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Reinventing the High School Government Course

Rigor, Simulations, and Learning from Text

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Abstract

The high school government course is arguably the main site of formal civic education in the country today. This article presents the curriculum that resulted from a multiyear study aimed at improving the course. The pedagogic model, called *Knowledge in Action*, centers on a rigorous form of project-based learning where the projects are weeks-long simulations. The first section introduces the course and the study, the second describes the methodology and design principles, the third describes the political simulations that are the spine of the course, and the fourth examines implementation and design issues that emerged across the years. The latter are concerned with the centrality of simulations, the selection of core content and skills for deeper learning, and the ongoing struggle to help students learn from texts. Readers are invited to adopt or adapt any of the design elements to suit their needs.

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The U.S. government course is a staple in the American high school curriculum. Most high schools offer it, and most graduates took it in one form or another (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2009). Consequently, the course—in terms of institutional investment and student enrollment—is arguably the main site of formal civic education in the country. This article presents the final, or 2.0, curriculum of a multiyear research-and-development initiative aimed at innovating this course. Our pedagogic approach centers on a rigorous form of project-based learning (PBL) in which each project is a weeks-long political simulation. Political simulations, readers may recall, are among the "six promising approaches" to civic education identified by a recent consensus panel (Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools and the Leonore Annenberg

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Institute for Civics, 2011, p. 6); however, they are unequally distributed to students based on their racial and socioeconomic characteristics (Kahne & Middaugh, 2008). The curriculum presented here was implemented in both well-resourced suburban and poverty-impacted urban public schools. It includes instructional supports that increase the likelihood of success for the range of students who now enroll.

This article is addressed to high school government teachers as well as to civic educators more broadly, including curriculum developers in district and state offices and in civic education organizations. Our goal is to present this curriculum and pedagogy along with our reflections on both so that readers may adapt them, if they wish, to their own efforts to renew the government course and other high school social studies courses.

We chose to work with the Advanced Placement version of the course, called AP U.S. Government and Politics (APGOV). We had several reasons. First, it is a popular AP course. It ranks fourth or fifth in annual enrollment of the nearly 40 AP courses offered. Since the late 1990s, the number of students taking it has increased rapidly, now standing at around a quarter million (College Entrance Examination Board, 2014). Second, and contributing to the increase, AP is being "democratized" (Lacey, 2010, p. 34); that is, the demographic profile of participating students is changing rapidly. This is due to a number of factors, including a deliberate expansion effort by the Department of Education in cooperation with the College Entrance Examination Board (College Board), the association that creates and administers AP tests and courses (see Wakelyn, 2009). Recently, an "excellence for all" trend has brought advocates of school tracking alongside advocates of de-tracking, making bedfellows of two groups of school reformers that traditionally pursued different goals: social efficiency on the one hand and social justice on the other (see perceptive accounts of the trend by Schneider, 2011, and Labaree, 2010). The effect of this union is to give many more students access to AP courses, which both groups have championed as the "gold standard" (e.g., Mathews, 2009) of the American high school curriculum. As more students, including historically underserved students, enroll in APGOV, *our* aim is to improve its quality.

A third reason for choosing to work with the AP version of the course is that it affords the opportunity to test our pedagogical approach on a most challenging platform. As the saying goes, "If you can innovate here, you can innovate anywhere." This is due to the daunting structural constraints that come with AP: an impossibly large topical array; a breadth-oriented, high-stakes summative test; and the test-prep pedagogy for which AP courses are generally known.

Our initiative had five goals: (a) to improve the authenticity or real-world value of the course, (b) to increase student engagement in the course, (c) to improve the "meaningfulness" of student learning while (d) achieving same or better pass rates on the AP test as students in traditional APGOV classrooms, and finally, we (e) wanted the increasing number of students now enrolling in APGOV not only to enter but to succeed in the course—both to learn and to enjoy.

In the next section, we describe our research and the design principles by which the course was developed. Following that are descriptions of the five political simulations that became the heart of the course, plus their constituent tasks and a note on the organization of the curriculum. The final section discusses key implementation issues that have arisen across the years—key because these issues are fertile and unlock a range of further issues. They are linked to the design principles described in the first section and concern (a) the centrality of simulations, (b) content selection, and (c) helping students learn from texts.

Method and Design Principles

We employed a research-and-development methodology called design-based implementation research (DBIR). DBIR is, by definition, concerned with problems of practice. Its primary goal is to improve practice. Its secondary goal is theory building, which includes problem redefinition as the work proceeds and the refinement of central categories—the three design principles presented below plus learning from text, which is developed in the discussion section. The seminal work on DBIR was done by Brown (1992) and has been refined since by Penuel, Fishman, and others (e.g., Penuel, Fishman, Cheng, & Sabelli, 2011). Brown argued that classroom innovations should be developed collaboratively by teachers, researchers, and school leaders; Penuel and his colleagues underscored this point and clarified that DBIR is committed to "using research to solve practical problems" (Penuel, Fishman, Cheng, & Sabelli, 2011). This requires the research to be plainly and directly "practice centered" (Penuel, Fishman, Cheng, & Sabelli, 2011, p. 332). Accordingly, we designed an innovation and then iteratively implemented, tested, and refined it in classrooms. We did this across three school districts in the years 2007–2014.

Our team was a multidisciplinary group of learning and curriculum researchers, APGOV teachers, political scientists, and social studies curriculum coordinators. Our teacher collaborators became designers and curriculum makers working with others on the team to create and implement a PBL-APGOV curriculum and then to gather data on the implementation and to revise the curriculum annually. The revisions were aimed at solving problems as they emerged and improving the next implementation. This iterative design-implement-revise process, grounded in actual problems of practice, is the essence of DBIR.

We began in a relatively well-resourced suburb with a robust AP culture, an expressed interest in PBL, and the institutional stability to accommodate the upheavals of innovation. It was, in a word, a "greenhouse." The superintendent was a forceful instructional leader; professional development was thoughtful and routine; teachers were respected and held to high professional standards; and there was a social studies curriculum coordinator—a midlevel manager who could liaison with other midlevel managers (e.g., the AP director) as well as teachers and building principals. Also, because the district was at the forefront of efforts to democratize AP courses, we could situate our work in schools that had a high number of AP newcomers mixed in with students who were AP "veterans."

Then, in the third year of implementation, we extended the DBIR to two poverty-impacted urban school districts. Both were democratizing AP, but both faced the difficulties common to under-resourced city schools (Rothstein, 2004). Now, we were attempting to innovate within not only the constraints of AP but also the constraints of school systems that were facing the hardships of urban poverty and the particular stresses of urban school politics (e.g., the testing regime, the discourse of "failing schools," overburdened building principals). Table 1 summarizes the seven-year DBIR process.

Table 1. Research and Development across Seven School Years

School year	*District type*	*Districts/ schools/ teachers*	*Version*
2007–08	Planning sessions	1/2/4	
2008–09	Suburban greenhouse	1/2/4	1.0
2009–10	Suburban greenhouse	1/2/3	1.1
2010–11	+ Poverty-impacted urban #1	2/3/3	1.2
2011–12	+ Poverty-impacted urban #2	3/8/8	1.3
2012–13	+ Poverty-impacted urban #1 & 2	3/6/6	1.4
2013–14	+ Poverty-impacted urban #1 & 2	3/7/7	2.0

Results have been detailed elsewhere (Parker et al., 2011, 2013). Generally, students in the PBL-AP course did as well or better on the AP test than students in comparison groups, and students found the course and projects personally meaningful. End-of-course statements such as these are common from students: "I've been exposed to all these new things that I've never heard of before, or hadn't understood exactly . . . As I've said before, my parents aren't very big with politics. So, I am interested a lot more now in political issues." And "It has made me more aware of where our money goes, who makes the rules, the decisions, and how things actually work."

Rather than explore these results in this article, we want to describe the course itself, the projects, and the emerging issues. Accordingly, we turn now to the design principles that guided our initial course development as well as the annual revisions. The first was suggested by our teacher collaborators, who had some familiarity and experience with PBL and political simulations (e.g., moot court, mock election). The second and third were derived in team deliberations during the planning year from the learning research of our teammate John Bransford (e.g., Bransford, Brown, & Cockling, 2000). The three principles are: (a) rigorous projects as the spine of the course; (b) quasi-repetitive project cycles, where projects build on one another cumulatively; and (c) engagement that creates a need to know. We elaborate each below. The issues that we address in the discussion stem from them as well. The first principle is the basis for next two.

Rigorous PBL

In the opening paragraph, we used the term *rigorous* to describe our approach to PBL. Because *rigor* has become a buzzword, we must clarify our usage. In our model, which we call Knowledge in Action, rigorous PBL has four characteristics. First, projects carry the full subject matter load of the course. They are not culminating activities that come at the end of an instructional sequence nor lively interludes inserted periodically into traditional recitation. Rather, projects encompass and fuel teaching and learning throughout the course. Projects are central, not peripheral; they are "the main course, not dessert" (Larmer & Mergendoller, 2010).

A second attribute of rigorous PBL is that the projects are "authentic," by which we mean they are related clearly to life outside school—to politics and governance in the United States. Therefore, they invite the kind of "authentic intellectual work" that is both complex and personally meaningful (King, Newmann, & Carmichael, 2009). Wright-Maley (2015) referred to a simulation's authenticity as verisimilitude, related to veridical or *veritas*—truthful. This is a critical attribute of simulations, for there is the expectation that a simulation will simulate (accurately represent) some aspect of reality, although in a simplified way. As Myers (1999) explained, this is the attribute that links simulations to children's imitative play.

A third attribute is the specification of meaningful learning as a goal. This is typical of PBL (Larmer & Mergendoller, 2010; Ravitz, 2009), but it is in contrast to the superficial learning-for-the-test that is often associated with AP courses. A National Research Council study (2002), for example, found that "the inclusion of too much accelerated content can prevent students from achieving the primary goal of advanced study: deep conceptual understanding of the content and unifying concepts of a discipline" (p. 1). A focus on meaningful learning means more than a great many topics covered quickly and then followed by a high-stakes test—a default definition of rigor that we call "breadth-speed-test" (Parker et al., 2013). Furthermore, a focus on meaningful learning goes beyond authenticity. Meaningful learning also is, we specify, deep and adaptive learning. The chief characteristic of deep knowledge is that it is differentiated; students understand a concept through multiple examples or cases. For example, *Federalism* is a core concept in U.S. government and politics. To understand it deeply is to know different examples of the concept at work—in the debates over health care policy today, the battle over slavery in the mid-19th century, or the Jefferson-Hamilton debate over the legitimacy of a central bank during the founding period—and to know what the various examples share in common. Closely related to deep knowledge, adaptive learning is the kind of learning that supports additional learning in the future. Adaptive learning refers to

knowledge that is applicable or actionable or, as educational psychologists prefer to say, "transferable" to situations encountered later despite the fact that future scenarios will differ from the ones first encountered. The multiple examples already in the learner's mind allow additional examples to be graspable, despite their novelty. (We base this meaningfulness criterion, including transfer, on Bransford's research on cyclical learning [Bransford et al., 2000, 2006] as well as Taba's, 1962, and Bruner's, 1979, seminal work on concept development.)

A fourth attribute of rigorous PBL is an appropriate assessment that serves as an external, summative measure of student achievement. In our case, this is the APGOV test. It is written not by members of our research team but by a committee of political scientists who teach the entry-level college course. These professors work with assessments experts from the College Board. As in any AP course, this test looms over the course, galvanizing the attention of teachers, students, and a small industry that produces texts, flash cards, and test-prep guides. The standard for the course and test is that they match what students get in the corresponding college course. This is what gives AP its name: Students who pass the test may be placed in the subsequent course at college without having to take the introductory course. They "place out of it," as the saying goes (see perceptive accounts of this rapidly changing landscape by Schneider, 2011, and Labaree, 2010).

We believe these criteria together make a rigorous form of PBL. Projects do the course's heavy lifting. The resulting student learning has real-world applicability as well as complexity and flexibility. And student achievement in the course is assessed by a challenging, external measure. These criteria could be designed into non-AP courses, but as we said, the AP platform already exists, enjoys a positive reputation among numerous constituencies, and is in need of pedagogic innovation if it is to express a conception of rigor that goes beyond breadth-speed-test.[1]

Looping for Depth

The chief practical problem we faced was how to achieve deep, adaptive learning in a course notorious for broad scope—many, many topics stuffed into a small space. The situation easily sponsors test-prep pedagogy (rushed "coverage") and, consequently, superficial learning. Using popular phrases, it can descend into a "pancake course" that is "a mile wide and an inch deep." One experienced APGOV teacher quipped that all a teacher can do is "duck and cover." The course description published by the College Board lists six topics, with the percentages of multiple-choice questions devoted to each on the AP test:

1. Constitutional underpinnings (5–15%)
2. Political beliefs and behaviors (10–20%)
3. Political parties, interest groups, and mass media (10–20%)
4. Institutions of national government: Congress, presidency, bureaucracy, federal courts (35–45%)
5. Public policy (5–15%)
6. Civil rights and civil liberties (5–15%)

In contrast, meaningful learning requires that a limited set of generative ideas and skills is selected for study and that these are studied, used, and refined through multiple examples and scenarios. Meaningful learning requires also a kind of instruction that allows for cyclical repetition or spiraling (Bransford et al., 2000, 2006; Brown, 1992; Bruner, 1979; Taba, 1962). This entails revisiting ideas and skills in different contexts in order to know them differently, comparatively, deeply. Our collaborating teachers named this "looping." Deep learning, then, necessitates curricular decisions about which ideas and skills are worthy of cyclical treatment but also an instructional procedure that permits this quasi-repetition without sacrificing pass rates on the test. Deliberative content selection addresses the what of meaningful learning while looping addresses the how (see Parker & Lo, in press). Working together on this problem, deliberating across multiple meetings and years, our team eventually concluded that five concepts should be looped throughout the projects:

1. Limited government
2. Separation of powers (Federalism, three branches, checks and balances)
3. Constitutionalism (rule of law, precedent)
4. Civil rights and liberties
5. Institutions linking citizens to government (elections, interest groups, political parties, media)

In the projects and their component tasks, students return to these ideas, but in different ways and settings, in order to build differentiated understandings while having multiple opportunities to apply or try them out in diverse scenarios. This is our approach to achieving deeper knowledge.

An example of looping content within and between project cycles is the recurrent instruction on Federalism throughout the course. Federalism is the separation (and often sharing) of powers among levels of government. The concept is notoriously difficult for high school students. Many of them recognize government and politics only at the national level (the president, Congress, the army), and the problem is compounded by the homonymic nature of the word *federal*: It signifies one of the levels of government (national) but also a form of government consisting of multiple levels of government that divide and share power (national, state). To help students develop the concept, it is featured early in the first project cycle, "Founders' Intent." Students take roles as delegates to the Constitutional Convention of 1787—men who held Federalist or anti-Federalist sentiments. Accordingly, the idea is constructed experientially (students interacting in roles) and on the basis of a contrast (always a useful aid to concept development). Students

1 A critical assessment of the APGOV curriculum is beyond the scope of this article. Suffice it to say that other U.S. government curricula can be imagined and do exist, and they, too, are social constructs that reflect the power relations of the developers and the social structures in which they work (e.g., Bernstein, 1990). The APGOV curriculum has an important advantage over some alternatives: It results from a deliberative process—an argument—rather than a teacher deciding alone. Yet, it has the disadvantages discussed in these pages.

then deliberate controversial policy issues in these roles. The first is the historic Jefferson-Hamilton debate: Is the national government authorized to create a bank? Next is a contemporary issue: Should states be allowed to legalize marijuana use when it is prohibited by the federal government? Should the federal Supreme Court be able to overrule local governments whose voters want to ban same-sex marriage?

To loop Federalism between, in addition to within, project cycles, the curriculum has students revisit the concept in other simulations. In "Elections," students in various roles interrogate or advocate the platforms of the two major political parties with Republicans generally promoting states' rights and Democrats generally supporting national policies. Federalism is looped again in "SCOTUS" when students, as lawyers or justices, argue states-rights cases and again in the final project cycle, "Government in Action," when students, now as political consultants, decide which level of government their client—an interest group—should approach to achieve its policy goals.

Besides determining which substantive content to loop, we needed to determine which skills or "syntax" (Schwab, 1964) to loop. Using the same deliberative process, the team eventually decided on five skills for looping:

1. Constitutional reasoning (reasoning about policy on the basis of the Constitution)
2. Deliberation (discussion to decide among alternatives)
3. Perspective taking (e.g., trying on diverse political ideologies and social positions)
4. Political autonomy (making uncoerced decisions, e.g., consenting to be governed, voting for candidate X)
5. Close, interpretive reading of core texts (e.g., Constitution, *Federalist 10*)

The first skill, constitutional reasoning, dominates the others. It is the kind of reasoning needed for arguing about public policy in any role, both in this course and in U.S. political life. The research team observed that when students were arguing from their assigned roles in the simulations (e.g., as a congressperson favoring *x* policy or a judge favoring *y* interpretation of the law), they often relied on their personal values rather than knowledge of the Constitution and the roles to which they had been assigned. This was true especially of students who entered the course with paltry knowledge of the Constitution and law, but youth generally are more familiar with their own preferences, experiences, and opinions than they are with the jurisprudential framework of the nation (Flanagan, 2013). Accordingly, they were inclined to perform their roles from a personal stance rather than the stance of the roles they were playing or knowledge of the Constitution. Observing this, teachers began deliberately to frame the distinction, explaining this law-related form of reasoning and coaching students in its use.

In order to build greater potential for deep learning into the structure of the course, the five simulations revisit a single master course question (MCQ): "What is the proper role of government in a democracy?" Students are introduced to the MCQ at the beginning of the course. As they proceed through the projects, they loop back on the question and try to generate stronger, progressively more knowledgeable responses. We understand this approach as inquiry-based learning, but of a sort that is stretched through the entire course. The course doesn't contain inquiries so much as it is an extended inquiry on this question. By unifying the projects, the MCQ gives the course just one overarching focus. Furthermore, the MCQ is authentic. It animates not only the founding era but today's party platforms and congressional stalemates. The researchers and teachers settled on the question in the first year of this DBIR, revised it after the first implementation year, and then returned to the original in the third.

Engagement First (Need-to-Know)

The third design principle is engagement first. Schwartz and Bransford (1998) explored *when* to use texts and lectures within the total repertoire of instructional methods. Their question was: At what point in an instructional sequence are they most effective? There was no doubt about the value of reading and listening to information and explanations—the question was how to optimize their value. Schwartz and Bransford concluded that there is an optimal readiness for learning from textbook readings or lectures after some understanding has been generated in other, more involving ways. They called this "a time for telling" (p. 475). Our third design principle, therefore, is that engagement in project work (e.g., being assigned to the role of a legislator with the task of forming and advancing a legislative agenda) should normally precede telling (e.g., an in-class lecture or assigned reading on how Congress works). The purpose of this sequencing is to create a need-to-know so that the information students gain from reading or listening is required to perform well in the role and to construct a deep and adaptive understanding. The telling has somewhere to go because there is already something going on. Students are already engaged in a drama where the information is needed; the telling explains or clarifies what is going on. "When telling occurs without readiness," Schwartz and Bransford wrote, "the primary recourse for students is to treat the new information as ends to be memorized rather than as tools to help them perceive and think" (p. 477). This is a powerful distinction.

Accordingly, this third design principle reverses an entrenched habit of schooling. This habit could be called "engagement later," where the experiential, interactive activity comes after new information has been presented. In its most basic form here, engagement first means that students are assigned to roles before they know enough to perform them well, which creates a need-to-know. Of course, this is not easy to pull off. As Brown (1992) wrote, it takes "clinical judgment" for a teacher to orchestrate this kind of instruction. "Successful teachers must engage continually in on-line diagnosis of student understanding" (p. 169).

A straightforward example of the engagement first principle is the Structured Academic Controversy (SAC) activities that are distributed throughout the course. These SACs are an adaptation of a cooperative learning structure developed by Johnson and Johnson (1985). A SAC provides students with two opposing courses of action on a controversial policy issue and has them argue

for one or the other, but eventually learn both. At the beginning of the procedure, the teacher assigns students to four-person teams. Each team is divided into two pairs, and each pair is assigned to one side of the controversy, playing the role of advocates of that position. Each pair needs to study its position and reasoning, using material that has been gathered by the teacher, and prepares its argument for presentation to the opposing pair. Next, the teams reassemble for the presentations. Afterward, as a test of their listening and questioning, the pairs reverse perspectives, now giving the argument of the other pair until that pair is satisfied that the argument was grasped. Following this, the teams discuss the issue with the aim of coming to a consensus or a disagreement, whatever the case may be. A SAC appears in the first project on the earlier mentioned national bank controversy of 1791. One pair presents the Federalist argument put forward by Washington's Secretary of Treasury Hamilton, while the other pair studies the anti-Federalist position put forward by Secretary of State Jefferson.

In our adaptation of SAC (Parker, 2011), there is an additional step. Our SACs not only use a pedagogical structure for engaging students in deliberation of controversial policy issues, they also are opportunities for students to develop political autonomy. SACs in this course emphasize a moment at the end of the procedure when students are asked to drop their roles and then share their own opinions on the issue. We call this a political autonomy moment (PAM). Thanks to engagement first, students' own views are informed by the competing views that have been presented and re-presented by the pairs and then deliberated in teams—students' horizons have been broadened in this way—after which they are given the opportunity to drop the roles and express their own, genuine views. It is in the contrast between the role-playing and the role-dropping that a PAM comes to life (see Lo, 2015, and Lo & Parker, in press).

To summarize, three design principles guided our initial course development and the annual revisions. Political simulations do the heavy lifting of the course; quasi-repetitive project cycles build on one another, cumulatively deepening students' understanding of core concepts and skills; and immediate engagement in simulations creates a need to learn new information.

Curriculum

We now turn to the projects and their component tasks. Please note the six embedded SACs. We end this section with a brief description of the curriculum guide.

Projects and Tasks

"Founders' Intent" (three weeks). The course opens with an introductory simulation, Founders' Intent. Students are introduced to role-playing and to the system of limited government and divided powers that the Constitution creates. Students are delegates to the Constitutional Convention. In these roles, they engage in three deliberations on controversial constitutional issues: First, and quickly (it is a review cycle for students who typically had US history a year earlier), they decide whether to approve the Constitution, thereby animating the Federalist and anti-Federalist arguments over the division of power between national and state governments. Second, still in these roles, but now in SAC teams, they deliberate a Federalism controversy from the past (e.g., the national bank). Third, again in SAC teams, they deliberate a contemporary Federalism controversy (e.g., federally mandated health care insurance). This last task loops back on Federalism, now in contemporary light, and introduces the role of political parties, which underscores their purpose: winning elections and gaining power. Students loop conceptually through Federalism and textually through the Constitution and *Federalist 10*.

- Task 1: Ratification—As delegates to the Constitutional Convention of 1787, students debate its ratification.
- Task 2: Historical SAC—Students deliberate, in the same roles, a historical Federalist/anti-Federalist debate (e.g., the National Bank of 1791).
- Task 3: Modern SAC—Students deliberate, in the same roles, a modern-day Federalist/anti-Federalist debate (e.g., marriage, drug, health, immigration policy).

"Elections" (six weeks). This is a simulation of a presidential election and the second scenario in which students wrestle with the master course question "What is the proper role of government in a democracy?" Students become candidates, voters in swing states, journalists in media organizations, and leaders of interest groups and political parties. Through a series of tasks—from throwing hats in the ring to the general election—students learn about public opinion, political ideology, polls, campaign finance, and the voter characteristics. They also learn the relationships among interest groups, political parties, and the media as they attempt to navigate and influence the campaign. After campaign platforms are presented, students vote to elect the next president of the United States.

- Task 1: Warming Up to the Race—Students play roles in a presidential primary election (includes SAC: Should voting be required?).
- Task 2: Navigating the Campaign Trail—Students begin the process of campaigning for the primary election.
- Task 3: Primary Election—Students vote on their primary candidates.
- Task 4: Gearing Up for the General Election—Students regroup to campaign for the general election (includes SAC: Should the Electoral College be abolished?).
- Task 5: General Election—Students finish the campaign and elect the next President of the United States.

"SCOTUS" (four weeks). Once the president is sworn in, students witness the impact of the election on the Supreme Court of the United States (SCOTUS), members of which are appointed by the president. In this simulation, students take roles in the judicial branch of government as attorneys and judges and specifically in appellate courts: circuit courts of appeals and then the Supreme Court. Students learn about and practice judicial argumentation and constitutional reasoning as they experience the way courts define and implement public policy, often dealing

with issues of civil rights and liberties. Students also learn how justices and lawyers navigate the pressures of public opinion, media, and interest groups. Throughout the project, students experience the interdependence of the three branches, such as judicial review and the impact of the presidential election on appointments to the Supreme Court.

- Task 1 (optional): Trial Court—As jurors, judge, attorneys, etc., students conduct a mock trial (so as to learn the differences between trial and appellate courts).
- Task 2 (and optional Task 3): Moot Circuit Court—As lawyers and justices, students conduct one (or two conflicting) moot circuit courts on a landmark Supreme Court case.
- Task 3 (or 4): Moot Supreme Court—As lawyers and justices, students conduct a moot Supreme Court on a landmark Supreme Court case.

"Congress" (four weeks). The fourth project cycle is a simulation of Congress. Students are legislators and learn not only how a bill becomes a law but how politics influence public policy. In committee compromises and floor debates, students navigate political pressures—from constituencies, political parties, and interest groups—for and against particular legislation. This project loops back on the party platform promises that presidential candidates made in the "Elections" project and the bicameral system set up by the Constitution in "Founders' Intent."[2]

- Task 1: Constituency Research—Students take roles as members of Congress and research their constituency and legislative agendas (includes SAC: Should elected representatives be trustees or delegates?).
- Task 2: Write and Submit Bills—Students research and draft bills that would help their constituencies.
- Task 3: Committee Markup—Students work in committees to pass/block bills written by other members of Congress.
- Task 4: Floor Session—Students conduct a floor debate to pass bills that have made their way out of committee.

"Government in Action" (five weeks). In this culminating project, students are consultants to interest groups that have strong positions on immigration policy. Applying knowledge from the previous projects, students study their client's position and what makes the group a serious contender in the political arena. Their job is to draw up a wise political action plan that will help their client advance its agenda through the political system—through the branches of government and the bureaucratic agencies—thereby learning how interest groups work with government to create, implement, and evaluate public policies.

- Task 1: Meeting the Client—As consultants, students meet the interest group they will advise.
- Task 2: Prepare for a Press Conference—Students work to answer key questions about their client's policy agenda (includes SAC: Is the federal bureaucracy a boon or a threat to democracy?).
- Task 3: Litigation Techniques—Students use litigation (and the courts) to help influence public policy.
- Task 4: Presidential Influence—Students write a letter to the president that outlines a political action plan that will advance their client's agenda.
- Task 5: Congressional Testimony—Students testify persuasively to a congressional committee on behalf of their client.
- Task 6: Political Action Plan—Students propose a comprehensive political action plan for their client's public policy agenda.

A Note about the Curriculum Guide

Our original teacher collaborators were advantaged by in-depth understandings of the content (e.g., Federalism, branches, interest groups) and instructional strategies (e.g., role-playing, SAC). They had internalized these during the process of developing the curriculum and teaching the course. On the basis of this prior knowledge, they were able to implement the tasks within each project cycle reasonably well. As new teachers were brought into the DBIR, we learned that more assistance was needed—broadly in terms of the three design principles and narrowly in terms of conducting a SAC and managing group work. Consequently, we developed a one-week professional development workshop along with a detailed procedures document for each project cycle. Our interest is not having teachers adopt our approach and carry it out faithfully; to the contrary, and respecting the professional judgment of teachers, we invite them to consider this approach and adapt it as needed.

The procedures documents for each simulation provide teachers with guides that frame the course for students; that is, they orient students to the course organization, the simulations, the engagement first principle, and to the relationships among tasks. Additionally, these documents provide the purposes and outlines of project activities, suggested materials, and need-to-know homework reading assignments. Still more detailed lesson plans are provided as well, but only for the first two projects. These are scaffolds that are then withdrawn from the next three projects as teachers devise their own supports. The goal of developing these daily plans was illustrative, to provide more explicit instructional guidance and classroom tools for teachers to use. Because this level of detail is dependent on resources (e.g., textbooks, supplemental texts), which are far from standard across schools and districts, these lesson plans simply illustrate that these kinds of daily plans need to made locally.

Discussion

Let us summarize and then highlight three issues. The curriculum is organized into five projects. Each is a political simulation that emulates real-world political processes. Since projects are the spine

2 We used (and continue to recommend) the online simulation LegSim (http://info.legsim.org/) in the first years of this DBIR because our teacher collaborators were already using it. But its technology requirements became untenable once we moved to under-resourced, poverty-impacted urban schools.

of the course, virtually all the information and skills students need for success in the course and on the AP test are embedded within the projects. Students take roles as political actors and consultants, and generally they are engaged in role activity before they encounter new information so that the information is needed in order to play the role competently. The simulations are organized in such a way that students loop back on key concepts and skills as well as a master course question. Consequently, students have multiple opportunities to apply and refine them in various scenarios. This quasi-repetitive cycling is the mainspring of the course. Its goal is to help students achieve differentiated (complex, rather than simple) understandings of core concepts and skills and have multiple opportunities to try them out in action.

The aim of the curriculum is adaptive knowledge of U.S. government and politics. This is knowledge that is actionable in the future—transferable and applicable to novel contexts and problems. Another aim is to provide an engaging and successful learning experience for the wider array of students now being admitted to AP courses.

Issues

We now raise three practical issues that are related to the design principles. These should be useful to teachers, teacher educators, and curriculum developers who want to try this approach to the APGOV course or adapt aspects to other social studies courses, whether AP or not. Some teachers, we know, are teaching a one-semester rather than full-year government course and may want to select just a couple of projects and, perhaps, shorten them; others may be teaching a non-AP version of the course and will have more latitude to teach a curriculum not bounded by the AP test.

Rigorous PBL. Related to the first design principle is this question: Can PBL be done in the government course (and other high school social studies courses) without one or more of the four standards of rigorous PBL? That is, can projects sometimes be a side dish or dessert? Can the authenticity requirement can be dropped or moderated? The meaningful learning requirement? The external assessment of student learning? We believe the first and fourth of these standards are negotiable but not the second and third. These two add real-world value to learning; furthermore, they assure that the knowledge and skills achieved are applicable and generative—that they support more learning later and in different contexts, such as college, work, and civic life.

Looping for Depth. Related to the second design principle is a crucial question: Which concepts and skills are loop worthy? Looping is not an end in itself. Like PBL and the use of simulations, looping is a means to achieve other ends. The chief end is meaningful learning—knowledge that is personally and socially meaningful (authentic) but, in addition, differentiated and adaptive (deep). Restating the issue, which concepts and skills are worth learning to this extent, and how can educators go about identifying them? This is important because, in our judgment, quite a lot of PBL discourse suffers from a knowledge deficit. There is much agreement on the how—projects should be authentic and engaging, students should be active and collaborative, and there should be public audiences and products. But there is somewhat less concern for the substantive and syntactical content of projects: Project work should result in learning exactly what? Which understandings and skills should projects aim to teach deeply? Responding to this question takes educators to the heart of curriculum planning: content selection.

The issue is exacerbated in an AP course, where so much content selection has been done already by the College Board committee before a teacher even enters the scene. Nevertheless, teachers need to judge which of the many topics are central enough and generative enough to be worthy of iteration. These are the stars, so to speak, the gravitational centers around which other topics rotate like orbiting planets and moons. As shown earlier, our teachers returned to this issue across numerous meetings and, eventually, settled on the short lists of concepts and skills presented earlier (for elaboration on this process, see Parker & Lo, in press).

Engagement First. Related to the third design principle is a three-part issue. First, how firm is the principle that students should be engaged in project activity *before* new content is taught, and, second, what resources will students need in order to access that new content? A surprise for us was that the second part of this issue led to a third: Assuming that those resources are present and available (never a certainty in poverty-impacted urban schools), how can teachers and students be encouraged actually to *use* them for learning? This concern relates directly to our emphasis on rigor—on assuring students learn powerful content and skills through PBL, not simply engage in interesting activities.

But first, how firm is the engagement first principle? We believe it is best to treat it as a hard and fast rule, rarely to be broken. Routinely, students should be engaged experientially in an action arena in which new information is needed to explain and clarify what is going on. This way, students and teachers alike find themselves in a different modality of school learning based on the earlier-mentioned "time for telling" (Schwartz and Bransford, 1998) research. Students in the first year of this DBIR, especially the AP veterans, found this new modality frustrating (Parker et al., 2011). They reported that if they don't acquire new information before the activity, then "we don't know what we're doing." In end-of-course interviews that first year, we asked students to advise us on how the course components could best be sequenced for learning. Many preferred that the course stick to the traditional model to which they were accustomed: First introduce the new information in a PowerPoint lecture— "floaties," as they put it—so that the project activities can then proceed with less floundering in the deep end of the pool. We did not want to revert to this familiar routine of schooling because the new information, presented in a vacuum, would have nowhere to go except into a memory bank, undermining our goal of deep and adaptive learning. Nor did we want to ignore students' frustration. The engagement first principle does *not* mean that students should be thrown into the deep end of the pool without floaties.

Because some amount of floundering and ambiguity is inherent in authentic intellectual work, we didn't want to reduce it

entirely, but we did want to make PBL-APGOV more enjoyable and less frustrating for more students. Consequently, our teacher collaborators began deliberately to orient students to a different way of doing school. This was the framing referred to earlier. Of course, it was easier for teachers to do this in the second year as they themselves were now familiar with the whole course. As a result, students at the end of year two reported greater comfort with the engagement first design. They knew the needed information would come once the action was underway. For example, "I knew every time we started a project cycle what the basic layout of it would be . . . what we were going to be doing."

Now to the second and third parts of the issue. Resources containing the needed information were, indeed, present and available. Generally, this was the course textbook, teacher-prepared handouts, and various internet resources. However, teachers assigned reading casually (e.g., "Read Edwards, chapter 3" was written on the board), and students mostly avoided it. This became an obstacle to achieving our goals, for it meant that resources other than the teacher were not being tapped, and students were not adequately learning needed information and concepts. Role performance suffered, looping for depth was undermined, and the full burden of information provision was borne by the teacher alone. This was especially problematic for the AP newcomers, who entered the course not only with less prior knowledge about government and politics than their AP-veteran classmates but also with dispositions toward reading and doing homework that required increased and explicit support from their teachers, not indifference or sympathetic workarounds.

Therefore, we assembled a small set of powerful yet practical strategies to support students in using and learning subject matter from texts. They are summarized in the following list (see Valencia & Parker, 2016). Each is based on the assumption that the particular ideas and information in the text to be read are actually needed for project activity and course success.

1. Teachers have read the text selection that is to be assigned, and they know what information it will convey and how that information is related to both the project activity and the AP test.
2. This allows them explicitly to state the purpose for the reading assignment when giving it. For example, "Read this to find out the meaning of the term *iron triangle*. Be ready to give multiple examples that show you understand it."
3. Information from the text is used subsequently in a project task. Literacy researchers (e.g., Valencia, Wixson, & Pearson, 2014) have demonstrated that text-task alignment is a boon to getting students both to do and to comprehend assigned reading.
4. Underscoring the fact that learning from the text is actually necessary, teachers do not cover the same material in a class lecture.

As a result of purposeful reading and its application, students can engage with the projects in more rigorous and substantive ways and perform well on quizzes too.

Conclusion

Bringing attention simultaneously to action-oriented learning through simulations and to learning from texts is unusual. These two concerns typically occupy separate universes of educational research, practice, and innovation. Adding rigor to the mix introduces yet a third dimension. It is important to recognize that the three blended naturally in this work. We didn't force the combination; it arose organically by "using research to solve practical problems," which required this DBIR initiative to be plainly and directly "practice centered" (Penuel, 2011, p. 332).

If we have succeeded at anything in these pages, it was to present a map of a particular way of approaching the high school government course. Certainly, "the map is not the territory," (Korzybski, 1958, p. 498). Still, we hope to have presented a map that is readable and that indicates enough of the territory that readers can adapt various aspects of the approach to their own work, should they want to. The territory will not be unfamiliar to most readers; political simulations, especially, are a longstanding feature of government courses.

We know that there are other valuable and viable ways to improve the quality of the high school government course, and we welcome them. We admire, for example, the *CityWorks* curriculum of the Constitutional Rights Foundation, *Project Citizen* of the Center for Civic Education, Street Law's *Landmark Cases*, and Sandra Day O'Connor's *iCivics*. The importance of the initiative presented here, we believe, is to show that a rigorous, authentic, and meaningful government course is possible even on a crowded, accelerated platform where the vast array of topics colludes with the high-stakes test to produce, too often, a "pancake course" where the only apparent option is to "duck and cover." We worry that without innovation, this course becomes merely a step on the college-entrance credentials ladder rather than a profound, adaptive civic learning experience.

By featuring political simulations as the spine of the course, including the embedded SACs, we were able to enact three of the six promising practices (numbers one, two, and six below) identified by the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools (2011):

1. Learning information about local, state, and national government
2. Opportunities to debate and discuss current events and other issues that matter to students
3. Service-learning opportunities
4. Participation in extracurricular activities
5. Opportunities for decision-making and governance experiences
6. Participation in simulations of civic processes

In this way, our initiative is linked not only to a reputable, external, deliberated measure of achievement (the AP test) but also to a set of reputable, external, deliberated standards for civic learning (the Campaign's). Most important, because the "excellence for all" movement is de-tracking access to APGOV in many school systems, we are able to offer a version of the course that, in our judgment, is more worthy of the students now enrolling.

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