

3-1-2010

The Road to the White House: Using Experiential Learning in the Classroom

Gregory Domin

domin_gregory@columbusstate.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://csuepress.columbusstate.edu/pil>

 Part of the [Curriculum and Instruction Commons](#), [Online and Distance Education Commons](#), [Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Commons](#), and the [Teacher Education and Professional Development Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Domin, G. (2010). The Road to the White House: Using Experiential Learning in the Classroom. *Perspectives In Learning*, 11 (1). Retrieved from <http://csuepress.columbusstate.edu/pil/vol11/iss1/8>

This Research is brought to you for free and open access by CSU ePress. It has been accepted for inclusion in Perspectives In Learning by an authorized editor of CSU ePress.

The Road to the White House: Using Experiential Learning in the Classroom

Gregory Domin

Columbus State University

Abstract

This case study presents a first hand account of experiential learning undertaken by the author and 16 Mercer University students during the 2008 presidential nominating season. The author was able to arrange a seminar entitled “The Road to the White House” which included an observation trip to South Carolina for the Republican Primary, 16-21 January, 2008, where students both witnessed and participated in the unfolding events of the 2008 presidential campaign.

The purpose of this paper is to make a case for experiential learning in the classroom. Over the last 10 years, I have made a more concerted effort to move away from a strict lecture format to include more strategies such as simulations, service learning, experiential learning, etc. to enrich my students’ learning experience. What I have found is, anecdotally at least, that students enjoy classes much more as a result of the “mixed” format than they did when I solely lectured. And, my students may have learned more as a result in this change of pedagogy since they appeared to be more engaged in the material.

You, the reader, will notice a couple of things as you read this article. One, this is a case study. As with any case study the ability to generalize any conclusions is minimal at best. Experiential learning in the classroom may work well for me but it may not work well for you or anyone else. Only you can decide what works best in your classes. Two, with the exception of the literature review itself, much of the article is conversational. I have designed the paper this way to give you a first-hand account of what occurred in South Carolina as a result

of this experience. My hope is that after reading this account, other faculty will want to delve into developing the same kinds of experiences for their students.

The Experiential Approach to Learning

Social scientists often envy their brethren in the natural sciences because they have the ability to use a laboratory setting to conduct experiments to better instruct their students. Our pedagogy is limited by uncertainty and the inability to control environment to determine the effects of key independent variables on critical dependent variables. We are often limited to discussing past events or widely variable behavioral trends. This paper is an attempt to elucidate a mechanism the author found to be quite successful in involving students in the political process and experiencing a major event first-hand.

Boyer (1987) explores the idea of an integrated learning environment. He explained that undergraduate education transitioned into the current lecture-based format in the 1930s. The move toward lecture-based learning greatly expanded after the second World War as colleges were

called on to educate more and more individuals in a cost-effective fashion. He notes that, prior to this change, students were educated by faculty guiding them through processes of learning that were both experimental and experiential in nature. In the post-war era, students have rarely had the benefits of one-on-one mentorship and the excitement of being in a cutting-edge learning environment where students participate in their own learning. This understanding is furthered by the work of Bennett (1996), which finds there is a movement among college faculty to integrate teaching and research roles in recent times to good effect. Further, Astin (1993) is of the opinion that when experiential learning actively challenges students, they are more likely to relate the experience to other life experiences. Malachowski (1997) writes that the active involvement of the instructor in direct experiential learning provides for an enhancement of the faculty as well as furthering their individual research agendas.

In political science, we have been fortunate to have many fine instructors who have long integrated the roles of lecturer, mentor, and researcher involving their students in exciting learning processes. This effort has often involved the infusion of current events and direct experiences into our teaching activities. Some recent efforts documented include Young's (1996) inclusion of students in field research on gender. Her work is based on the model developed by Kolb (1984) that sees a cyclical relationship between concrete experiences, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Seitz (1994) has seen success in requiring students to observe local government functions. His findings suggest that students discover more about the "real" effects of our political process when they are actually exposed to them.

Young (1996) also encouraged students to experience the system, though some of her students were less than enthusiastic about the process because of the uncertainty involved. Chesney and Feinstein (1993) employed an innovative approach to encourage voter registration and electoral participation by assigning students to work in registration efforts and then evaluate the benefits of their efforts in a writing assignment. They found that students who participated in this project were more likely to value participation than those without a participation module in their curriculum.

The opportunity to study presidential primaries is unique because of the dynamics of the process and the strong role of the media. The latter of these phenomena makes it easy to follow the campaigns, even if direct observation is cost-prohibitive. Aldrich (1980) notes the dynamics of the system and the somewhat uncertain nature of the outcome. Bartels (1988) updates this understanding with a comprehensive analysis and a conceptual framework for understanding the nomination dynamics. Fenno (1990a) provides an excellent case study of the candidacy of John Glenn, and Gurian (1991) offers an analysis of the media and the Super Tuesday phenomenon. Further, Fenno (1990b) gives us insight into the methodology of observing political events. The relatively small body of literature, the relatively brief calendar of the nomination season, and the uncertainty of outcome make the project an interesting one for students to grasp and master.

The Idea

During the fall 2007 semester, it was agreed by our department that I was next in line to teach a special topics course in the spring 2008 semester. Not having any ideas of my own, I struggled to come up with a course that I thought might be interesting to our students. As I thought about what

ROAD TO THE WHITE HOUSE

courses I might like to teach, a colleague and I had a conversation about the course as I was dismayed with my lack of ideas. During this conversation, my colleague said, “Why don’t you teach a course on the presidential primary season, and see if you can take your group to one of the early primary or caucus states to observe first hand what it’s like to be on the ground during a primary?”

I discussed the idea with my chair, and he was resoundingly positive. He sent me to see our dean, who was equally positive. As I sat and listened to the dean express his joy of seeing such a course come together, I was worried about how I was going to pay for the travel expenses of the trip. I was required to do a budget, and after figuring in transportation (two vans), the cost of gas for the trip, lodging, meals, etc., the grand total came to \$7575.00. In order to make the trip, I needed a strong financial commitment from the college. When the dean and I got around to discussing the budget, much to my surprise, he said he would kick in \$6000.00. He said I should try the Provost’s office for the remainder of the money. If the Provost did not come through, the dean said he would cover the remaining \$1575.00. I thanked him profusely and immediately made an appointment to see the Provost where I secured the remainder of the money. The trip was born!

The Letter

The following letter was sent to participating students prior to the experience.

10 December, 2007

Dear Student,

Welcome to POL 380.0V1 “Road to the White House”. I am writing you to introduce the course to you before it begins. This is a four credit course. You also need to be enrolled in POL 496.0V2. While the course is scheduled to meet MWF at 2:00 p.m. in Knight 206, there are several requirements I need you to be aware of up front.

First, part of the fourth hour entails you viewing the presidential primaries beginning in January all the way through the end of the semester. Most of the primaries and caucuses fall on a Tuesday evening (with some exceptions). In addition, in all likelihood, we will know both parties’ nominees by early February if not sooner. However, since this is a course on presidential primaries and the media, you are expected to keep abreast of all of the primaries and caucuses.

Second, we are scheduled to visit South Carolina for its first in the south primary on Saturday, 19 January, 2008 (Republicans only). The Democrats will hold their primary election on 29 January. For whatever reason, the two parties decided to hold their primaries on different days this election cycle. Since the Republicans appear to be the more competitive of the two parties this cycle, “we will chase them” around South Carolina. We plan to leave on Tuesday, 15 January and return on Sunday, 20 January. I will have more details about the trip once the semester starts, but please know in advance that traveling to South Carolina is REQUIRED (no exceptions). ***I am also asking each student to set aside \$150.00 to help defer the cost of the trip.

Third, depending on access, we will also chase the presidential candidates in Georgia on Tuesday, 5 February. This is obviously more of a local event and will include both the Republican and Democrat candidates. More on Georgia’s primary once the semester begins. Fourth, we will also tour a local TV news station (ABC, FOX, NBC, or CBS) to get a sense of how the media are covering the presidential primaries. I will have a firm date once we get back from Christmas break.

Recruitment

My initial concern was that search for participants, after minimal advertisement, we found sixteen students (the maximum number) who committed to the course itself and the trip; there were several students on the waiting list. We capped the course at sixteen because it appeared to be the maximum number for which the seminar format worked. In addition, it was all that we could afford based on the budget. The largest expenditures were lodging: three to a room, the van rentals, and the cost of gas.

The Plan

Even though we knew the Republican candidates would be in South Carolina from 16-20 January, we knew that in campaign politics, candidates quickly change their plans and schedules. We had to be sure that our schedules were flexible once on the ground. This forced me to have to relinquish “control” over the learning experience that I enjoy in the traditional classroom setting. I had a very open and honest discussion on the first day of class before we traveled up to South Carolina telling my students that there were no guarantees on what would take place during our time there.

While the most exciting part of the seminar was the trip to South Carolina, the seminar involved a full semester’s worth of course material and planning in only a few days since the primary took place early in our semester. First, I needed to lay a theoretical framework for the participants so that they could make well-informed observations. Three tools were used to accomplish this task. One, all participants were to read *The Front-Loading Problem in Presidential Nominations* (Mayer & Busch, 2004). Students were expected to combine an understanding of the unfolding events in 2008 with past scholarship in political

science. The Mayer and Busch readings gave students a solid understanding of the basis of scholarship on the process of nominating presidential candidates and a good review of nomination dynamics from the 1970s through 2004. Two, one of my colleagues from Mercer University came with us to South Carolina and drove the second van. As an aide, my colleague’s guidance, assistance, and good nature were invaluable to the trip. Having my colleague with us gave students the opportunity to ask advice from someone who actually experienced the presidential primaries first hand since he took a group of his own students to New Hampshire for its primaries in 2000. The interaction between the students and my colleague led to an enhanced interest in the academic side of the experience. The third activity which prepared students for the events was a series of discussions that focused on the unfolding events of 2008. We watched the Iowa and New Hampshire returns and the debates that preceded our trip in mid-January. Students were also asked to read daily national newspapers in order to stay abreast of the campaigns. We discussed media coverage of the campaign and began to formulate our own ideas on what might be different between our “actual” observations and the coverage of events through the “selective” lens of the journalists.

Results

The student evaluations for this course are displayed in Table 1. Without a doubt, these are the strongest evaluations of my teaching career.

ROAD TO THE WHITE HOUSE

Table 1 Student Course Evaluation for POL 380.

Student	Instructor encourages interest	Instructor enthusiasm	Instructor approachable	Instructor encourages student to think	Instructor challenges learning	Comments
1	5	5	5	5	5	Greatest experience out of all classes.
2	5	5	5	5	5	It was the best class at P.C. and best learning experience.
3	5	5	5	5	5	Great experience, but unorganized at times.
4	5	5	5	5	5	Great experience and great class.
5	5	5	5	5	5	Best class I took all year.
6	5	5	5	5	5	The class was a great learning experience.
7	5	5	5	5	5	This class was the best experience of my college career.
8	5	5	5	5	5	Best class ever. Professor wants students to learn.
9	5	5	5	5	5	
10	5	5	5	5	5	Excellent class. Superb teacher
11	5	5	5	5	5	Great class
12	5	5	5	5	5	The class was an incredible learning experience.
13	5	5	5	5	5	Best class I've ever been a part of.
14	5	5	5	5	5	
15	5	5	5	5	4	
16	5	5	5	5	5	Most insightful class I've ever had.

In addition to the formal evaluations that are displayed in Table 1, students submitted informal evaluations at the conclusion of their projects. Among the comments was the following, “I really learned how politics works in this class.” Another participant wrote, “We [learned] how to go with the flow and roll with the punches...that is the nature of the beast in politics; no one ever knows what will happen tomorrow and what affect it will have on public perception.” One student commented, “The experience of volunteering gave each student a sense of duty and pride...and I am sure that most of us have never felt that strongly about a candidate.” Another perspective was expressed in the following words, “Most of all, I loved the seminar because it got me involved in something in which I strongly believe...never before had I stepped up to take a stance for a candidate.” A student wrote, “This course was the epitome of everything a political science major could hope for. It was exciting and we had the opportunity to study the most exciting event in politics, elections.” Finally, one participant wrote, “This class benefited me more than any other I have taken, not because I learned specific information; but rather because I learned how a complex process works...it isn’t knowledge that is memorized and forgotten, it is a process that became part of how I think.”

Conclusion

Such an experience makes for a magnificent capstone for our major. My colleagues are strong teachers and their classes developed a systematic understanding for politics. This experience gave the students the opportunity to develop their understandings in an applied environment.

Another idea that has been considered since the conclusions of this

seminar is a tour of civil rights sites in conjunction with our African Americans in the Political System class. I am currently investigating funding to involve students in studying campaign styles by direct observation. Yet, funding these sorts of adventures makes it difficult to provide the opportunities. Some sources for funding include undergraduate research funds and the waiver of certain institutional fees to reduce the cost for participants.

The response to this experience has been so positive that I have already begun planning for 2012. I have also worked to move away from a strict lecture format to a more discussion and current-events related atmosphere. Although it took a great deal of effort to organize, this seminar proved to be the most exciting teaching experience in which I have engaged.

Overall, this class had the effect of increasing enthusiasm of our majors and increasing interest in our department by others on campus. This was supported by an rise in the number of majors declared during the spring semester 2008. Our administration was enthusiastic that participants appeared on MSNBC and a number of rallies for Paul, Romney, McCain, and Huckabee. I developed a deeper bond with my students and accompanying colleague, and I gained greater confidence in taking on innovative learning projects. I also have come to believe that an integrated learning process including discussions, immediate analysis, and independent discoveries has a deeper meaning for students. These discoveries are also accompanied by a deepened understanding of theory.

References

Aldrich, J. H. (1980). *Before the convention*. Chicago: University Press.

ROAD TO THE WHITE HOUSE

- Astin, A.W. (1993). *What matters in college? Four critical years revisited*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Bartels, L. M. (1988). *Presidential primaries and the dynamics of public choice*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton Press
- Bennett, W. L. (1996). *The governing crisis: Media, money, and marketing in American elections* (2nd ed.). New York: St. Marten's Press.
- Boyer, E. L. (1987). *College: The undergraduate experience in America*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Chesney, J. D., & Feinstein, O. (1993). Making political activity a requirement in introductory political science courses. *PS: Political Science and Politics*, 26(1), 535-538.
- Fenno, R. E., Jr. (1990a). *The presidential odyssey of John Glenn*. Washington: CQ.
- Fenno, R. E., Jr. (1990b). *Watching politicians: Essays in participant observation*. Berkley: Institute for Governmental Studies.
- Gurian, P.-H. (1991). The influence of nomination rules on the financial allocations of presidential candidates. *Western Political Quarterly*, 43(3), 661-687.
- Kolb, D.A. (1984). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Malachowski, M. (1997). Not all research is equal: Student-oriented vs. research-oriented approaches to scholarship. *Council on Undergraduate Research Quarterly*, 17 (4), 192-196.
- Mayer, W. G. and Busch, A. E. (2004). *The front loading problem in presidential nominations*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press.
- Seitz, J. L. (1994). Now that was a good class: Learning about politics by observing local politics. *PS: Political Science and Politics*, 27(1), 71-72.
- Young, R. R. (1996). Brief field experiences: An instructional tool for undergraduate political science classes. *PS: Political Science and Politics*, 29(2), 695-696.

Gregory Domin, Ph.D. is Chair of the Department of Political Science and MPA Program at Columbus State University. His areas of expertise include, but are not limited to, American, foreign and national security policy, the American presidency, and campaigns and elections. Dr. has served as a political consultant and provides analysis and commentary on matters of American foreign policy and campaigns various television affiliates.