

“Playing Politics”

Assessing the impact of the active learning environment on students' political knowledge, political efficacy, and confidence in government.

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Research Question:

- Does the *way* we teach the introductory course in American Government effect...?
 - political knowledge
 - political efficacy
 - attitudes about government (confidence)

Traditional lecture v. active learning in American government course

- Traditional lecture has been criticized for not fully engaging learners in the subject matter.
- Traditional lecture may prohibit students from understanding the role of debate and compromise in our American political system.
- Research findings are mixed on the value of teaching American government from an active learning approach.

Research Design

- Quasi experimental design
 - Same instructor for four (4) sections of PSC 131- Introduction to American Government
 - Two (2) sections taught with traditional lecture
 - Two (2) sections taught from active learning approach

Research Design (cont.)

- Administer assessment tool
 - Pre test given during first week of class
 - Post test given during last regular session of class

Research design (cont.)

- Students in active learning sections played fifteen (15) simulation games throughout the semester in conjunction with lecture. (Games from *Playing Politics*. J. Tobin Grant, 2004.)
- The simulations dealt with governmental processes that highlight the necessity of negotiation, formation of coalitions, debate, and compromise.
- Furthermore, the games highlight governmental power structures and institutional rules which constrain political behavior.
- Students in traditional lecture sections only received lecture.
- All quizzes, reviews, and exams were identical for all four classes.

Research Design (cont.)

- Comparison of means tests
 - Verify learning occurred for entire sample
 - Ensure no statistically significant difference between groups prior experiment
 - Compare difference in means from pre to post tests on the following scales:
 - Political knowledge (total score from 25 questions)
 - Subgroup 1: Questions from test bank provided with text - general knowledge about governmental foundations, inputs, institutions, and policy (14 questions).
 - Subgroup 2: Identification of current leaders in government (7 questions).
 - Subgroup 3: Identification of party ideology (2 questions).
 - Subgroup 4: Current party control in Congress (2 questions).
 - Internal political efficacy (total score from 7 questions)
 - Confidence in government (total score from 6 questions)

Description of the sample

- 83 students in entire sample
 - 51 active learning students
 - 32 traditional lecture students
 - 26 students completed only the pre test
 - 12 students completed only the post test
- 45 students completed BOTH the pre test and post test
 - 27 active learning students
 - 18 traditional lecture students

Preliminary Findings

- Overall, the difference in means for the sample does show a statistically significant difference between pre and post scores.
 - Students DID learn in PSC 131 Fall 2006.
- A t test of the difference in means between the active learning and traditional lecture sections does not show a statistically significant difference *between the two groups* on the **pre test scores**.
 - Any difference at the beginning of the semester between the research groups can be attributed to chance alone with 95% confidence.

Findings on Traditional Lecture v. Active Learning

- A t test of difference of means (post minus pre) on the “political knowledge” scale scores show no statistically significant difference *between* groups.
- A t test of difference of means (post minus pre) on “internal political efficacy” scale scores show no statistically significant difference *between* groups.
- A t test of difference of means (post minus pre) on “confidence in government” scale scores show no statistically significant difference *between* groups.

Problems with project implementation

1) In the beginning, the games were used as a “lead in” to the discussion on the subject. However, students were often confused about what they were trying to accomplish – perhaps because they had not yet read the assigned corresponding chapter. Therefore, strategy was adjusted and students began playing the games AFTER the topic was introduced in class.

Problems with implementation (cont.)

2) Originally, the researcher had intended to rely on the course attendance policy to ensure active participation in the games. However, it was clear early on that students were not investing energy into simulating the roles as people would behave in the real world when there was no incentive to do so. Therefore, the use of small rewards was instituted (usually candy or pencils); given to “winning” teams or individuals in order to increase active participation. This seemed to solve the problem with apathy.

Problems with implementation (cont.)

3) The plan was to use the political games as a supplement to lecture in the active learning sections. However, by mid-semester the students in the active learning sections were receiving less lecture time than their counterparts in the traditional setting. This change developed due to unforeseen time constraints from a combination of instructor absences for conferences and the College calendar.

In the interest of conducting the experiment, the researcher felt it necessary to play the games and limit lecture (as students should have been reading the materials anyway). Of course, students were still free to ask questions about the subject matter for clarity purposes.

Lessons Learned

- It appears the effects of active learning for American Government students are minimal, as none of the tested variables was statistically significant for either group in this research project.
- Some notes about direction of the mean differences:
 - Within the political knowledge scale scores, students in the active learning sections had a higher mean difference on the political knowledge questions tied specifically to the text materials (subgroup 1) and party control in Congress (subgroup 4).
 - Yet, the mean difference for political knowledge questions about current leaders (subgroup 2) and party ideology (subgroup 3) were slightly higher for the traditional sections.
 - In regard to internal political efficacy and confidence in government, the difference of means for students in the active learning environment were slightly *lower* when compared to students in the traditional lecture sections.

Conclusions

- To further explore this topic, the research project will be conducted again during Spring, 2007. The sample discussed herein was quite small, so adding cases will bolster confidence in the findings.
- Additionally, a better effort will be made by this instructor to give equal time to lecture in all sections of PSC 131. The original design was to use the role playing exercises as a supplement to lecture; not as a substitution for lecture.
- Furthermore, data collected from other American Government instructors at JALC and SIU (a local university) will be analyzed to identify any statistically significant differences between those groups.
- A regression analysis will be run to see what other factors (aside from type of teaching style) might influence changes in political knowledge, political efficacy, and attitudes toward government.
- Finally, a qualitative analysis will be conducted on results from interviews held with approximately 100 students who took the introductory American Government course at JALC or SIUC during Fall, 2006 or Spring, 2007.