

Workshop 4

Constitutional Convention

Key Concepts

- Adopting a constructivist approach to teaching does not necessarily mean that every lesson will be student-centered. Good teachers use a combination of methodologies to convey different types of information and develop different types of skills.
- Even when conducting most of their work within a group, each student should bear responsibility for completing his or her own assignment.
- Developing groups that work well together requires knowledge of each student's abilities, which will grow over a semester.
- Simulations are most successful when students have a significant amount of information to draw upon while forming the position they will take on various issues.
- The outcome of a simulation, by its very nature, is unknown. Teachers must be flexible.

About the Lesson

Overview

Matt Johnson teaches an Advanced Placement (AP) Comparative Government class to seniors at Benjamin Banneker Senior High School in Washington, D.C. This program shows the class participating in a simulation in which students create a constitution for the hypothetical country of Permistan. To do so, the students need to review all the materials they have studied over the course of the semester, pull together their ideas, and analyze what works and what doesn't as they attempt to craft an ideal government. They have a wide range of constitutions to look at and procedures to examine. Johnson expects that they will draw from all five countries they have studied, as well as the United States, in putting together a new constitution. Students work in cooperative learning groups to discuss and debate issues relating to the executive and legislative branches of Permistan and then come together as a whole class to participate in a constitutional convention. The lesson—which is designed to help students review prior to taking their final exam—was videotaped over three class periods near the end of the semester. Simulation is the primary methodology highlighted in this lesson.

Context

Teacher: Matt Johnson is chair of the department of social studies and teaches AP U.S. Government, AP Comparative Government, U.S. Government, Constitutional Law, Economics, D.C. History, and Global Perspectives to students at Benjamin Banneker Senior High School in Washington, D.C. Students in his law class have won the District of Columbia Mock Trial Championship for seven of the past nine years. In addition to his course load, he has served as senior class sponsor, coordinator of Congressional internships, law club sponsor, stock market club sponsor, and outdoors club sponsor as well as coached varsity softball, boys JV basketball, and varsity cross country. Prior to teaching, Johnson interned at some political think tanks in Washington, D.C., and was a legislative librarian at a law firm. Johnson earned a Bachelor of Science in political science from Ripon College in Wisconsin and a Master's degree in political science at George Washington University in the District of Columbia. (Note: Matt Johnson is also the featured teacher in Workshop 8: Rights and Responsibilities of Students, in which he is seen with his Constitutional Law students.)

School: Benjamin Banneker Senior High School is a small, college preparatory, public high school in Washington, D.C. Nearly 93 percent of its 432 students are African American (1999-2000 data); remaining students are Pacific Islander (3.2 percent), Hispanic (3.2 percent), or White (0.7 percent). The high school has an attendance rate of 96.4 percent and a promotion rate of 98.1 percent.

Course: Matt Johnson's AP Comparative Government course explores the political and constitutional organization of five countries—China, Russia, France, England, and India—all of which have been studied prior to this lesson. The U.S. political system was covered in a previous course on U.S. government. The typical class unit starts with students being assigned to complete a data sheet—looking at basic socioeconomic, political, religious, and societal forces in the particular country. At the same time, Johnson assigns each student a one-page research paper on a specific topic, e.g., the House of Lords, for example, and provides about a week for its completion. The class then begins three to five days of student-led presentations, each of which is followed by questions and answers about the topic at hand and discussions about what has been learned so far. It is each student's responsibility to go out and learn enough to teach his or her peers. Each student comes to class with 25 copies of a one-page summary of his or her presentation. In effect, the students have created a textbook. The teacher's role is to get the class started, call presenters in turn, and moderate the question-and-answer discussion after each presentation. At this time, the teacher would also fill in with additional information as needed. The simulation lesson seen in the video is an end-of-the-year activity that draws on all the units that have preceded it. The class meets on a block schedule every other week.

Workshop Session

Before Viewing

A simulation is a representation of a real-life event in which participants assume roles and try to reach consensus on areas of conflict. Sometimes students are assigned specific roles; in others—like Matt Johnson’s class—students essentially “play” themselves and represent their own ideas. Consider the following scenario: Your school is considering adopting an “open campus” policy in which students may leave the school grounds for lunch. You and the other members of your workshop session are members of a group that will make a recommendation to the school committee. The group consists of a parent, teacher, student, local fast-food restaurant owner, police officer, and the school dietician. Choose one of these roles and make a list of all the facts you would need to have available before taking a position on this issue.

Facilitator’s Note: For the discussion of Activity 1, participants will need a copy of the Executive Branch Worksheet (located in Lesson Materials) and the Constitutional Convention Rubric (located in Assessment) in the Lesson Plan section of the Web site. For the discussion of Activity 4, participants will need a copy of the Lesson-Specific Standards, also in the Lesson Plan section of the Web site.

Watch the Video

Watch the video, stopping at the end of each segment. Use the following questions as a basis for discussion and reflection. If you are not attending the workshop with other teachers, use your workshop journal to respond to at least two questions per lesson activity.

Introduction

- Johnson notes that one of the most challenging moments in this lesson is immediately after the assignment has been presented. What questions would you expect students to have at this point? (Think about how you reacted to the Before Viewing assignment. What questions would you have liked to have answered before you began to work?) How would you answer your students? How long would you let the clarification process go on before you directed the groups to get to work?
- The composition of the groups for this lesson are predetermined by the teacher. What do you notice about these groupings of students that seems to be working? What might not be working? Discuss the benefits of teacher-assigned groups vs. student-selected groups. Consider when each type of group selection might be appropriate.

Activity 1. Constitutional Creation: Executive Branch

- Review the Executive Branch Worksheet that Johnson developed for this lesson (from Lesson Materials in the Lesson Plan section of the workshop Web site). If you feel that you would like to adapt this worksheet for your students, think about and discuss your reasoning for adding or eliminating some provisions. Look as well at the Constitutional Convention Rubric from the Lesson Plan Assessment section and consider whether you agree with its implicit and explicit goals for student performance. What adaptations would make it a realistic assessment for your students?
- How does Johnson redirect a group that seems to be getting “bogged down”? What are some strategies you might use in a similar situation?
- Discuss Elliott’s statement, “When you have to study something yourself and then explain it to everybody else,... you become a more dynamic learner, instead of just learning things for classes.”
- Alvin notes that Johnson “won’t go more than a couple of minutes without having the class respond to whatever he’s talking about.” How long do you typically talk before you invite students into the discussion? What are some strategies for getting students to respond?
- What is the role of lectures in a constructivist classroom? When do you use them?

Workshop Session, cont'd.

Activity 2. Rules for Convention

- Why do you think Johnson introduces this task now rather than waiting until students are ready to actually debate the elements of the Permistan constitution? What do you see as the pros and cons of the two strategies?
- What is your reaction to the level of discourse by the students? How do you think your students would do with a similar assignment?

Activity 3. Constitution Creation: Legislative Branch

- From what you have seen so far, how would you describe Johnson's role in this lesson? Make a list of words that characterize his teaching style. How do these descriptions compare to your own classroom style? How well does it seem to work for this class? What have you observed that you might try?
- What qualities do you think make Johnson an effective teacher?
- Although you don't see students discussing the judicial branch, a complete lesson would include this discussion. Would you vary the nature of the presentation in any way once you had gone through the first two branches? Why or why not?

Activity 4. Constitutional Convention

- What are students learning from this lesson? How do these outcomes compare to the standards for this lesson listed in Lesson-Specific Standards in the Lesson Plan section on the workshop Web site?
- In order for students to complete this assignment successfully, what lessons do you think would need to precede it? What resources would you want students to have available during their deliberations?
- How does this lesson build on previously learned material?
- What are the challenges and benefits of teacher-directed vs. student-directed classrooms?

Before Next Week

Assignments

- Prior to the simulation, each student researched a particular topic, prepared a presentation on it including a one-sheet overview for each student in the class, and taught the topic to his or her classmates. Select an area of your curriculum. Write a brief description of how you normally teach this topic. Do you lecture? Assign reading from a textbook or other sources? Engage students in other kinds of learning activities? Consider using the method Johnson uses to teach his students about each of the countries studied in his comparative government course. Break down the big idea into a list of as many specific topics as you have students. Make a list of sources of information you would want to have available to your students. Tell how you think you would need to prepare yourself for this lesson, including a discussion of the role you would play during student presentations. Discuss how you think student outcomes would differ between your usual method and this method.
- Review those sections of the Web site that you have not yet read, e.g., Essential Readings, Other Lessons, Teacher Perspectives, and Student Perspectives.

www.learner.org/channel/workshops/civics

Notes
