensive Final Exam = 72.36%

□

Bivariate analysis has also been supportive of my hypotheses. Comparison of means testing identified several statistically significant relationships between exam frequency and exam scores. The experimental group's combined mean score from exams one and two ($\mu = 81.63$) was higher than the control group's mean score from exam one ($\mu = 69.24$) ($t = 5.83$; $p \leq 0.000$, two-tailed test). The experimental group's combined mean score on exams three and four was higher ($\mu = 80.05$) than the control group's mean score from exam two ($\mu = 72.60$) ($t = 3.85$; $p \leq 0.000$, two-tail test). The combined test five and six mean scores for the experimental group ($\mu = 77.83$) were higher than the control group's mean exam three scores ($\mu = 66.8$) ($t = 4.67$; $p \leq 0.000$, two-tail test). Finally, the experimental group's mean score on the comprehensive final exam ($\mu = 76.72$) is higher than the control group's ($\mu = 72.36$) ($t = 2.13$; $p \leq 0.03$, two-tailed test). The bivariate results are listed in Table 1.2.

Table 1.2
Comparison of Means Test for E.G and C.G. Exams

Scores for E.G. & C.G.	Mean	t-score
E.G. Exam 1 & 2	$\mu = 81.63$	$t = 5.83$ ***
C.G. Exam 1	$\mu = 69.24$	
E.G. Exam 3 & 4	$\mu = 80.05$	$t = 3.85$ ***
C.G. Exam 2	$\mu = 72.60$	
E.G. Exams 5 & 6	$\mu = 77.83$	$t = 4.67$ ***
C. G. Exam 3	$\mu = 66.80$	
E. G. Final Exam	$\mu = 76.72$	$t = 2.13$ **
C. G. Final Exam	$\mu = 72.36$	

*** $p \leq 0.000$ (two-tail test)

** $p \leq 0.05$ (two-tail test)

Multivariate analysis further supports my second hypothesis. The experimental group's mean scores on the comprehensive final exam were higher than the control groups ($\beta = 4.36$; $p \leq 0.03$, two-tailed test) (See Table 1.3). This indicates the possibility that higher frequency exams improve knowledge retention over the course of an academic semester.

Table 1.3
OLS Regression (Comprehensive Final Exam Scores)

	β	<u>SE</u>	<u>t</u>	<u>p</u>
Final Exam E.G.	4.36	2.05	2.13	0.03**
Final Exam C.G.	72.36	1.72	42.08	0.00

** $p \leq 0.05$ (two-tail test)

Like all scholarship of teaching and learning research, improvements in our understanding of the impact of exam frequency on student learning outcomes serve to increase our understanding of the overall learning experience for our students. Recognition of the importance of exam frequency could help educators reform one of the more difficult areas of education for students: preparing for and taking exams.

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"Shall We Play A Game?"

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SimClassroom and Some Results

A Whopper Of An Idea: Teaching Using Simulations

In the 1983 film "WarGames," a special military supercomputer named WOPR (an acronym for War Operation Plan Response, and is later dubbed "Joshua") has been created to help the United States prepare for nuclear war. Thanks to the accidental actions of a high school hacker, WOPR is induced to play a nuclear wargame (Block 2004), for keeps! The only way to prevent such a catastrophe is for the hacker and the WOPR inventor to teach the supercomputer that whether the game is Tic Tac Toe or nuclear war, there is no way to win the game (Block 2004). WOPR learns through playing games, and often issues the mechanical query "Shall we play a game?"

In college education, we don't just try to teach computers lessons via games. We often try to use simulations in the instruction of the participating students. The use of simulations and games in the classroom is nothing new, even going back past the movie "WarGames" As Lincoln P. Broomfield and Norman J. Padelford at M.I.T. reported on "a series of experiments held at M.I.T. with political gaming on problems of international affairs to see what research and teaching values this technique may yield," which are paralleled with simulations by the RAND Corporation and the United Nations Project at the Center for International Studies. All of these involve undergraduate college students (Broomfield and Padelford 1959, 1105). These Ivy League professors and students chose to replicate an international crisis involving Berlin over several weeks.

Much of the research on the subject of employing games in the classroom focuses on using video games, or simulations that take multiple classes. For example, Squire (2005) used Civilization III to teach his students about world history while DeVries and Slavin (1978) used something known as “Teams- Games- Tournaments” (TGT) to teach basic skills, core values, and student diversity issues.

Such studies compare results from these games to traditional lecture outcomes. Ke (2008), for example, found that computer games beat traditional quizzes on math motivation, but did not do significantly better in “facilitating cognitive math test performance and metacognitive awareness (Ke 2008, 539).” But rarely is there any survey material that polls the students as to whether such games are preferred, or whether such games help understand the material, in the field of political science.

A Few Studies Of Classroom Game Feedback

There are some exceptions in other subjects. Nemerow (1996) polled his biology classes to see how they felt about his competitive and non-competitive games. He found that participants felt their self-esteem, relationships with fellow students, and learning increased. The competition did induce pressure but made the gamers more motivated in their studies.

Another study is from Bourgonjon, Valcke, Soetaert and Schellens (2010). These researchers take on the argument that students are more excited to play video games in class, as opposed to traditional learning techniques. They find instead that “the students’ preferences for using video games in the classroom is affected directly by a number

of factors: the perceptions of students regarding the usefulness, ease of use, learning opportunities and personal experience with video games in general (Bourgonjon, Valcke, Soetaert and Schellens 2010, 1145).”

Games People Play (In My Class)

Clearly, the literature is supportive of using active learning, defined by McCarthy and Anderson (2000, 279) as “experiences in which students are thinking about the subject matter” while “they interact with the instructor and each other. “These role-playing simulations, lessons, games, puzzles, and other in-class and out-of-class examples are ones I utilize in the classroom, as I came from an environment in Washington DC where such activities were part of my work. It was only working with our college’s education department when I learned that such activities had a name, and a place, in the wider scholarship on teaching methods.

I have been using a few of these, and many others of their type, for the last two decades, but have never sought feedback from students, other than informal verbal assessments. In this section, I will explain a few of these games from my POLS 2210 Comparative Politics class, and report on the results of student evaluations of these lessons and games.

Pluralism-Corporatism Game

Directions

In the first game, students are trying to learn about interest group systems, how they interact with each other, and the government. Groups are broken down into three types: business, agriculture, and labor. Each group has a resource and wants a resource from someone else. Labor unions

want higher wages and lower food costs. Agriculture wants higher food costs, and lower fuel prices. Businesses (in energy) want higher fuel prices and lower wages. In the pluralism game, the students playing groups all bargain with each other. In the second game, corporatism reigns, where a fourth actor (also played by a student) operates as the government and tries to negotiate a truce among the three sectoral group.

Pluralism Game: Group yourselves into three students per group.

- Person on the left = Labor
- Person in the middle = Agriculture
- Person on the right = Business

LABOR

1) Wants Higher Wages

2) Wants Lower Food Costs

AGRICULTURE

1) Wants Higher Food Costs

2) Wants Lower Fuel Prices

BUSINESS

1) Wants Lower Wages

2) Wants Higher Fuel Prices

Corporatism Game: Group yourselves into four students per group alphabetically (A-D)

- First = Agriculture, Second = Business, Third = Government, Fourth = Labor
- Agriculture, Business and Labor want the same things as the Pluralism Game.
- Government: Your job is to negotiate a truce among all three groups.

PLURALISM VS. CORPORATISM!

Project Participant Assessment:

Did you like the game?

Did they help you understand the two interest group systems?

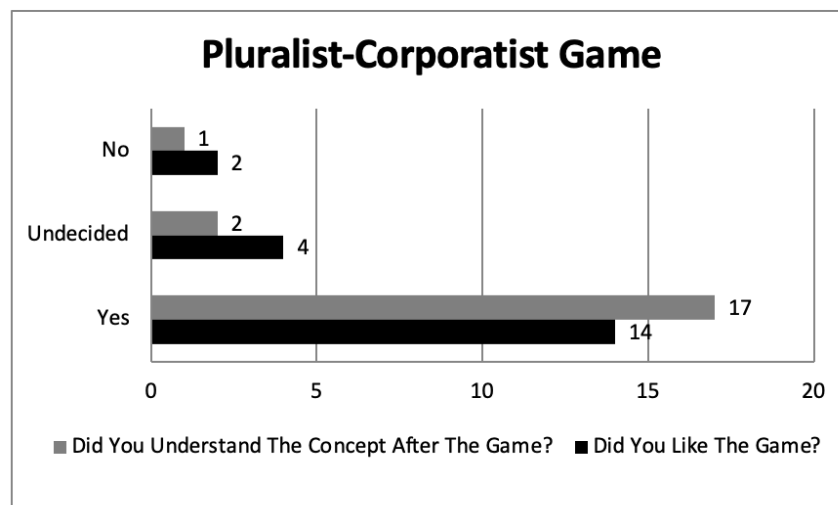
Would you like to play more such games, or go by traditional lecture format?

Figure 1: Pluralism vs. Corporatism Game

Feedback

In addition to playing the game, I also solicited feedback from the students who played, to see if they liked and learned from the experience. In the first set of surveys, the students claimed that they understood the game (and got it right on the mid-term exam). A majority also said they enjoyed the game as well, with few disliking the game or being confused by it. Given that it was the first time I used this game in a comparative politics class, I think it was a good first try.

Table 1: Pluralism-Corporatism Feedback



As you can see, a majority of the students, when given a chance, prefer the pluralism-corporatism game. Among the remaining students, five preferred the lecture and three wanted a mix of lecture and games, reflecting the argument that students enjoy games, but want the lectures to make sure they know the practical material as well, or have the concept explained to them first (Bourgonjon, Valcke, Soetaert and Schellens 2010).

Table 2: Student Preferences After The Pluralism-Corporatism Game

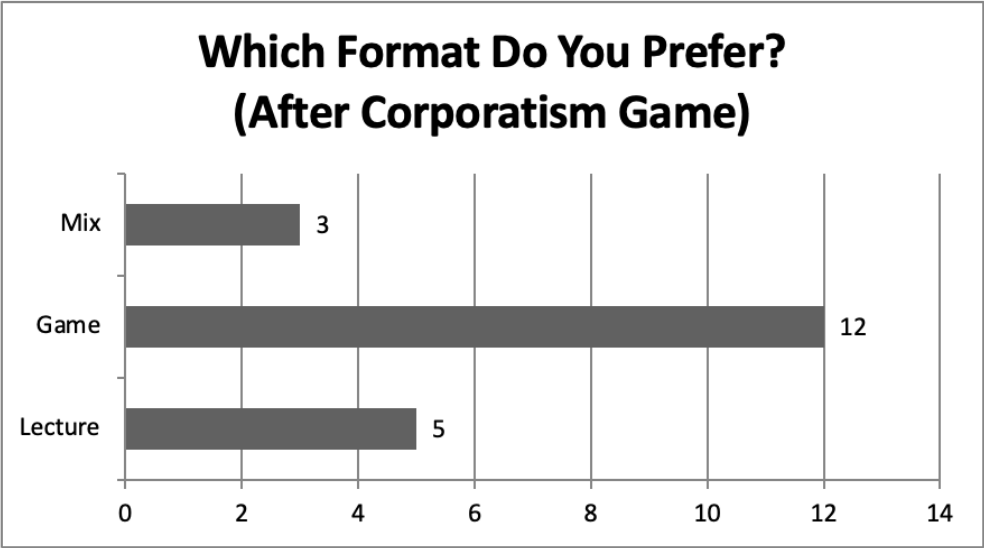


Figure 2: Delaware Map For Gerrymandering Game.

Gerrymandering Game

Directions:

The next game I attempted was a game that was designed to cover a topic that was in the news, as students were following the Supreme Court case in Wisconsin that involved gerrymandering (Kennedy 2017). It was also designed to show the students the difference between two electoral systems that we were covering, which included the single-member district pluralist system, and the proportional representation system.

Here is a description of the game rules. “You are a consultant for the Yellow Party, which has consistently finished in third place with 20% of the vote, ahead of the Green Party, but behind the Blue Party (40%) and Red Party (30%). That’s because your state (Delaware) has been operating under a proportional representation system (PR), where vote percentage = seat percentage.”

The description continues. “A voter referendum has changed the electoral system from a PR system to a Single-Member District Plurality System (SMDP), where the country is divided into three districts of elected representatives, where the candidate that finishes first (most votes) wins the election, even if it is not a majority (a plurality will do). But you have been given a rare opportunity to redraw the three districts of New Castle, Kent, and Suffolk. How do you redraw the districts so that your third party (the Yellow Party) can win one of the districts?”

	Total Vote %	Newcastle District	Kent District	Suffolk District
Blue Party	40%			
Red Party	30%			
Yellow Party	20%			
Green Party	10%			

- District Support For Each Party Across 3 Districts Must Average The Total Vote % (So Greens Can Get 20% In Newcastle, 10% In Kent, 0% In Suffolk)
- The Districts Must Total Up To 100%
- **CAN YOU SOLVE THE GAME?**
– More Than One Answer May Work

Figure 3: Gerrymandering Game Rules & Fill-In

Feedback

The students found this original game that I created to be the most challenging of any game I have ever assigned. Several wouldn't even try to solve it. Others attempted it but failed. Barely half turned it in, and only one in five got it right. Yet a group of students did try to crack it and succeeded. And not all were political science majors. One bright theater major (who missed all of her questions on the class pretest, but received one of the highest grades in class and the posttests) was among the few to solve it. When I asked how she was able to do so, when so many failed, she said "Oh, it was just like Sudoku!" It makes you wonder if would-be congressional district manipulators would look among the Sudoku champions for recruits!

Despite the challenge of the game, student interest in games did not wane. Most of the students who turned in the survey professed to like the contest, liking the class mix of lecture, discussion, and games. As a side-note, several students who could not figure out the game asked for another opportunity to solve it, and attempted to do the test extra-credit where students were asked to see if they could get the red party to capture two districts, an even bigger challenge. Once I solved it for the students the first time, they "got it" for the exam, and (more importantly) understood the concepts of proportional representation and single-member districts, both on the test and in the paper (only one struggled with the systems on her paper out of 20 students).

Table 3: Gerrymandering Game Feedback

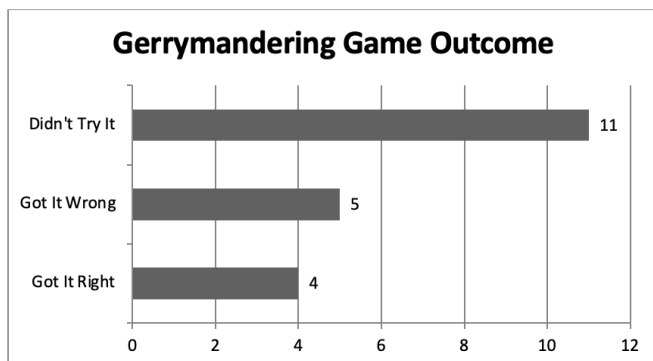


Table 4: Did Students Understand The Gerrymandering Game?

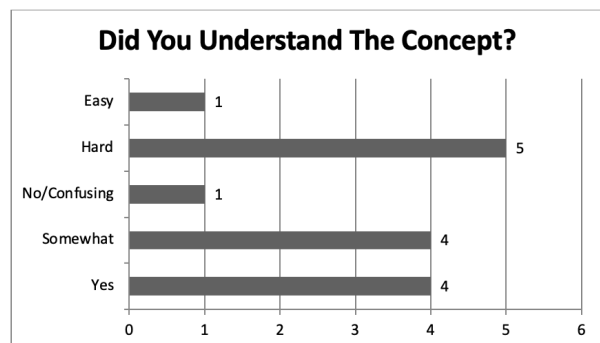


Table 5: Gerrymandering Game: Student Preferences

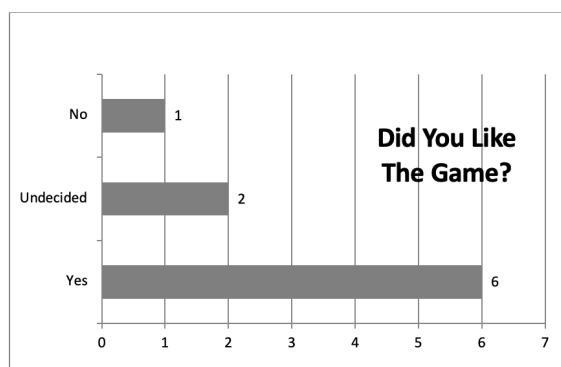
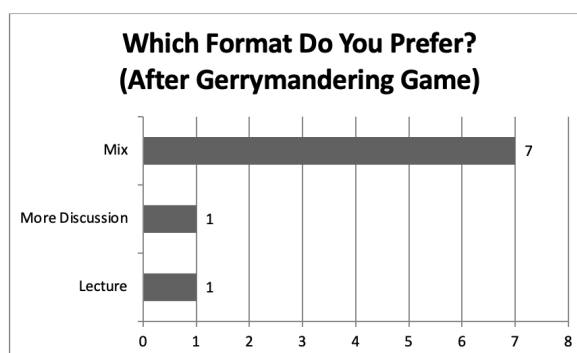


Table 6: Student Class Preferences After Gerrymandering Game



Other Games

Description

Other games were also played in this comparative politics class. In one game, students played the famous “World’s Smallest Political Quiz,” (Advocates n.d.) where students answer five questions about economic issues and five questions about personal issues. Of course, the survey definitely leans toward “libertarian” as an answer, but it does help the students draw real distinctions between liberals and conservatives, and why neither has the monopoly on “getting rid of government.” Additionally, it helps them understand what authoritarianism is, and how it differs from other ideologies.

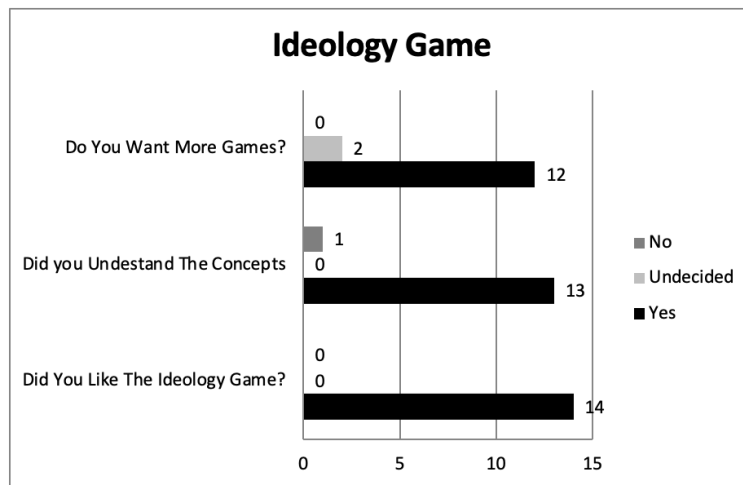
The second game involved students using the implicit association test, or IAT offered by Harvard University (Banaji and Greenwald 2013). In this game, students view a series of images and words and rapidly play a matching game. The theory is that the errors made in the playing of this game are hardly random, and are designed to uncover our implicit biases. Subjects range from evaluations of presidential candidates to race to gender to religion.

Feedback

Unfortunately, both games require a degree of anonymity, in that we are asking for personal information about ideology, or may achieve results that could insinuate that the surveyed individual harbors negative feelings toward a person or group. For example, I took a test involving religion where I was identified as harboring negative feelings toward Buddhists. Was I biased toward this group? There are a variety of reasons for my finding. Out of all the surveyed religions (Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and Judaism), I knew the least about Buddhism, and my errors could be attributed to a lack of familiarity and subsequent nervousness about that.

Nevertheless, I was able to get some information about student attitudes about the ideology game. As you can see, the students really grew to like the games and wanted more of them. They could understand the concepts (and just about all of them understood the concepts, in the poll and on the exam, even if the results of both were to be kept generally anonymous.

Table 7: Feedback From The Ideology Game



Final Findings

Survey Summaries

Overall, the students both tended to understand the concepts (on the survey and the exams) and enjoyed playing the games, a positive development for implementing these activities. There were few responses of “no” or “undecided.”

Out of all responses, games topped the instruction method that the students wanted more of, followed by a mix (of games, discussion, and lecture). Only one student wanted more discussion (we have a fair amount of it in class), and six wanted more traditional lectures. Two students were undecided about what they wanted more.

Table 8: How Students Evaluated All Semester Games

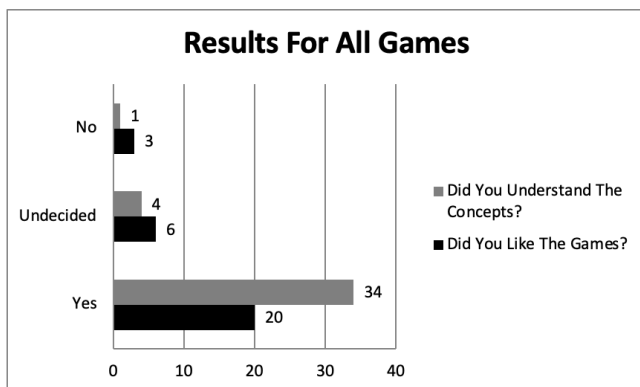
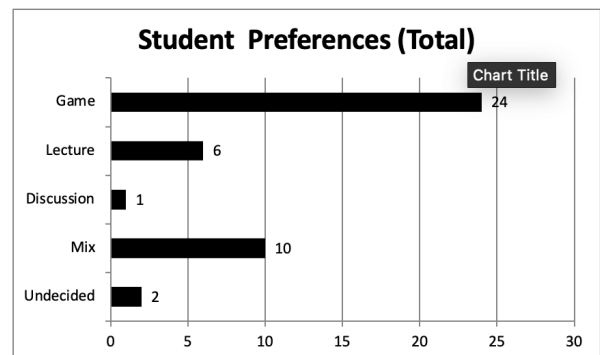


Table 9: Student Preferences After All Games



Ideas for Improvements

One thing that might have improved the most challenging game, involving gerrymandering, might have been to break the students into teams, instead of having them work individually. Research by DeVries and Edwards (1973) showed that “student teams positively altered classroom process by creating greater student peer tutoring, and greater perceived mutual concern and competitiveness in the classroom.” These were better than peer tutoring without the games or teams (DeVries and Edwards, 1973). Similarly, Ke (2008) found a more cooperative rather than competitive or individualistic approach tended to facilitate classroom learning via games.

Another involves employing such games in smaller classes. McCarthy and Anderson (2000, 280) find that their active-learning game approaches may not work well in classes with a large attendance. It could work for discussion sections that are typically offered, though they are rarely employed in these (McCarthy and Anderson 2000, 280). Such games of mine were offered in classes less than 25 students. Larger courses would be needed to be broken up into smaller groups to use these games, especially if collaboration was to be used in gerrymandering.

The key finding, however, is that students are interested in games, and will want to play them. They also don't want to completely abandon traditional methods of lecture and discussion, as many want a mix of methods used. They share the trepidation that Bourgonjon, Valcke, Soetaert, and Schellens (2010) mentioned, where students are concerned about the applicability of the games to the real world. Special care is needed to demonstrate their link to their utility beyond the classroom to the students so that such games are not seen as a frivolity. Ultimately, evidence from this paper supports "the need for balancing passive with active learning wherever and whenever the possibility arises (McCarthy and Anderson 2000, 280)."

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A Little Help from the President: Igniting Civic Engagement in American Government Students

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Abstract:

This paper presents the findings of a mixed-method research project in online American Government classes in a large urban public university with a minority-majority student population. Student questionnaires and reflective writing assignments were examined for evidence of civic engagement, transformation, and self-reported empowerment to pursue social change. In particular, the research focused on student reactions at term start to a 2009 commencement address by President Obama, reports of empowerment and the focus of civic intent in a course end critical reflection and student responses in a questionnaire that also sought evidence of civic engagement, course engagement, and attitudes related to the President's speech. The paper details the student reflections related to significant learning experiences including those

comments that indicate pause or transformation in personal goals and/or engaged citizenship. Overall, the President's speech was well-received by students, and students indicated that the speech at term start caused them to increase their efforts in the American Government class. A significant majority of the students reported empowerment by term end. The most common focus of their interests for action was issues of race, criminal justice reform, and equality. The findings also support the idea that significant learning experiences promoting civic engagement can be successfully designed and employed in online classes. The research did not find a significant difference in civic engagement between full and abbreviated term classes.

In a healthy democracy, political participation requires a basic knowledge of politics and government structures. Colby, et. al (2007) writes that "being politically informed, it turns out, is closely related to being politically engaged: implicit in the goal of having a politically informed populace is the assumption that citizens possess political knowledge and reflective judgments that are useful in guiding their voting or other political ethics." Colby argues that people need to care about civic life to be willing to "invest energy in gathering, interpreting and applying relevant information" (28). There are many elements of society that can contribute to civic education and engagement but in western societies, public educational institutions have been tasked with a significant role in advancing these social goals.

In the landmark work *Democracy and Education* (1918), educational psychologist, John Dewey argues that the full development of an educated mind depends on societal experiences that help younger members to better understand the social norms and effectively participate in society. Dewey notes, "all education which develops power to share effectively in social life is moral. It forms character which not only does the particular deed socially necessary but one which is interested in that continuous readjustment which is essential to growth" (380). In particular, Dewey argues that this social environment is bound by common experiences. He notes, "by doing his share in the associated activity, the individual appropriates the purpose which actuates it, becomes familiar with the methods and subject matters, acquires needed skill, and is saturated with its emotional spirit" (27).

The acquisition of educational credentials, especially a college degree has been linked to the attainment of essential elements of citizenship including "knowledge of principles

of democracy, political leaders, and other political concepts and information: political interest and attentiveness; frequency of voting; participation in high-political activities; and essential democratic values such as tolerance" (Colby 49). Noting that public colleges and universities have an important role to play, Myerson (2001) summarizes this case by stating,

"Universities are training their students for life as active citizens, and a role as "tempered radicals" in the jobs they will hold - individuals who are able to promote change in institutions despite the constraints they will invariably face."

These essential competencies require cultivation and practice. Some research suggests that pursuit of these competencies in course design may also provide additional dividends in terms of outcomes. Political scientists who chase rising student outcomes via the scholarship of teaching and learning have embraced the strategy of harnessing interest in public affairs to improve student-learning outcomes. Bernstein (2013) reminds us that those teaching about politics and government must explore with students the necessary conflict inherent in the political system. He notes, "more than simply lecturing our students that is the case, we would be on even stronger ground if we are able to show these lessons to students" (87). Active learning activities are more likely to help students to better understand the dynamic realities of politics. Creating a learning environment that reaches outside the classroom to weave social and political experiences together with course content can provide students with important practice in civic participation, heightened content mastery, and amplified civic engagement.

Connecting course content with the social and political sphere outside the classroom can be a challenging task. Pedagogies that are employed to facilitate this connection include active learning, collaborative learning, service-learning, community-based research, internships, and reflective activities. Some of these techniques are more difficult than others to incorporate into distance courses due to the limitations of logistics. Students may be geographically distanced from their instructor and each other. They may have chosen distance learning due to barriers such as transportation, family commitments, or health challenges. One technique that may produce positive outcomes includes assignments that require a reflective component to help students to connect course concepts and experiences with civic life. Harwood and Shay (2013) suggest that a premium should be placed on self-reflection and that it can only be achieved if the learner considers that which stands outside self (33). If learning is connected to the social and political sphere, the experience becomes a richer, deeper opportunity.

Fink (2013) has coined the term *significant learning experiences*—“teaching that resulted in something that is truly significant in terms of students’ lives” (7). For learning to be significant it must do more than help students temporarily remember course content. Studies have shown that students often cannot recall course content immediately after the term ends. Significant learning instead meshes the learning with how students live their lives and alters attitudes and actions. Institutions of higher education such as Georgia State University are promoting the concept of significant learning experiences via centers for teaching and learning in an effort to promote best practice and improved outcomes (GSU Signature Experience). The definition for signature experiences varies but Fink argues that connecting the “life file” with the “course

file” in course design is the characterizing requirement. Such course activities provide students with opportunities to expand skill sets and prepare for their place in civic society. Students placed in such learning situations have the opportunity to develop competencies to perform complex tasks by practice at combining and integrating knowledge to develop greater fluency and automaticity (Ambrose et. al (2010).

Some political scientists chasing the goal of raising student outcomes via the scholarship of teaching and learning have embraced the strategy of harnessing interest in public affairs to improve student learning outcomes. Creating a learning environment that reaches outside the classroom to weave social and political experiences together with course content can provide students with important practice in civic participation, heightened content mastery, and amplified civic engagement. By embracing the role of the university in preparing students for engaged citizenship, instructors creating civically engaging course design support this mission to initiate young citizens into government and politics.

One such effort to inspire informed, active and caring citizenship is documented in this paper. The project was undertaken in core Political Science American Government online classes at an access college within a large urban minority-majority university in the Southeastern United States. The study design employed a mixed-method approach. The quantitative component of the study was administered via a student questionnaire. The questionnaire sought to ascertain student reactions to a particular course activity and to measure student attitudes related to civic engagement. A separate qualitative component harnessed two-course activities that might provide data of student civic engagement via themes and attitudes.

The first of these two assignments set the stage for a reflection via a requirement to review and comment on one of President Obama's first speeches to a group of demographically similar peers – a commencement address to Arizona State University on May 14, 2009, soon after taking office. The speech, light on partisan policy but significant in its call to service of the country, resonates with students of every political stripe. While this instructor perceived anecdotal evidence that students were inspired by the speech, as time passed, curiosity sparked a plan to more effectively measure what effect if any, the speech might have on the students and their enthusiasm for the standard core course in American Government. Was the speech somehow special in its ability to reach college students? And was its message lasting in its effect? Finally, is the spark of engagement limited in abbreviated academic terms? Is there time to ignite civic interest? In particular, do second-half term students report engagement at the same rate as the other cohorts? Second-half term students sometimes exhibit greater academic challenges. This study was designed to examine these questions. The assignment provided an opportunity to provide a significant learning experience that would hopefully lead students to and through the intersections of course concepts and community, civic engagement, and political competency.

A second course-end reflection assignment was also reviewed for evidence of civic transformation. The assignment asked students to reflect on where they were when they started the course and compare that level of engagement and knowledge to where they were at term-end. In particular, this study is most interested in two questions from this final reflection assignment, which may indicate

transformative civic engagement. Did students indicate that they felt empowered by course activities to make social change? What causes if any, do students identify at the end of the journey that is worthy of their time and attention?

The quantitative phase of the study examined student attitudes in an anonymous student questionnaire administered at the end of the term. Students did not know they would be surveyed until the end of the term, to avoid skewing data by prior knowledge of the instructor's interest in the President's speech and course design. The instructor did not have access to the individual student responses so students were able to freely give responses knowing that the answers were only reported to the instructor in aggregate. A preliminary survey was conducted in the Fall Semester of 2015 in three online classes of the American Government. The survey had a response rate of 82% with a sample size of 77 students. This data was not collected by term type so only an aggregate report is available. Of the 66 respondents, 63 (96%) agreed or strongly agreed that President Obama's speech was engaging. The survey results indicated the President's speech inspired interest in active citizenship in 60 students (93%). In addition, 53 students (82%) responded that they believed that the speech increased their interest in their American Government Course that was just beginning. The speech theme of service and citizenship was reported by 53 (84%) of student respondents to have increased engagement with course material and 46 students (71%) suggested the timing of the assignment in the first week was a contributing factor in their academic effort in the class.

Indeed, this particular speech by President Obama received very positive marks by the students in-class assignments and in this survey, with 56 students (83%) recommending that the Arizona State University (ASU) Commencement Address be employed by their professor in a similar manner for future classes. Of those respondents, 50 students (77%) recommended that the term starts with a President's speech but this number is somewhat lower than the number of students who believed that the ASU speech was somehow special.

A formal study commenced in the Spring Term of 2016. A survey was conducted of American Government online students in various term lengths from Spring Term 2016 and Summer Term 2016 related to this research. The survey was optional and extra credit was offered to those who completed the questionnaire. Due to the brevity of the survey and the enticement of extra points attached to their final grade the aggregate survey response rate was robust at 78%.

The response rate varied from section to section. In particular, the response rate in the first-half terms in the spring of 2016 was depressed due to administrative difficulties related to institutional consolidation. The merger of two institutions was underway during this period, causing difficulties with student email accounts and messaging related to the survey from the Office of Institutional Research. Had this unusual event not interrupted the research project to a certain degree, the aggregate response rate might have been somewhat higher. Nonetheless, a student response rate of 78% suggests the data collected is reliable. The response data are broken down by aggregate, full-term aggregate and partial term aggregate types may be found in the summary tables below. A more detailed data set for each category can 20

be found in Appendix A, B, C & D at the end of this paper.

The data found in the 2016 spring and summer surveys align with the result from the preliminary surveys in the fall of 2015. While the formal survey is limited in its scope, the data demonstrates that the students:

- Listened to the speech and a significant number found it engaging
- Agreed that the speech inspired reflection on active citizenship
- Agreed that the experience increased interest in American Government class
- Agreed that the President's call to community service transferred to an interest in class success
- Agreed that the speech inspired student interest in excelling in this class
- Recommended that this particular speech be employed in class in the future
- Recommended that the instructor starts with a presidential speech but data suggest that this speech, in particular, was special.
- Agreed that the course increased engagement with the national government
- Agreed that they felt empowered to work for change related to problems of interest to them.

In addition, comparisons between profiles suggest that the data is surprisingly consistent across profiles (aggregate, full-term, half term, and second half term) and does not support the investigator's hypothesis that short terms or second half-semester part term students might feel less engaged or less empowered to make social or political change. Finally, the data suggest that it is possible to create significant learning experiences for online students that enhance civic engagement and inspire civic transformation.

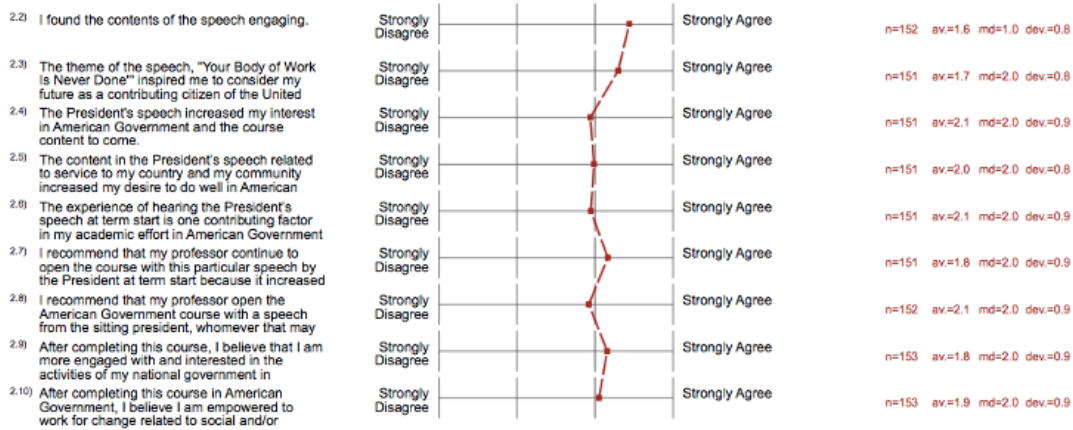
Aggregate Responses

Profile

Compilation: Compilation of All Courses

Values used in the profile line: Mean

2. Please complete the following questions thoughtfully and truthfully to contribute your insight for the research underway. At the completion of the the survey you will receive a certificate of participation to forward as proof for extra credit. Your answers are anonymous and cannot be tied to you individually. All responses will be reported as an aggregate.



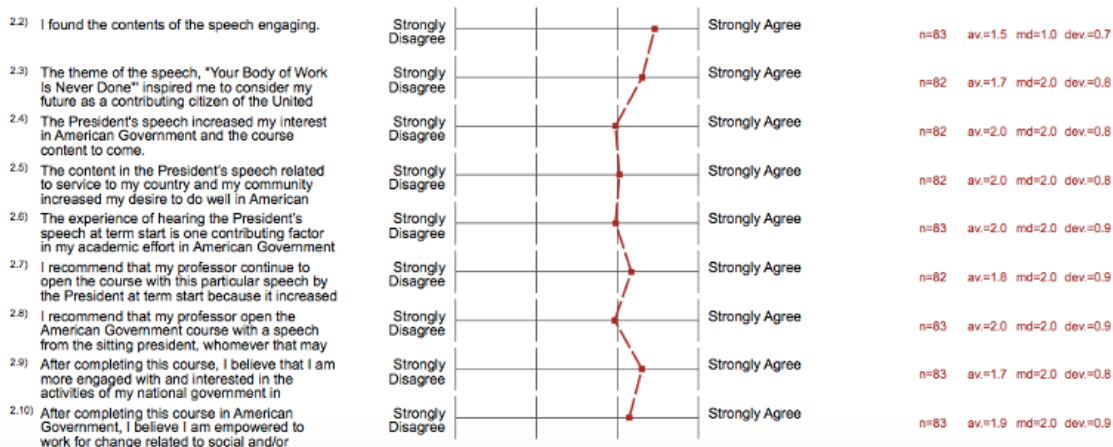
Full Term Responses

Profile

Compilation: Ortgies-Young Research Aggregate Compilation

Values used in the profile line: Mean

2. Please complete the following questions thoughtfully and truthfully to contribute your insight for the research underway. At the completion of the the survey you will receive a certificate of participation to forward as proof for extra credit. Your answers are anonymous and cannot be tied to you individually. All responses will be reported as an aggregate.



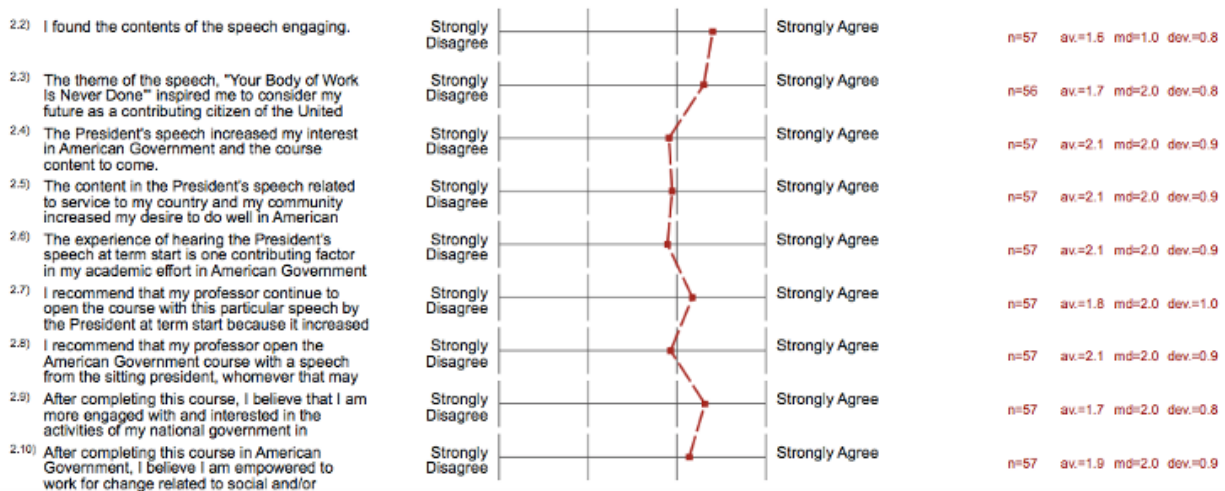
Half Term Responses

Profile

Compilation: Half Term Courses

Values used in the profile line: Mean

2. Please complete the following questions thoughtfully and truthfully to contribute your insight for the research underway. At the completion of the the survey you will receive a certificate of participation to forward as proof for extra credit. Your answers are anonymous and cannot be tied to you individually. All responses will be reported as an aggregate.



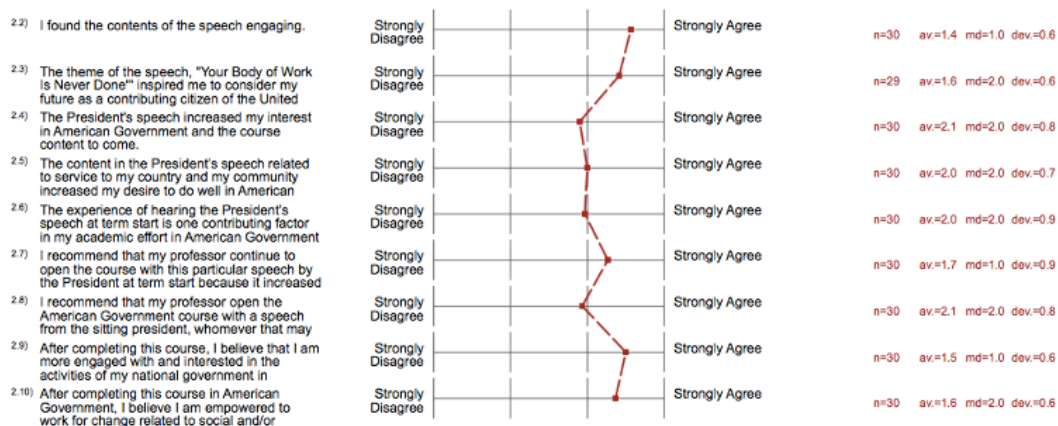
Second Half Term Classes

Profile

Compilation: Second Half Courses

Values used in the profile line: Mean

2. Please complete the following questions thoughtfully and truthfully to contribute your insight for the research underway. At the completion of the the survey you will receive a certificate of participation to forward as proof for extra credit. Your answers are anonymous and cannot be tied to you individually. All responses will be reported as an aggregate.



In an effort to find additional sources of data for the study questions beyond student questionnaires, the first-class assessment (Assignment 1) examined for more direct evidence regarding engagement with the President’s speech. This opening class assessment required students to react to prompts after listening to the speech in an online discussion forum and to share their reflections of the speech with their classmates. The following list includes frequently used keywords or phrases from the reflections that help describe student responses to the speech:

Table 5: Frequent Student Responses to President Obama’s Speech in Assignment 1

Inspiring resonates, humorous, encouraging, powerful, eloquent, charismatic, informative, motivating, conversational, excellent, clear message, genuine, a pleasure to watch, touching, honest, positive, relatable, empowering, impactful & enjoyable.

Many student responses included a transformational key, suggesting the speech provoked critical reflection or pause that has the potential to be of lasting impact. Examples of critical pause in Assignment 1 can be found in the following table:

Table 6: Student Pause to President Obama’s Speech in Assignment 1

Made me rethink my future
Left me hopeful
Motivates young minds
Changed me personally
Captivates the emotions of young listeners
Helped me understand that graduation is not the end but a new beginning
Made me realize our potential is unlimited
Helped me realize there are fulfilling things to accomplish
The speech motivated me to work harder and try my best
A student said the speech gave him chills, it gave me chills and opened my eyes
This speech positively changed how my life was going and will go in the future
I’d never been one to go up against a challenge but this speech made me believe I can
As I listened to everything he said, all I could think about was finishing school strong
After listening to his speech it got me to think about what exactly it is I want to do and how I can help and make a change in other peoples lives

Closing coding analysis of the speech reflection assignment found that 99% of students have a positive reaction to this speech by the president. There was on average one detractor in each class. One such student suggested that the speech was “dull, not very interesting, unattached, and too well-researched.” This reaction was not the norm and it may be that pre-conceived opinions of the President hindered an open analysis of what was otherwise, reported being a highly engaging address. To summarize the impact of the speech on the vast majority of the students that listened and analyzed the speech, the following quotes give a distinctive picture of the student discussion in Assignment 1.

- ***President Obama’s speech resonated with me because he spoke with such enthusiasm about every topic he covered. He made me want to believe in myself, to follow my dreams, to work harder in school, and to make a name for myself and others. I want to motivate myself more, that way I can be successful for others. I have my whole life ahead of me to learn more, do more, and achieve greatness.***
- ***Like President Obama said, “Your body of work is never done.”***
- ***The President’s speech had me lost in the speech and made me reflect deeper about my role in this nation.***
- ***I was smiling while watching him light up and keep the audience alive... President] Obama gave great hope to young men and women.***
- ***How could someone not be encouraged to go out and do all that they could to make this world a better place after hearing this speech?***

A final analysis of student reactions to the course content including the president’s speech asked students to evaluate their ability to work in an area they feel strongly about for a social change. This final course reflection asked students if they feel empowered with a greater knowledge of the American system of government at term end. Student responses may be found in Table 6:

Table 6: Student responses in Final Course Reflection (Empowerment)

Feel empowered or able to make a social change:		
Yes	132 (78%)	n=169
No	22 (13%)	
Unsure	15 (9%)	

A significant majority of students (78%) indicated that they believe they feel empowered to make a social change after completing the American Government class. Students mentioned in these reflections that the weekly class activities including the assignment to critique the President's speech played a role in this newfound confidence. Those students who reported that they did not feel empowered cited the reason being that the system is rigged; the power is controlled by the wealthy or a lack of interest.

The response rate for the reflection assignments was higher than that of the student survey because the reflection assignment was a required class element. In these final reflections, students mention a wide variety of interests, with the highest number of responses clustered around the related topics of race, equality, criminal justice reform, and economic equality. Other response topics fall into the general categories of voter participation, economic issues, the environment, health, minority populations, and the gun debate. One student's comment sums up her thoughts about civic engagement suggesting, "silence solves nothing."

Table 7: Student responses in Final Course Reflection (Topics)

Student interests for social change:
racial justice, equality, criminal justice reform, economic equality, social structure, urbanization, minimum wage
voting rights, civil liberties, youth participation, local government, electoral college, community groups, social media, and politics
the federal budget, welfare spending, college affordability, student debt, money and power, campaign finance reform
environment, climate change, buy local, animal rights
healthcare reform, pro-life, pro-choice, sex education, mental health, veteran's care
women's rights, foster children, LGBT rights, immigrants rights, faith-based rights
gun rights, gun control

A review of the final reflection data reveals a wide range of student social change interests. In addition, a clear majority of students claim to believe they feel empowered at the course completion, echoing the data on empowerment from the student survey. While some students are not confident in their personal power to make social change, still they are hopeful:

With the new information, I have obtained I feel conflicted on whether I make a difference in society. I definitely understand more and I like that I am not naïve to politics anymore, however, after reading about the Electoral College I don't know if I can make a huge difference politically. I think that I can make small differences though and hopefully all the drops that I can put in the ocean will turn into a wave.

In conclusion, the data from this study of one effort to inspire informed, active, caring citizenship in undergraduate American Government students suggests that efforts to embed significant learning experiences in course design may lead to increased student civic engagement. Data collected from both close coding of two key course reflections and a course-end questionnaire support the hypothesis that engaging course activities beginning with an impactful speech by President Obama can have a transformational impact on student civic connections. In addition, the data collected does not support the hypothesis that students from abbreviated academic terms are less likely to be civically engaged by course activities designed to increase student – civic connections. Indeed, the data suggest that students in abbreviated terms report similar engagement to those students in full 16-week terms. One interpretation of the data, suggests that student civic connections were sparked by course activities and in particular, by the required viewing of President Obama's commencement address at Arizona State University. As Dewey notes, it is possible to actuate student purpose by an associated course activity. In this course design, students indicate they have acquired needed skills to be empowered, and thus became saturated with Dewey's emotional spirit by indicating that there are causes they are now prepared to pursue.

Recommendations for future research include the evaluation of student responses to speeches from future presidents to see the influence of a president is related to the office or the characteristics of the individual. In addition, efforts to identify measure effectiveness of course components that promote civic engagement and improved student outcomes are recommended to expand the scholarship of teaching and learning in the essential work of building an informed citizenry.

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Evaluating the Utilization of Various Best Practices for Assignments in Introductory Online POLS Classes

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Research Question:

Considering the general nature of instructional challenges faced by faculty teaching introductory POLS classes, what kinds of assignments best motivate the average student in such classes to actively engage in learning about Political Science course content, to maximize the academic achievement of as many such students as possible? The following section will briefly review some select SoTL literature on POLS Education and online higher-education instruction. The forthcoming literature review is intended to identify major streams of thought regarding best practices that may be most appropriate for instruction in introductory POLS classes, online and college-level in general. Toward the end of the following literature review, a series of teaching and learning best practices will be identified as having been selected by this author for the most appropriate implementation, and evaluation, in the context of his introductory POLS classes.

Literature and Best Practices:

Very much related to the social constructivist approach of Lo and Mange (2013), both Robertson (2013) and Woo (2007) argued in favor of assignments that create real-world relevance for students doing collaborative assignments through authentic tasks. Several of the characteristics listed by Woo, and discussed by other scholars such as Lo & Mange (2013), Junisbai (2014), and Kelly (2012) suggest that instructional flexibility is a fundamental characteristic for designing and teaching any college-level class in the 21st century. Quite a few publications reviewed for this study tend to agree on the importance of having clear, straightforward, easily understood instructions for the completion of online assignments, as well as unambiguous explanations of how student work for the assignment will be assessed

(<http://onlinelearningconsortium.org/>, <https://www.qualitymatters.org/rubric> & <http://www.brown.edu/about/administration/sheridan-center/teaching-learning/course-design/learning-technology/online-assignments>).

Coutinho (2007) joined other SoTL scholars in advocating for the merits of prompt, constructive feedback on student work. Delivered expeditiously in the appropriate context, such instructional feedback can promote quite productive metacognitive reflection for students. To introduce their research, Coutinho overtly acknowledges that preceding research had focused on the relationship between students' achievement goals, metacognition, and academic success (at the primary and secondary educational levels). However, no such prior research had analyzed that relationship specifically for college students. Coutinho describes achievement goals as the types of outcomes that students seek to realize in educational settings. There are two types of achievement goals: First, content mastery goals are described by the author as most conducive to positive academic outcomes since they serve to orient students to focus on learning and mastery of course content. The second type of achievement goal described by Coutinho is performance goals, which "encourage students to focus on scoring better than others or avoiding the appearance of incompetence" (Coutinho, 2007, 40). The positive influence of student content mastery goals demonstrated in Coutinho's research offers support for the last best practice for online assignments described below for this study. That is, a systematic focus on aligning the requirements of any required assignment for an online class with the specific learning objectives for the content, as well as the common course learning outcomes.

Selected Best Practices for Online Intro. POLS Assignments:

1) [Flexibility] Allow for flexibility in required time/ form of completed assignment, thus accommodating diverse students with multiple learning styles. **2)** [Motivate-engage] Promote student choice and individual *motivation* by presenting various opportunities

for students to explore personally engaging, individually compelling facets of the course content concerning real-world politics. Sometimes referred to as "*differentiation*." **3)** [Authentic tasks/ Civic Engagement]; Create real-world relevance for students doing authentic tasks, that call for students to become politically engaged in advocating for their preferred outcomes, interests, or opinions regarding the real-world implications of POLS coursework.. **4)** [Collaborate] Present multiple opportunities for student-to-student collaboration and/or **teamwork** to encourage students to develop their cooperation and leadership skills. **5)** [Info-literacy] Encourage students to develop their critical thinking and information literacy skills such as writing, accessing, analyzing, organizing, and/or presenting complex information about various topics related to course content. **6)** [Responsive-prompt--feedback] Facilitate student metacognitive awareness (<http://psycnet.apa.org/journals/amp/53/4/449/>) and critical self-reflection through prompt, constructive instructional feedback. **7)** [Simple-instructions] Provide accessible, easily understood, instructions with limited steps to completion of assignments. **8)** [Align-objectives] Align the requirements of assignments with discipline-specific, institutional learning objectives for the course.

Variables and Analysis:

Dependent Variables: POLS 1101 Student academic achievements (including student engagement with, and mastery of, the course content; as well as retention) will be measured for each class (section) using two (2) dependent variables. First, achievement of GPC's Common Course Learning Outcomes among the students in a particular section of POLS 1101 will be indicated as the percentage of students in a class that earned a 70, or higher, on a comprehensive, end, of course, assessment.

This aggregate variable of average student success on GPC's Common Course Assessment for POLS 1101 within a particular class will be used instead of individual students' Final Exam grades to indicate the causal influence of different types of assignments with respect to student learning outcomes to mitigate the spurious influence of pre-existing variation between diverse individual student's prior academic training and content familiarity. In other words, the use of aggregate, class-level assessment averages to indicate relative degrees of academic success among classes with different required assignments should overshadow the potential influence of substantial, preexisting variation among culturally, academically, and socioeconomically diverse students in all of the relevant classes. Those average class results are intended to provide a class-level measure of student achievement concerning the following Course Learning Outcomes for POLS 1101: **1.** Discuss how the political system of the United States works. **2.** Describe how the Georgia government works under the current state constitution. **3.** Identify the historical and philosophical roots of the U.S. system of government & politics, as well as its Constitutional foundations. **4.** Explain the importance of civic responsibility in a participatory republic. **5.** Evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the contemporary U.S. political system. **6.** Utilize computer technology to interact with information relating to politics and/or government. Average student academic achievement in each Online section of POLS 1101 under consideration will also be indicated by a dependent variable measuring the percentage of students originally enrolled in a class who completed the academic requirements for that class. The theory here is that the nature of various academic

assignments required for particular sections of Online POLS 1101 could serve as a deterrent or an encouragement for students' motivation to press-on, and complete the academic requirements of a course, or not.

Independent Variables: The above-mentioned student academic achievement will be analyzed across multiple, full-term sections (classes) of POLS 1101 taught Online at GPC from 2008 through Fall 2016 by a single instructor (myself). Those learning outcomes will be compared between various POLS 1101 sections in which one of several different assignments was used (before the administration of the Final Exam).

The causal influence of requiring a specific assignment on the average level of student academic achievement in a section of Online POLS 1101 will be indicated by the percentage of students originally enrolled in a class who completed the academic assignment(s) required in that class (70% or above). The theory underlying this approach assumes that the main purpose of requiring assignments in an Online section of POLS 1101 is to help all students enrolled in that class achieve specifically delineated course Learning Objectives and/or Educational Outcomes. If the requirements of a particular assignment for Online POLS 1101 are such that students find them confusing, unclear, inaccessible, or simply discouraging, then the probability of that assignment contributing to the general academic achievement of students in that class is significantly diminished. Each of the following assignments utilized (to varying degrees) at least one of several best practices for assignments in Online, college-level POLS learning environments:

Topic

Debates Assignment: 4 WebEx Debate meetings are scheduled throughout a full-term class (45 to 50 minutes duration, each), with two teams of opposing debate leaders (up to 5 students each) leading a critical class discussion of various dimensions of a content-relevant problem from opposing viewpoints. Up to five students are assigned as collaborative debate leaders to 1 of 2 opposing debate teams—for each of 4 prescheduled Blackboard Collaboratedebate chats. Members of each debate team are granted exclusive access to their team's asynchronous discussion board (for collaborative communication in preparing for their team's WebExdebate). Each debate leader is individually responsible for turning in a three-page paper outlining the information that they have researched for the debate, along with a list of at least 4 quality sources—before their scheduled WebExdebate. Holding each debate leader individually responsible for specific academic work—based on their preparations—is intended to address the free-rider problem common to group work. Other students in the class, not assigned to a team for a particular debate, are still required to engage by reading some introductory material on the topic and producing a list of 5 of their own, original questions on the debate topic. These audience members are further encouraged to participate in each debate by logging onto the relevant WebEx debate—and participating by asking questions of any of the debate leaders.

Civic Engagement Project: This Civic Engagement project is a full-term, semester-long written assignment for any introductory POLS class (minimum 6 to 8 pages, with at least 8 references in APA format), in which the students choose their own, personally compelling topics. Topics must be proposed to the instructor (for advice and consultation) in the first couple of weeks of the semester. Next, students are to explain and describe the various options they pursued publicly expressing their preferences, concerns, or ideas about their topic using **civic engagement**. Civic engagement should be more 'public' than the simple act of expressing one's own, individual political opinions in a single act, on one isolated day. It should involve organized participation with other (like-minded) people in efforts to make a positive contribution to dealing with an important political problem. This project should give the

student insight that individual ideas, concerns, and preferences are much more likely to be influential in American politics when expressed publicly, preferably in coordination with a network of other people who share a common interest in the topic. Students are not necessarily required to join an interest group, or donate any money, for this project!

In the **critical reflection** section of the paper, it is appropriate for the student to write in the first-person, personal tone—as allowed in the "civic engagement" section of the paper (using I, me, mine...). I will be interested in observing their critical assessments of the nature of politics ongoing relevant to the chosen topic, as well as the potential biases or objectivity of information learned from various perspectives on the topic. I also want the student to discuss in this section their critical observations of their personal engagement experiences with the politics of the topic. Did they make a difference? Did the experience of political engagement on an important personal topic impact them personally? Did this assignment have any influence at all on their personal views regarding the topic? As far as the public nature of this assignment, did their civic engagement activities have any effect on the attitudes of other people regarding the topic? Students are asked to critically evaluate the relative influence of other people, groups, or organizations involved in the politics of their topic. In addition to the requirement to turn in the civic engagement papers at www.turnitin.com (which allows for plagiarism detection, the use of an assignment rubric as well as in-text feedback), students are required to post a copy of their civic engagement papers to an asynchronous discussion board accessible to all students in the class (as a **final class presentation**).

McGraw-Hill Connect: This assignment directs students to log in to Connect, a website maintained by their textbook's publisher, McGraw-Hill, <http://connect.customer.mheducation.com/features/students/> (access to that site was included in the purchase price of the required textbook). LearnSmart is a highly interactive feature at the Connect site which is designed to encourage metacognitive reflection as students work through a progressively adaptive series of questions designed to provide an immediate, individualized response to their answers.

Before answering each question, students are to indicate the level of their confidence in the veracity of their knowledge. Adapting to each student's demonstrated content knowledge, as well as their degree of confidence in their answer, the program progressively selects future, forthcoming questions to help each student efficiently improve their learned understanding of the content. The following text is copied from McGraw-Hill's Connect Effectiveness Study: "By facilitating a stronger connection with the course content and incorporating the latest technologies – such as McGraw-Hill LearnSmart®, an adaptive learning program – these tools enable a student to be more successful in their college careers, which will ultimately raise the percentage of students completing their postsecondary degrees.

(<http://connect.customer.mheducation.com/studies/effectiveness-studies/connect-makes-a-difference/>, 2013).

Observations and Analysis:

In Figure I, the blue bar graph presents percentages of students originally enrolled in POLS 1101 classes who scored a 70 or higher on the common course assessment. Another dependent variable generally indicative of student academic success in a particular section is indicated by the purple line labeled Retention. That variable is a measure of the percentage of students originally enrolled in a POLS 1101 section that completed the academic requirements for that section with a class grade of 70 or higher. The black line indicates the percentage of students originally enrolled in a class who earned a 70 or better for their work on the required Debates assignment (assigned from Spring 2008 through Spring 2011). The yellow line indicates the percentage of students originally enrolled in a class who earned a 70 or better for their Civic Engagement paper (assigned from Spring 2010 through Spring 2012).

Further, the red line is an indicator of students who earned 70% or more credit for the McGraw-Hill Connect assignment (required beginning in Spring 2013). Figure I demonstrates that both average student success on the POLS 1101 assessment and general student retention saw significant declines when both the Debates assignment and Civic Engagement projects were required simultaneously in the same class. Specifically, the average percentage of students enrolled in such classes who earned a 70 or better on the POLS 1101 common course assessment dropped to 58.833. Further, the percentage of students in such classes who completed the academic requirements of POLS 1101 at 70% or better was 68.67. Such generally disappointing results strongly imply that all instructors of introductory POLS classes should be careful to avoid overreaching in choosing their required assignments. It is not necessarily the case that using more instructional best practices will result in higher levels of student learning.

A glance at assessment results in Figure I certainly implies that the McGraw-Hill Connect activities assigned in my Online POLS classes since Spring 2013 have been more conducive to improved student academic achievement in comparison to student academic achievement in the same level and type of class where civic engagement papers or topic debates were assigned. However, it must be stipulated that in 7 of those 16 sections (from Spring 2010 through Spring 2011), both a civic engagement paper *as well as* a debates assignment were required. The combination of those two, semester-long assignments as part of an introductory, online POLS 1101 class was, quite likely, too much academic work to expect from students enrolled in such a section. Even so, I currently require both a civic engagement paper and a debates assignment in my online, Honors sections of POLS 1101, with relatively good results.

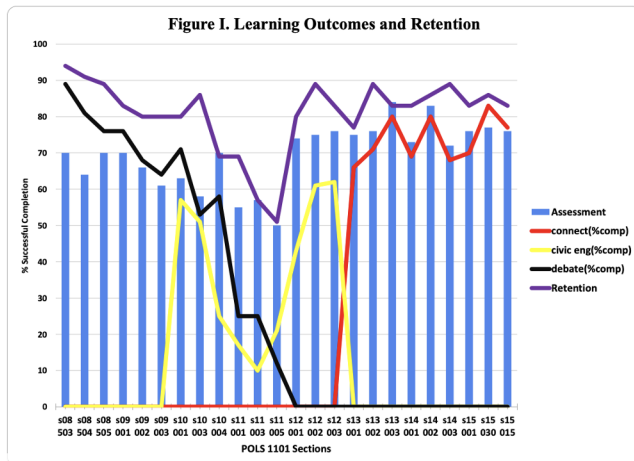
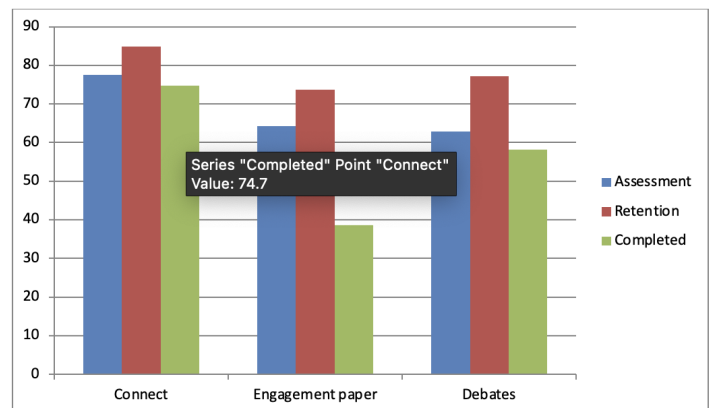


Figure II. Average Student Academic Achievement for 3 Assignment Types:



Aggregation of the above noted, class-level averages of student learning outcomes presented in Figure II implies several things. First of all, a comparison of average student assessment results across the three relevant assignment types demonstrates that average student assessment results were markedly better in classes where the McGraw-Hill Connect activities were required. No significant difference in average student assessment success between classes that used debates versus civic engagement projects is indicated. (64, 63). Further, both average student retention (84.8) and assignment completion (74.7) results in classes requiring McGraw-Hill Connect activities were far superior to the same results in classes that either required a civic engagement paper (73.78, 38.56) or a debates assignment (77.154, 58.167). Finally, although there is only a slight difference in average student retention between classes with a civic engagement paper (73.78) and debates (77.154), average assignment completion for debates (58.167) was far superior to the average percentage of students who completed a required civic engagement paper (38.56). Such disappointing student completion of a paper assignment in introductory POLS classes may specifically result from the limited academic background (and information literacy skills) of the average student enrolled in a two-year, access college. These results may also, very well reflect the limited instructional attention devoted in those classes to actually teaching the students about the process of civic engagement, how to analyze the reliability/validity of information obtained through research, and/or how to present such analysis and research as a political science paper. My reflection on the results of requiring such a semester-long, written paper in terms of my instruction of future introductory POLS classes cautions me (and other beginning instructors of introductory POLS classes) to *'teach the students you have, not the students you wish you had.'*

Implications and Conclusions:

The results previously noted are certainly not conclusive. However, this study provides some evidence that POLS instructors of introductory courses could be well served by including student-focused, active learning assignments as requirements in their classes. Such a general, blanket statement must be qualified with the advice for such instructors to reflect on the nature of students that are likely to enroll in their classes. In other words, assigning an eight-page written paper based on a semester-long civic engagement project for an introductory POLS section at a two-year, entry-level access institution was admittedly overenthusiastic. Even so, smaller, more manageable civic engagement activities could be used quite productively in introductory POLS classes. For example, some of the activities that I require as part of my McGraw-Hill Connect assignment encourage students to interact with real-world, empirical ramifications of the course content, while reflecting on possible options for civic engagement. Also, the debates assignment, which I currently use with good results in my Honors Online sections of Introductory American Government includes some features of civic engagement. The fact that I continue to use civic engagement papers in my Honors section of online Introduction to American Government, as well as in sophomore-level, online Introduction to Political Science classes holds promise for the use of similar assignments in most advanced POLS classes, even in the online forum.

Regardless of the type of assignment an instructor chooses to use in an online introductory Political Science class, the results of this study imply the importance of flexibility concerning both the scheduled due date as well as the format of content required of

students for the assignment. It is also important to ensure that the assignment is well aligned with the learning objectives for the course. Relatively simple, straightforward instructions for completing the assignment (as well as criteria for evaluating student work) were also found to be redeeming qualities of my McGraw-Hill Connect activities. The instantaneous, individually responsive feedback for student interaction with the progressively adaptive questions in McGraw-Hill Connect's LearnSmart proved to be quite efficient in contributing to the improvement of student learning outcomes in this study. Although the McGraw-Hill Connect activities did not put much emphasis on developing student cross-disciplinary, information literacy skills (as could be emphasized in Debate or paper assignments), small group and/or large group collaborative student interaction is possible in relation to such assignments. Specifically, after students are required to go to the textbook publisher's website for individual interaction with the questions or activities at that website, various communication tools in the classes' online learning platform could be utilized to engage students in collaborative discussions about those activities, and individual student's observations, reactions and/or questions about the relevant content.

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From Model UN to “Choose Your Own Adventure”: Providing a Virtual Experience Into International Organizations and Conflict

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How COVID-19 Infected Our Annual Model UN

Nearly every year, LaGrange College puts on a Model United Nations (MUN) for the local community, either for high schools in West Georgia and East Alabama, or college students and faculty at LaGrange College. Participants play countries while my college students in an international organizations class (POLS 3322) or international politics class (POLS 2220) help me write the scenario these countries find themselves in. Players are put on various committees related to the crisis in the scenario (political, military, economic and environmental); they have to pass resolutions in

committee, and then take them to the full assembly of countries for debate and possible passage. All of this is run by the LaGrange College students on MUN day, with my role being one of judge for participation and awards.



Photo1: LaGrange College Model UN In Action

Then, COVID-19 struck. LaGrange College, and local high schools, shut down a month before the Model UN was to take place. Everything went from in-person to Zoom. Our carefully crafted scenario about trying to stop a war between India and Pakistan, with our committees and assignments, all went down the drain, just like so much in academia in 2020 across the country. Or had it? Even as debates raged across the country about what to do, I met together with my students, before the campus went down on lockdown. I had just been reading a “Choose Your Own Adventure” (CYOA) book to my kids, niece and nephew the prior weekend, a series of books written where the reader makes a series of choices, which determines the outcome of the stories (Chooseco LLC 2020). These books sold 150 million copies in 34 languages from 1981 to 1998, according to a CYOA source. I pitched a novel idea to our students, so to speak. What if we converted the Model UN to a Choose Your Own Adventure for the high schools to play?



Photo 2: LaGrange College Model UN In Action

How Professors Play CYOA

Believe it or not, these “Choose Your Own Adventure” (CYOA) stories are hardly the stuff of young adult fiction. A number of academic publications, from education to social psychology, lectures style and communications to cybersecurity, have relied upon this book theme as a teaching strategy to promote active learning.

Tyndale and Ramsoomair (2016) detail how 37

interactive storytelling, a key component of the videogame industry has experienced a recent renaissance among kids and adults. They find that such lessons from entertainment have applicability in academia. Tyndale and Ramsoomair (2016) find that some interactive storytelling narratives succeed better than others. They find that there needs to be a reasonable (1) “illusion of choice” (rather than only one reasonable choice), (2) visible consequences to player strategy, (3) making players “emotionally invested” in the outcome, including more mental stress about the decision and empathy for the characters, (4) unpredictability in the plot of the story, (5) realistic and credible supporting characters, and (6) satisfactory closure, whether the outcome is positive or negative [11]

[11] It should be noted that I read this paper *after* we did our own CYOA project, but we luckily were able to encompass many of these recommendations made by Tyndale and Ramsoomair (2016). Having read these CYOA books before starting gave me a sense of what works, and my sample UN India-Pakistan water conflict subsection helped give ideas to the undergraduates who participated in this research project when coming up with their own sections.



Photo 3: Author's Picture of CYOA Books From His Personal Library.

Vicary and Fraley (2007) provide a hypothesis test of “attachment theory,” where those who lack confidence make poor choices in relationships with loved ones. In order to analyze whether attachment theory holds, researchers conducted a simulated test using CYOA methods. “Across three studies, participants were presented with a ‘Choose Your Own Adventure’ dating story in which they made choices based on their partners’ behaviors. In each study we found that attachment styles predicted the kinds of choices participants made at the outset of and throughout the story. Additionally, relationship satisfaction was related to the choices participants made throughout the fictional narrative, even in situations in which the partner’s behavior was the same for all participants (Vicary and Fraley 2007).”

Mundy and Consoli (2013) in their paper “Here Be Dragons: Experiments With The Concept Of ‘Choose Your Own Adventure’ In The Lecture Room” write that their research “focuses on examining the translation and adaptation of an approach used principally by novelists, that of the non-linear narrative, to provide readers with active agency in choosing the direction of a story. The readers, in this case, are the learners and the story is the lecture.”

Both Mundy and Consoli (2013) admit while there are some problems in their analysis of the effectiveness of their strategy, they add “it can have a positive impact on the learner environment, including increasing student motivation to study.”

Similarly, Ribarsky (2013) writes the paper “Choose Your Adventure: Examining Social

Exchange The Relational Choices (2013).” She uses the methodology so “Students will explore the ways in which social exchange theory explains how individuals make choices as to whether to enter, continue, or terminate a relationship.”

Finally, Chothia et.al. (2017) put together the piece “Jail, Hero Or Drug Lord? Turning A Cybersecurity Course Into An 11 Week Choose Your Own Adventures Story.” In their article, they write “[W]e argue that narrative and story are important elements of gamification, and we describe a framework that we have developed which adds a story to an 11 week cyber security course. The students play the part of a new IT security employee at a company and are asked to complete a number of security tasks... As the story unfolds they find deceit, corruption and ultimately murder, and their choices lead them to one of three different endings.”

In their assessment of the game, Chothia and his co-authors find evidence that “the story increased student engagement and results.” But would that be the case for high school students and teachers, and could college students and their professor recreate the type of scenario that experienced professors conjured up? That remained to be seen.

Challenges Of A Choose Your Own Adventure

Coming up with our own book, a virtual game designed to teach students about the United Nations and the India-Pakistan conflict captured the excitement of my students, and me as well, until the task started to

It took us 88 Microsoft PowerPoint slides to cover everything. Coordination for one of these via Zoom was such a challenge. And the ability to link up the format of the page, for decision nodes, took so many edits that I consider it a minor miracle that it was accomplished before the end of the semester, barely in time for the high schoolers before their year ended. See Doctrow (2009) for an example of exactly how challenging such an undertaking can be! As Ragan (2008) reveals, the CYOA book *The Mystery of Chimney Rock* by Edward Packard had 121 pages, 36 endings, 44 choices and 33 continuing pages, demonstrating that this is definitely not “child’s play.”

But there were benefits. First of all, we actually could pull off the Model United Nations (MUN), as promised. Second, we could teach those high schoolers about the simulation themes: both the India-Pakistan issues of concern, from their history, politics and economics to regional alliances, such as the ties between India and Russia, as well as the China-Pakistan alliance. Players learned about the United Nations institutions, from the UN General Assembly and UN Security Council, to the International Court of Justice and ECOSOC, rules, voting, vetoes, and consequences of each.

We had the reader play a college graduate, commissioned to play a role at the UN, with a British and French diplomat to help remind the protagonist of the rules for the UN, or a little about the history of the country, offering realistic pros and cons for the decision-maker to consider before selecting a particular option.

And yes, I enlisted an art major from our college who was taking me for another interdisciplinary course to assist with the eye-catching cover.

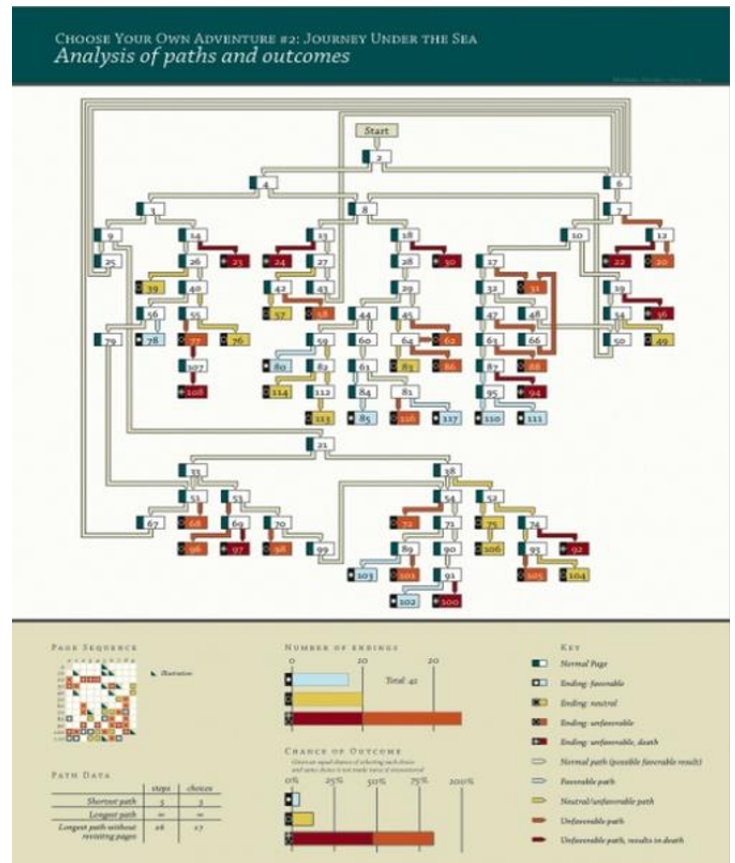
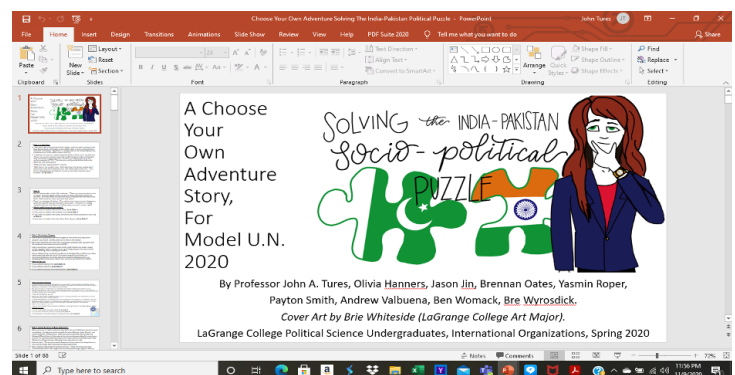


Figure3: Doctrow (2009)



Here are several suggestions for any professor interested in following in our footsteps. First of all, understand that this is a Herculean undertaking to put one of these projects together, so get an early start well into the semester.

Secondly, you'll probably need to give the students an example of what you're looking for. Even showing examples of the Choose Your Own Adventure books still left a few of them scratching their heads. So I split their committee work into three issues to tackle, and reserved the fourth for myself: water wars. Once I distributed these to our students, it got the ball rolling, though I had to make some cosmetic changes to their write-up from time-to-time.

Third, encourage your students to take the assignment as seriously as possible, to make it realistic, and less outlandish (some CYOA books could border on the fantastic and unbelievable). I recommend reading, and having your students read, several of these articles in the literature review, especially Tyndale and Ramsomair. The college students' work, just like their MUN participation, is designed to serve as an inspiration to the high schoolers, several of whom eventually chose LaGrange College as their destination, citing our simulation.

And finally, have someone look over the finished product before distributing it to the high schoolers, or college students. If you think your final product is ready, think again. You'll never perfect the "if you choose option A, go to slide 15, or if you choose option B, go to slide 16" set of options without heavy editing and field testing (on some high school students). The results were worth it, though. "We have our AP exam on Monday, so I will add this on Google classroom on Tuesday!" one teacher wrote. "I loved Choose your Own Adventure books as a kid. I checked

out every single one from our school library! What a cool idea to make your own. I know my students will really enjoy it!"

You can get started yourself (Choose Your Adventure Books, n.d.) at

<https://www.chooseyourownadventurebooks.org/write.interactive.stories.html>,

where thousands have started published their own works. Then, the adventure can truly begin!

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