

# **Learning through Experience: Using Web-based Learning Interactions to Teach American Government**

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## **Abstract**

Bringing to bear a variety of theories of pedagogy, we develop a multi-media resource for use in the American Government classroom. The result is a unit-based ancillary through which students can work in preparation for class discussion. An initial pilot tested on students revealed three distinct advantages to this resource, including: increased interest in the subject matter, enhanced student preparedness, and excitement over harnessing new media. The following pages review the tenants of constructivism, Bloom et al.'s (1956) taxonomy of types of learning, and learning through narrative, explain our web-based tool, and present the pedagogical and practical applications and advantages of using this resource.

## **Introduction**

As teachers, how do we increase fundamental student interest in the resource material? How do we increase student preparedness for class discussion? Employing the fundamental principles of constructivist learning theory, we develop a web-based curriculum that integrates online teaching tools such as: simulations, photo galleries, interactive timelines, and automated testing, with innovative pedagogical tools such as: the use of narrative, experiential learning, different learning styles, and civic education. The result is a unique web-based resource through which students can work in preparation for class discussion.

In the following pages, we establish constructivism as our model of learning acquisition, present our learning objectives structured by Bloom's taxonomy of learning objectives in the cognitive and affective domains, and describe our pedagogical approach of first person accounts from people actively involved in parties and elections. We engage in a thorough description of the resource we have developed, entitled *Americans Governing*. To conclude we present the results and implications of a trial run using this resource in the classroom.

In brief, the pilot revealed distinct advantages to this resource. The first concerns increased interest. Student feedback suggests that not only does the material spur basic interest in the subject matter; it actually spurs interest beyond the subject matter. Students want to know more than what is provided by the sometimes lengthy video footage. They want to hear even more questions answered by these political elite. They have probing questions for the "experts" investigated on the site. Second, this tool greatly enhances student preparedness. After administering the pilot, I asked students in the class for initial reactions, and they launched into rather sophisticated dialogue on the subject matter. Finally, and importantly, students are impressed and excited about the potential of using an online resource instead of or in conjunction with traditional print media.

## Theoretical Framework: Constructivist Learning Theory

Constructivism as a philosophy of learning dates as far back as Socrates. Best known for his method of teaching – Socratic Dialogue – Socrates introduced to the world of pedagogy the idea of learning through problem-solving. In its basic form, constructivism is a

theory suggesting that students learn by constructing their own knowledge, especially through hands-on exploration. It emphasizes that the context in which an idea is presented, as well as student attitude and behavior, affects learning. Students learn by incorporating new information into what they already know. (Glossary of Education Terms and Acronyms 2002).

It stands in opposition to instructivist learning theory, otherwise referred to as objectivism or the systems view, which has long been the predominant philosophical orientation in instructional approaches (Duffy and Jonassen 1991). The instructivist position focuses on course objectives and standardized assessment of learning outcomes. Contrastingly, constructivists strive to recognize students' previous experiences to help them find relevance in course subject matter. A major problem with instructivism, according to constructivists, "is that it discounts the reality of the ambiguous, complex, and continually changing world in which we live" (Kanuka and Anderson 1999: 3). For students to effectively learn, therefore, "activities must be presented in an ill-structured way that will reflect the complexity of functioning in a changing world after the course has ended" (ibid).

The idea of constructivism largely owes its origin to Piaget (1970). The major focus of constructivists is the process through which individuals conform their experience-based beliefs to accommodate new information and new experiences. This process has been described in a number of very similar theoretical frameworks, including: the theory of accommodation (Piaget), the theory of cognitive dissonance (Festinger (1957), the theory of cognitive restructuring (Schmidt in Belkin 1982), and the theory of perspective transformation (Mezirow 1990).

There are now several distinct schools of constructivist learning theory, including: cognitive or critical constructivism, radical or extreme constructivism, situated constructivism, and co-constructivism – also known as symbolic social interaction or social constructivism (ibid). While these schools differ over whether reality is objective or subjective and over whether knowledge is socially or individually constructed, they do hold some beliefs in common. According to Kanuka and Anderson, all can agree that:

- new knowledge is built upon the foundation of previous learning,
- learning is an active rather than passive process,
- language is an important element in the learning process, and
- the learning environment should be learner-centered (1999: 11).

Kanuka and Anderson (1999: 2-3) combine the work of others to suggest that several questions guide constructivist learning theory, including:

- What does it mean to know something?
- How do we come to know it?
- How does this knowledge influence our thinking process? (see Hofer and Pintrick 1997)

In the end, all constructivists believe knowledge is based on experience and learning must be an active process.

***Traditional versus Constructivist Pedagogy***

In order to clearly compare the differences between traditional pedagogy and constructivist pedagogy as models of learning acquisition, consider Figure A.

**Figure A**  
**A Look at School Environments**

<b>Traditional Classrooms</b>	<b>Constructivist Classrooms</b>
Curriculum is presented part to whole, with emphasis on basic skills.	Curriculum is presented whole to part with emphasis on big concepts.
Strict adherence to fixed curriculum is highly valued.	Pursuit of student questions is highly valued.
Curricular activities rely heavily on textbooks and workbooks.	Curricular activities rely heavily on primary sources of data and manipulative materials.
Students are viewed as “blank slates” onto which information is etched by the teacher.	Students are viewed as thinkers with emerging theories about the world.
Teachers generally behave in a didactic manner, disseminating information to students.	Teachers generally behave in an interactive manner, mediating the environment for students.
Teachers seek the correct answer to validate student learning.	Teachers seek the students’ points of view in order to understand students’ present conceptions for use in subsequent lessons.
Assessment of student learning is viewed as separate from teaching and occurs almost entirely through testing.	Assessment of student learning is interwoven with teaching and occurs through teacher observations of students at work and through student exhibitions and portfolios.
Students primarily work alone.	Students primarily work in groups.

Source: Brooks and Brooks (1993: 17).

Constructivism impacts learning in at least five distinct ways. First, constructivism begins with the principle that teaching consists of “posing problems of emerging relevance” (Brooks and Brooks 1993: 35). While students might not enter the classroom finding all topics interesting, as teachers we must find ways to tap into the relevance of the subject matter to the students. As a second principle, this approach to learning focuses on understanding concepts holistically, seeing the connections between and relevance of factual information. Our focus should be on helping students construct meaning around primary concepts rather than simply regurgitate isolated facts. A third principle of constructivist learning theory is that teachers should not simply present information, but rather should encourage students to openly engage the subject matter through extensive dialogue. A fourth principle is that educators must understand the mental models with which students perceive the world of politics before we can adequately communicate with them. “If suppositions are not explicitly addressed, most students will find lessons bereft of meaning,

regardless of how charismatic the teacher or attractive the materials might be” (ibid: 69). A final principle of constructivism is incorporation of assessment of learning as part of the learning process. Constructivism does away with standardized “objective” testing. Rather, assessment is incorporated as part of the learning process using instructional tools such as nonjudgmental feedback, authentic assessment, and context-bound assessment (see Brooks and Brooks 1993: 96-97).

This approach to learning revolutionizes resource material. Rather than relying on standardized curriculum, the constructivist teacher customizes resources to students’ prior knowledge and molds the classroom experience around first-hand problem solving. While there is room to disagree over how well constructivist instructional methods can be translated into technology-mediated learning, Kanuka and Anderson (1999) suggest that most methods do work well and “some work even better online than in face-to-face learning environments” (12). Among techniques well-suited to an online format, they include: the debate method, the case method, and brainstorming.

### **Categorization of Learning Objectives and Bloom’s Taxonomy**

Working from a Constructivist perspective, and employing a case study approach, the following experiment is one answer among many to the question of how emerging technologies can be used to achieve the goals of the American Government classroom. Such as a question can only be approached in light of those goals, perhaps including but not limited to:

- increasing awareness of the institutions and processes by which Americans govern – the “facts” of American Government
- increasing interest in American Government and the ability of the student to be active as an informed, engaged citizen – the desire to get involved
- helping students to discover what they believe and why – develop personal awareness of their political socialization and ideological orientation

#### ***Cognitive & Affective Domains***

The classic categorization of learning objectives suggested by Bloom et al. (1956) provides a framework for understanding ways in which we might describe the goals of the American Government classroom (see Figure B). The cognitive domain includes learning “objectives related to information or knowledge, naming, solving, predicting and other intellectual aspects of learning. Bloom and his associates (1956) developed a widely used taxonomy for the cognitive domain” (Morrison, Ross, and Kemp 2001: 87).

**Figure B**  
**Applying Bloom’s Taxonomy of Learning Objectives to Political Parties**

<b>Step in Process</b>	<b>Function</b>	<b>Example</b>
Knowledge	Recall of specific information	What is a political party?
Comprehension	Lowest level of understanding	What is the purpose of a party?
Application	Application of a rule or principle	Why do both major parties continually represent about 50% of the population?
Analysis	Break idea into component parts and describe relationship	What is the structure of the party organization?
Synthesis	Put the parts together to form a new whole	How do parties influence policy in American Government
Evaluation	Make judgments about materials and methods	What would be required for a third parties to attain success?

Adapted from Morrison, Ross, and Kemp (2001).

The first three categories include knowing terms, distinguishing between concepts, and wielding them in the abstract. There is a break at this point in Bloom’s taxonomy from the relatively abstract tasks of using vocabulary and principles to the relatively contextualized tasks of using these concepts to explain real political phenomena. Categories of Analysis, Synthesis, and Evaluation make a shift from content traditionally seen in a textbook to content traditionally seen in the newspaper -- from the academic ideas of the discipline to the working out of those ideas in historical and current events.

***Affective Domain***

The affective domain includes learning “objectives concerning attitudes, appreciations, values and emotions such as enjoying, conserving and respecting” (Morrison, Ross, and Kemp 2001:89; for a thorough discussion of the affective domain, see Krathwohl, Bloom, and Masia 1964). The American Government classroom typically involves two over-arching affective goals. One is absolute: students should come to appreciate American Government, to desire to be more involved and, to some degree, value democratic institutions. The second is relative: students should come to develop personal opinions about policy. As a result we tend to be unabashedly biased toward respecting political involvement and disrespecting apathy and ignorance even while often taking great pains to not betray any specific policy preferences.

***Current Methods***

Objective testing on material presented in lecture or textbooks helps students reach objectives within the cognitive domain, particularly the three lower levels. Class discussions have proven an effective way to push students to spend at least some time thinking through the issues, helping with the affective objectives and, when involving actual events, with the higher levels of the cognitive domain. But there is a hard cap on class time and students are notoriously unreliable in preparing for class with a textbook.

## **Instructional Strategy**

So what are the leading reasons students are not currently reaching their cognitive or affective potential? It appears they do not know because they do not care enough, and they do not care because they do not know enough. Ideally, we would turn this vicious cycle into a virtuous cycle with students caring enough to learn more and, through learning more, caring even more. Our research revolves around the use of first-hand explanation and narrative from individuals highly involved in American Government. We call this web-delivered collection of audio and video a multi-media presentation of first-person accounts from politically active people. These first-person accounts should increase interest and identification, leading to more understanding, yielding gains in cognitive as well as affective domains. In designing our instructional strategy, our question is this: If students are provided with first-person accounts of the political process from active individuals, will they be better prepared for class and able to learn more. That is, will they be better able to advance toward a range of learning objectives in both the cognitive and affective domains?

### ***Narrative***

By definition, narrative is dramatic and thus interesting. And narratives inevitably establish a protagonist with which the reader/viewer identifies. With increased interest and identification with real Americans in the process of governing, students may

- be more likely to do the out-of-class assignment
- be more likely to identify with the characters and thus care about the process
- see the need for the knowledge of how the systems work, and thus seek and retain the knowledge

### ***New Media***

Due to recent advances in technology, these virtual guest speakers are now more easily incorporated into outside-of-class work than ever before. The falling cost of video production has made it feasible to produce custom video for use in the same manner as a textbook. Professors can and do expect their students to have access to both a computer and broadband access to the web. With the falling price of video, ubiquitous computing and broadband access, these resources are just now emerging as practical.

Web Video, in contrast to a VHS tape, can be distributed as easily as any web link resulting in lower distribution cost and greater viewing convenience. Web Video can be accompanied by interactive elements, such as questions to ponder and answer while viewing and to then send to the professor. However, there are drawbacks. Web video is typically displayed at a smaller size than VHS or DVDs. And there are more frequent technical problems with web video including problems with internet access (i.e.; sometimes the lab is down) and problems with plug-ins (i.e.; it didn't work for me.)

### ***Guiding Questions***

To accompany our web-based narrative applications, we have developed questions to guide the student through the resource. Questions are displayed on screen adjacent to the video to prompt critical thinking and call attention to relevant dimensions of the narrative. Students were expected to answer these questions by typing and then email their answers to the professor, thus encouraging basic analysis by the viewer and allowing the professor an easy way to grade

for completion. The questions are a critical part of encouraging students to participate outside of class.

### ***Class Discussion***

A final but integral part of our strategy is a class discussion of the features viewed. The discussion, in many ways, is the point of the stories. Showing first-hand perspectives is designed primarily to whet the student appetite for a discussion of the principles in action and to provide concrete referents for the concepts as presented. For this reason, the interviews and stories were not designed to stand alone – that is, one could not expect to watch these alone and come away with an adequate understanding of the concepts within. We chose to leave academic and analytic content out of the videos to leaving them as pure narrative and first-hand perspective.

### ***The Features***

- Three features were constructed for use in two classes. Each student was asked to view:
- a 22 minute documentary portrait of a congressional candidate
  - 60 minutes of interviews with a variety of people playing various roles within political parties
  - 60 minutes of audio exploring the diversity, or lack thereof, within the Republican party

The two video features were created specifically for this experiment by Shadowbox, Inc. The third feature was originally created by This American Life for distribution through Public Radio stations. This resource was audio-only. Both classes took place at University of West Florida. One course was an honors section of American Government and includes 8 students. The other course was Legislative Process including 40 students. We created a website, [soomo.org](http://soomo.org), and asked students to navigate into Dr. Evans' class and then view these three "features" in the "Parties" topic area. The assignment was made on Sunday and the discussion took place on the following Wednesday.

### **Student Feedback**

All students sought to view the materials. Granted, there was an unusual amount of attention on this particular assignment. It was presented as being personally meaningful to the instructor; an entire class period was set aside for discussing it; one of the producers of the videos was present for the classroom discussion; an unusual grade percentage was associated with the assignment; and it was an extremely novel resource. By contrast, an informal show of hands revealed that only about a third of the class read the assigned text the week before.

### ***Technical Difficulties***

One student was technically unable to view any of the work. Several others were able to view all but one due to technical difficulties with one plug-in or another. There was a general discomfort with the mechanism for submitting answers to the guiding questions which resulted in a large number of multiple submissions, but no dropped submissions.

### ***I Like Videos***

Some students were very clear on preferring this format. One said, “if you would just record somebody reading the book, that would be better than having to read the book.” Student feedback included:

“Definitely gets your attention. I know if it were a textbook I would not pay near as much attention to it.”

“I learn better from watching it and hearing it because you see it more on a personal level - like you see how they interact, and how it actually works rather than being told how it works. It's a lot easier to follow and understand than when you read it in a textbook.”

“You kind of put it together better in your head if you can see them doing this and it kind of runs through your head as like a story rather than just facts, and stories are always easier to remember.”

### ***I Like Books Too***

But there were clear fans of books as well. Countering the “record the book” comment, one student suggested “writing the video” preferring a transcript to a video or audio stream which is difficult to index and difficult to control. (Several students reported frustration in trying to rewind a small amount.) One student suggested, “Watching something on television or in a little video on the internet, I don't retain it.”

No one seemed medium agnostic, but there was widespread agreement that there should be a video component for stories as well as a print component for “the facts.” They are clearly seeking a source for objective, generalized content. As one student stated:

“I like books too... at least some reading to go along with it, cause it would've been nice to have like a background; like this is how elections were and this is how it's changed over the year kind of thing would've been nice.”

Many students professed to like the video simply because they don't like reading. This feedback raises many larger issues. If students aren't reading, are we obliged to deliver content some way other than a textbook? Wouldn't many students enjoy a better educational experience if they always came to class prepared? But if we cater to this self-imposed illiteracy, are we harming the students?

It is crucial to note at this point that our original premise was that students don't read in large part because of the nature of the content. And while we did utilize a different medium, we also used very different content. Students were not simply “being read a textbook;” rather they were engaging in a whole new mode of learning that seemed to enhance comprehension and retention. As one student suggested:

“It's much easier to pay attention to cause I know I can sit and read 10 pages of a book and have no idea what I read. But I sit there and listen to it and...remember what it was when you finish with it.”

### ***Able to Receive, Respond and Value***

Students praised the ability to see the non-verbals; to see the gestures and facial expressions and hear the intonation as they spoke. They like the first-hand perspective throughout and frequently identified with the “characters.” Some suggested:

“It's personal. You kinda relate to it cause you want the underdog to win and everything like that.”

“The first person view really helps. You sit there and you see it yourself. You don't just see it from someone else's point of view telling you this is how it is. But when you see it, see the way it works, its a, it definitely helps out a lot.”

“You can put a face to the voice. and like in a textbook it's just some random person telling you straight up facts while they're telling you, ‘this is what I do’ ‘this is why I like it...’”

“It seemed like everyday activities and stuff like that kinda made you like almost root for him, you know? You're kinda like ‘awww, he's so sweet’ and everything, it's like ‘look at him smiling’ [laughter] and then he lost I'm like, ‘ no!’”

It was quite clear that students found the content highly accessible and they had no difficulty understanding the content or identifying with the subjects.

### ***Organizing Diversity***

Students drew from the various personal, subjective perspectives to see clearly the diversity of these perspectives, stating: “It's a lot easier to understand because you like actually, you learn the differences. You learn, just different perspectives and that's part of understanding.” Interestingly, this student contrasted “actually learning” with “just reading and remembering.” In some cases, the diversity itself provided an important message. In the “Party People” feature, students were able to see a range of sophistication from the local to the national level of party politics. One summarized, “I think the, the national players talk more in theory where the local players talk more ‘this is how it happens.’”

Students were clearly able to see different values in the various voices and to develop their own values about those voices. By not presenting a single correct perspective, the content invited students to form their own opinions. In sum, students have no difficulty understanding the content, evaluating it, or otherwise interacting with it on an affective level. With such a strong connection we would expect gains in cognitive learning objectives as well.

### ***Knowledge Retained***

We presume that students did not take notes while watching. And none of the questions posed to them while watching were oriented to factual recall. Yet in conversation, they displayed an impressive ability to remember specific facts. For example, the amount of money raised by candidates Brown and Inglis was displayed one time and for only 7 seconds but these amounts were often quoted quite precisely by students.

Many students retold parts of the narratives to illustrate a concept or to refer to a specific moment as reference. Clearly, their understanding of party concepts is now tied to and enmeshed

within these videos. Students moved fluidly between personal stories and those from the features, suggesting that these were now part of their body of experience with political parties, despite that experience being mediated as video.

### ***Comprehension and Identification***

One student said that “it was neat to see these people in a real setting, as opposed to on CNN.” Since both CNN and our features are essentially video, we can assume he was referring to their tone. Most subjects retained a degree of being “on the record,” but few were as formal as they would be with a major media outlet. And the non-threatening nature of our process-oriented questions also assisted in gaining us access and facilitating honest responses.

In another sense, the videos made students aware on an affective level of things they had previously known only on an intellectual level. A student said:

“I knew that a lot of stuff went into...your campaign and everything like that but I know it made me realize how much work was actually done. So many people do all this just so that one guy can make it, make a difference, and do what he has to do and I thought that was really cool.”

Several students mentioned that it was good to see and hear “how it really works,” which is a little surprising given the relatively small amount of documentary style footage. It appears that first-hand accounts are a reasonably good stand-in for actually capturing the process in progress. Connecting with real people further contributed to serious consideration of issues. Students commented:

“I heard a lot of like, views and opinions and stuff like that, that I hadn't ever thought of especially from the log cabin guy...he was like comparing gay marriages with a lot of our basic rights that we have. And I never really thought about how basic it is to them.”

“The interviewees seemed to be “people just like us” and “made me feel like I could easily get involved.”

“I liked having the students’ perspective of a rally. I've never been to a rally, so seeing that kinda makes me want to go to the next one I have the opportunity to go to.”

“He talked about just like how easy it was to, to, you know get into politics and which, was like surprising to me.”

### ***Content and Application***

Beyond factual recall, many students were able to go further to evaluate and synthesize the material. For example, one student theorized that Brandon’s campaign was designed to galvanize existing support. While another did not understand the attention Brandon, an African-American, Democratic candidate paid to African-American voters. “Didn’t he have their vote already?” he asked. Overall student evaluation and synthesis was demonstrated in some of the following comments.

“You have to reach out personally, you can't just put up signs.”

“You better show up at everything... [laughter] every press, it doesn't matter how big or small a function, you better be there.”

In a surprising demonstration of evaluation, another student mentioned that one of the interviews reminded him of Federalist 10, and went on to relate how this concept of factions continues playing itself out today.

### ***Questions: Help in Analyzing***

The most common request was for the addition of an objective, fact-oriented, trustworthy voice to the mix. They liked the multiple perspectives but wanted help in synthesizing the wide range of stimulus into a coherent understanding. Some suggested:

“I trust books more than personal opinion.”

“I like... the little black out screens and they would tell you like what's coming and the little statistics there were, were kinda nice.”

“You could even do like blackout screens with the, the platforms, like in the middle of it whatever, when he mentions something kind of like a platform and you can come up with a black out screen you know what the actual platform is.”

They liked being able to answer questions while they watched the videos for two reasons. First, they like having questions to guide the viewing, helping them to understand what to look for and to appreciate what they are seeing. In fact, a common request was for more questions. One stated:

“In general, if you were using that in place of a textbook, some questions that would kind of, not necessarily tie it together but would [bring out the questions that we just talked about on the board.] Yeah, like how does this relate to parties? What does it make you think about such and such on a local level? Things like that...stuff to get you started...and not even things that [you] necessarily have to answer in some way shape or form, just something... [thought provoking?] right.”

Second, many of the students confessed to “multi-tasking” while viewing the two and half hours of content, suggesting that simply sitting and watching is too passive. Providing more questions to answer while viewing would not only help to allay restlessness but also to keep them engaged in processing or analyzing the content.

One class received a lecture on parties before viewing the features. The other class did not. In both classes we asked students if they wanted more structure before the video or more after. All students said “both.” They want more guidance before watching as well as the discussion afterwards.

### ***The Discussion: Key to Synthesizing and Evaluating***

The videos laid the groundwork for the class discussion, but the real sense-making took place in the discussion. That is, having the videos as experience, albeit mediated, an amazing

array of concepts could be introduced and understood in the class discussion. But without the discussion, the video would have planted seeds never to be harvested. Some students revealed:

“I wasn't taking much away from it until we talked about it in class when you put it in perspective and kind of explained what we were looking for. But as I was watching it I was just zoning out and thinking, 'what am I trying to get from this?'“

“If you hadn't tied in with the lecture, I wouldn't have learned anything from those videos.”

One student characterized the videos as “reinforcement, not teaching” thus highlighting our concept of teaching as the very abstract and very cognitive. What he labeled “reinforcement” others labeled “contextualizing” or “making real.”

In sharp contrast to previous classes in which students were unprepared, and passively took notes, students brought much to bear on the subject of political parties from their experience with these web-based learning interactions. They realized what they learned through the experience with one articulating:

“I was worried that I wasn't going to learn anything after just watching the video, but after this lecture I feel I learned a lot more than simply reading a textbook and then moving on to another topic.”

### *New Questions*

Many of the student comments were actually questions betraying a desire for even more from these subjects. Students were particularly drawn to questions of ideology and anything smacking of controversy. It annoyed some students to see people from both parties speaking about process but not clarifying policy preferences. Students really wanted to hear, especially from members of a party not familiar to them, what the party believed and why. Some stated:

“They never really talked about what they...really believed in, what they stood for, they were just like, yeah, we're different, blah blah blah. I mean they never said what they stood for and that's why I don't think they could ever answer a question.”

“Would have been nice to have some concrete, like, the difference between a Republican, a Democrat, a Libertarian, and so forth in the third parties”

Students were also curious about what motivates these people. As the reality of the party characters' situation and jobs came through the students wanted to know even more about them personally. One remarked:

“I wanted to um, ask in the interview section...why they do that work, and why even if they don't agree with every part of it, why do they still you know, consider themselves a Republican or a Democrat, even though um, they don't necessarily agree with the majority of what the party stands for.”

There was general agreement that more space was needed for typing answers. We provided a small box for answering the questions posed. Students could type more than two lines but could only see two at a time. Surprisingly, they wanted more room to write longer answers.

### ***A Balanced View***

We relied on narrative to build identification with the protagonist. And in the case of Candidate Brown's documentary it worked well. But many students seemed unsatisfied with Brandon's portrayal of his opponent. They wanted to see the opponent as well, to hear in his own words how he characterized the race. Some suggested:

“See I would have liked it if you'd had the same thing, but with Inglis, then you could have seen the different aspects like, like saw how he was, cause we see that Brandon as a regular person but then we could have also seen it from the other guy's standpoint.”

“This kind of makes us biased. But then if we had the other view, we might not be as, I don't know... one-sided. The underdog in his situation and like and the incumbent, that would be real good because you could see the vast differences.”

## **Strategic Plan: Where Do We Go From Here?**

### ***More Structure***

We succeeded in developing the first-hand perspective in the features and in retaining much of the analysis for the classroom. However the student desire for a stronger framework before and while watching was quite clear. More analysis and fact in the voice over and on screen in infographics will help.

We must give more attention to preparing students to watch the videos. In such an unstructured resource, they are uneasy about approaching it without knowing the learning objectives. In other words, we must allay their anxieties about the resource by anticipating and answering questions concerning our expectations for the test.

### ***Better Subjects***

The technical quality was not impugned by the students. But some subjects were clearly more interesting than others. George Getz of the Libertarian Party, Brandon Brown our Congressional Candidate, and Christine Iverson, Press Secretary for the National GOP were clear favorites. In the future we need to be more deliberate about choosing compelling characters, but without shifting the focus to “interesting” over “relevant.”

While students seem to have liked all three features, the clear favorite was *Big Tent* from *This American Life*. *Big Tent* had no video and thus was arguably the least engaging. It was also the most passive, with an hour of content launched with only one click (as opposed to *Party People* which also presented an hour of content but required a click before each question). What *Big Tent* clearly had in its favor was compelling subjects and exceptional editing. The fine folks at *This American Life* know how to craft a tale that students really appreciate.

### ***Balance & Objectivity***

Students were quite sensitive to perceived imbalance. “The Libertarian didn't get as many questions as the major parties” and similar comments were quite common. On the whole,

the features are in fact quite well-balanced, but this did not come across to students. Where they can see sides, we need to take pains to show them that we are not favoring one over the others. Students appear to be quite ready to take information in from these subjective sources, but they really crave enough examples so they can generalize reliably, or to hear a voice with academic authority make those generalizations for them.

### ***Character Guide***

A “character guide” power point slide or other digital image with a photo and the name and title of each character would help the class discussion. Instead of “the Asian guy” students could refer to and think of this man as “the campaign manager.” Likewise “the Kerry guy” becomes “chairman of the Greenville County Democratic party” and so on.

### ***Production Choices are Critical***

We need to be very aware that our production choices have a disproportionate impact on student perspectives. If we tell the election from a candidate perspective, they will think of elections from a candidate perspective. As long as we are aware of this and careful with our choices, this should work toward effective education.

We should be especially selective in showing exceptions. The exceptions, such as an interview with a Gay Republican, often make for compelling narratives. The very novelty of such a subject adds to the interest of an interview for those of us who find it exceptional. But what is novelty to us may be taken as the norm for students without a previously established knowledge base. If you’ve never heard an interview with a Republican before, the first one should be quite representative. Seasoned viewers would see such a straightforward interview as predictable and perhaps boring. But for the new viewer, the material should reflect the norm, and exceptional aspects should be clearly noted.

### ***Technology***

The technology was quite stable. By using three different delivery technologies (Quicktime, Flash and Real Audio) every student but one was able to view at least two out of three features. In the future, we would likely drop the problematic Real Audio format and present all features in Quicktime, Flash and Windows Media whenever possible. Highly interactive features require Flash, and there really is no capable alternative to Flash at this time for web-based interactions.

### **Theoretical Discussion and Implications**

Returning to our initial question, how we can increase fundamental student interest in the resource material used to prepare for discussion in the American Government classroom, we must evaluate how this approach compared to more traditional materials. Our sample student learning objectives suggest that students should learn about the structure and processes of our institutions, should become interested in and aware of modes of civic engagement, and should come to realize their personal political socialization and ideological orientation. We did find that students were engaged by the resource and demonstrated clear retention of the material. They understood the terms of political parties because they saw them used in the context of real life. They grasped the structure of political parties because they heard discussion of the hierarchy from various members of the party organizations. They recognized the role and function of the

political parties because they saw them as mediating institutions from the vantage point of candidates, activists, and voters. Further, students became more interested in modes of political participation by the first-person accounts. They also desired to reconcile their own political views with those of the characters.

Clearly students became more actively engaged in the learning process. They grappled with their preconceived notions of parties and altered their understanding to accommodate this new information. They identified with the subjects; they questioned the subjects; and they evaluated the subjects within the context of political parties. While there are limitations to constructivism as a model of learning acquisition, we found great usefulness for its tenets in creating an engaging resource. Political science has a lot to gain from studying education theory to challenge and improve our classroom experience. More research is necessary, however, to understand the ramifications of a constructivist orientation in teaching political science. We found that one of the strongest criticisms of our approach, according to students themselves, is the lack of structure. If this obstacle can be overcome, however, students are excited about the possibilities provided by first-hand experiential learning.

In terms of Bloom's taxonomy of learning objectives, we found that these features facilitated much more learning than that provided by traditional materials. Students went beyond knowing, comprehension, and application, to analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. They not only understood what a political party is and how our parties are philosophically and ideologically aligned. They also fundamentally discovered what the parts of the party contribute to the whole, what the party as a whole contributes to American politics, and why some parties are successful while others are not. It is important for us as a discipline to not only clarify what our subject-specific learning objectives are, but also clarify what types of learning we want to activate and how to best accomplish this goal. Again, the field of education research has much to offer to our discipline.

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this research was to find a way to increase fundamental student interest in resource material for the American Government classroom. To pursue this goal we drew from the constructivist model of learning acquisition which primarily suggests that learning is an active process through which students come to reevaluate their beliefs and understandings of the world around them. We presented our learning objectives structured by Bloom's taxonomy of learning objectives in the cognitive and affective domains. And we describe our pedagogical approach of first person accounts from people actively involved in parties and elections. After describing the resource, *Americans Governing*, we discussed a pilot project in which students used the resource to prepare for the classroom experience. The results reveal a few major implications of using this resource in the classroom.

Our major findings are that not only do these web-based learning interactions spur basic interest in the subject matter; they actually spur interest beyond the subject matter. Students want to know more than what is provided by the sometimes rather extensive video footage. They want to hear more questions than those answered by political elite. They have probing questions for the "experts" investigated by the site. Second, this tool greatly enhances student preparedness. After administering the pilot, I asked students in the class for initial reactions, and they launched into rather sophisticated dialogue on the subject matter. Finally, and importantly, students are

impressed and excited about the potential of using an online resource instead of or in conjunction with traditional print media.

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