

Workshop 3

Public Policy and the Federal Budget

Key Concepts

- Finding out what students know, don't know, and/or don't understand prior to beginning a major lesson helps teachers tailor a lesson to students' needs and interests.
- Many governmental processes require elected officials and Federal agencies to reach a consensus on different issues. The best way for students to understand the complexity of these situations is for them to participate in such negotiations, which gives them an opportunity to practice important citizenship skills.
- Behaviors that contribute positively to group work can be identified and learned.
- Technology is increasingly providing both teachers and students with on-demand access to both information and tools that are of critical value in the real world of citizenship.

About the Lesson

Overview

Over three class periods, Leslie Martin's ninth-graders at West Forsyth High School in Clemmons, North Carolina, create, present, revise, and defend a Federal budget, and then reflect on what they have learned. Students participate in a simulation, working in small, randomly assigned cooperative-learning groups. Using such computer applications as PowerPoint and Excel to illustrate their recommendations, they first create a budget for presentation to the class that represents the priorities of the executive branch. They are next introduced to the actual 2001 Federal budget, and in a whole-class, teacher-led discussion, discuss some key concepts involved in creating a Federal budget. These concepts include entitlements, which they learn account for nearly half of the Federal budget, and the difference between zero-based budgeting, which they practiced in the first part of the simulation, and incrementalism. Students return to their cooperative-learning groups to revise their budgets based on new ideas they have heard in the presentations and Federal budget realities that were addressed in the whole-class discussion. Finally, each group presents its revised budget and the remaining students, who have previously each selected a Congressperson whose views are compatible with their own, simulate a Congressional hearing on the budget. This lesson highlights the integration of teacher-directed instruction with small-group work.

Context

The Teacher: Leslie Martin teaches the two-semester, ninth-grade freshman seminar course called Economic, Legal, and Political Systems at West Forsyth High School in Clemmons, North Carolina, where she has taught since 1998. Prior to 1998, she worked in industry—as a senior consultant at Competitive Solutions, Inc., in Raleigh, North Carolina; assistant vice president at Integon Insurance Corporation in Winston-Salem, North Carolina; and an associate at Eli Lilly and Company in Indianapolis, Indiana. Martin holds a Bachelor of Arts in history from Stanford University, a Master of Business Administration from Duke University, and a Master of Education from Wake Forest University's Master Teacher Fellow Program. In February 2002, she was named Outstanding High School Social Studies Teacher of the Year by the North Carolina Social Studies Council. She is a National Board of Professional Teaching Standards certified teacher.

The School: West Forsyth High School has an enrollment of 1,700 students and a campus with 10 permanent buildings and several temporary classrooms. The school was established in 1964 and has undergone many changes over the years, both in size and leadership, as the community has grown and the grades served by specific schools have shifted. New residential development continues to bring new students from many different backgrounds into the ever-changing student population. Technologies such as hypermedia, interactive software, and the Internet are available to both teachers and students.

The Course: At West Forsyth High School, civics is taught at three different levels: standard, honors, and freshman seminar, which is the class seen in this program. The freshman seminar is an honors-level class, specifically designed for the highly gifted, self-motivated student, and emphasizes independent thinking. The curriculum, while following the standards established by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, focuses more heavily on independent research, group work, and group and individual presentations than do non-honors courses. The course covers two semesters, one on civics and American government and the other on economics. The civics portion presents a history of the Constitution and discusses the impact of government on our lives. The economics portion deals with such basic concepts as supply and demand and monetary policy. An overall goal of the course is to help the students understand the interplay between the government and the economy. The lesson you will see is a culmination of what the students have learned over the entire year.

Workshop Session

Before Viewing

Identify several different teaching strategies you have used or might use in the future to introduce the Federal budget to your class. List the major advantages and disadvantages of each.

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.

Activity 1. Class Discussion of Government Budgeting Process

- Martin assigns students randomly to groups. What are the various methods that can be used by a teacher in assigning students to groups? What factors would you take into consideration in choosing one over the other for a particular lesson? What are the advantages and disadvantages of having students choose their own groups? What are the advantages and disadvantages of homogeneous groups based on ability level? What grouping of students do you think makes for the most productive learning and why?
- Martin assigned students to groups of five. What should be the basis of determining group size?
- How do you typically use cooperative-learning groups? What behaviors can you teach that would help students function effectively in groups?
- The classroom seen in this video is clearly technology-rich. How would you vary this lesson in a school in which students did not have as ready access to laptop computers or previous experience with such programs as PowerPoint and Excel? How could you work with your teaching colleagues and the community to give students such experiences?

Activity 2. Groups Create Draft Budgets

- Prior to introducing this lesson, students have read about the Federal budget in their textbooks. Martin made this assignment to give students an overview of the process. How often do you use textbooks in your classes and for what purposes?
- Martin has given students very brief instructions before directing them to complete the assigned task. She has, in effect, put them in a situation in which they have a limited period of time to make some very important decisions, and thus are forced to do so quickly. How do you respond to the pressure inherent in this technique? How detailed do your instructions tend to be? How would you adapt the instructions for this activity for the students and classes you teach?

Activity 3. Groups Present Draft Budgets

- Not all students are comfortable doing group presentations. What can be done to develop students' presentation skills and create an environment that is comfortable for presenting? What are the advantages and disadvantages of having a group spokesperson vs. having each group member make part of a presentation?
- This teacher has had both corporate experience and teaching experience. How do you think this influences her teaching approach? Discuss non-teaching experiences that you have had that influence your teaching style and describe the effects.
- Martin says she loves the unpredictability of what students know and don't know. Think about the last week of classes you taught. What surprised you about your students' knowledge—either positively or negatively? Tell how these insights might change what and how you teach. Discuss ways of finding out your students' understandings, gaps, and misconceptions before starting an activity.

Workshop Session, cont'd.

Activity 4. Class Discussion of the U.S. Federal Budget

- One of the standards Martin is responsible for helping her students achieve reads as follows: Students shall understand, analyze, and see the impact of government on the economy. How does this lesson achieve that standard? How would you assess student achievement of the standard?
- This segment shows a traditional teaching methodology in which the teacher leads a discussion of some basic concepts. Why do you think Martin uses this technique at this point in the lesson? (After this workshop session, review the Web section called Teacher Perspectives, in which Martin talks about her use of a variety of teaching methodologies.)
- What are some strategies that can be used to maximize student involvement in whole-class discussions? How do you make sure that all students are actively participating?

Activity 5. Groups Revise Budgets

- What are some lessons students are learning in this activity? (After this workshop session, look at Student Perspectives on the Web site to read students' thoughts about what they have learned.)
- How do you assess group activities? How do you deal with students who do not fully participate in a lesson?
- How would you increase the strategies that help students work together productively (i.e., goals, incentives, resources, roles, sequence, simulation, competition, environment, and creating an identity), while still teaching this basic lesson?

Activity 6. Groups Present Revised Budgets to Congress

- How would you adapt this lesson to meet your school's schedule?
- How do you deal with student absences on presentation days?
- How would you deal with "technology failure" on presentation day?

Activity 7. Class Debriefs on the Budget Process

- Martin thinks constructivist strategies create the best citizens. Discuss whether or not you agree and why. Select one constructivist teaching strategy and tell how you think it might be used to help students become better citizens.
- As a wrap-up activity, students have been assigned a two-page paper in which they reflect on their experience. What final assignment would you give for this lesson?
- Why is debriefing important in this type of lesson?

Before Next Week

Assignments

- Although there is no specific written rubric for this lesson, Martin uses several forms of assessment, including participation in class discussions, a two-page paper, and a state-mandated, end-of-semester test (see Assessment in the Lesson Plan section on the workshop Web site). Create a rubric for the paper that would be suitable for the population of students you teach.
- Select one or more standards that this lesson relates to (see the Lesson-Specific Standards in the Lesson Plan section on the Web site.) What knowledge, skills, and behaviors do students need to achieve the standard? In what ways would you expect students to demonstrate this knowledge, these skills, and these behaviors?
- Review the civics standards for your own state and show how this activity would align with them. Develop an assessment that demonstrates that students are meeting the relevant state standards.
- Review those sections of the Web site that you have not yet read, especially the Teacher and Student Perspectives sections reflecting on the discussion from Activities 4 and 5.

www.learner.org/channel/workshops/civics

Notes
