

Familiarity Breeds Respect Toward Congress: Teams in the Classroom and Workplace

Robert H. Swansbrough, *University of Tennessee at Chattanooga*

"We're putting together a great team to serve America."

—President George W. Bush

"You know, politics and public life is a lot like athletics. It's a team sport. I don't care how good the quarterback is, or the center. If you don't have a good team, you're no where."

—President Bill Clinton

Introduction

Many futurists and business leaders underscore the vital importance of teamwork in the 21st century. Business guru Peter Drucker predicted that, "Teams [will] become the work unit rather than the individual himself. . . . We will have to learn to use different kinds of teams for different purposes" (Drucker 1994, 68). A 1997 survey of CEOs and American Council of Education leaders identified as the top three skills to succeed in the 21st century workplace: leadership, teamwork, and problem solving (Business-Higher Education Forum, 1997). As the above presidential quotes indicate, politics also depends upon leaders who can attract, motivate, and coordinate teams to win electoral victories, organize government, and develop public policies that benefit the nation.

This article describes a semester-long American government project that assigns students the role of representing actual members of Congress.*Students then serve on House committee teams considering current bills.¹ Such a legislative exercise provides students with experience in speaking on the House "floor," as they debate and vote on controversial legislation in the national news. The project also addresses some of the misunderstandings about Congress that former Representative Lee

Hamilton pointed out in a recent Pi Sigma Alpha address (Hamilton 2000).² In particular, the congressional simulation highlights the complexities and challenges involved in the law-making process, illustrates the importance of political skills in a democracy, clarifies many public misperceptions of Congress, and underscores the attentiveness of congresspersons to the voices of their constituents.

The growing importance of teams in the workplace led the author to add to the American government syllabus the objective: "*Underscore the importance of collaborative learning and teamwork in the 21st century.*"³ Teams comprise a key component of the general education American government class, where most students declare majors other than political science. The Internet becomes—through online syllabus "hot links," listservs, and email—a means to involve students in collaborative projects centering on contemporary "real-world" issues. Furthermore, web-based asynchronous discussion forums, utilizing Blackboard software, allows student team members to share their research findings, exchange sources of information, and plan outside-of-class for scheduled class presentations and debates on current political issues.⁴

The study analyzes empirical and qualitative data from student team members enrolled in seven courses from fall 2000 to summer 2002. One particular problem arose early in the author's integration of teams into his courses: how to motivate all students to fully participate with their team, rather than coasting as "free riders." Free riders represent a special challenge in creating effective teams for collaborative learning.

A Congressional Experience

In the American government class, students learned on the first day that they would be assigned to represent real members of Congress in a class debate at the end of the semester. Based upon their preference, the instructor assigned students to serve as a Republican or Democratic congressperson in that session (e.g., 107th Congress, 2nd Session) of the House of Representatives. Students also choose to debate on either a

domestic or foreign affairs bill, which had not become law. The instructor has focused past House floor debates on gun control, the national defense missile system, oil drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, stem cell research, abortion (Child Custody Protection Act), and fast-track trade authority for President George W. Bush.

Students serve as a member of the House committee that has jurisdiction over that issue or particular bill. The instructor posts their party and committee assignments on Blackboard or the online syllabus to ensure that students begin to rely on the Internet for key class information. A class of 50 students may comprise up to three committees with majority and minority party members (a total of six teams). Teaching assistants would allow an instructor to use more teams, with six to eight the optimum team size.

The instructor posts on Blackboard a direct link to the legislation, for students to analyze and debate an actual bill. They may check the Library of Congress web site (Thomas) or the Project Vote Smart site to determine the status and legislative history of the bill. Students utilize the pre-midterm period to begin researching the bill topic, posting useful web sites, and sharing other sources for teammates to explore. Teams often divide up the sections of the legislation for research by particular team members.

The instructor devotes an early class period for an orientation on the use of the online syllabus and requires students to complete a written quiz by using answers found while browsing through the syllabus and hot links to other web sites. Students receive credit for the assignment, but the main purpose is to bolster confidence in navigating the online syllabus to discover hot links to political web sites they will later use for issue and member profile research. The instructor schedules this class session in a campus computer lab. The orientation also introduces students to their team's Discussion Board on the Blackboard system.

Another early assignment requires each student to post a self-introduction on the Republican or Democratic Party Discussion Board. Students provide their

Robert H. Swansbrough is professor in the department of political science at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. He was a Congressional Fellow of the American Political Science Association, served as administrative assistant for Representative Marilyn Lloyd (3rd TN), professionally managed six congressional campaigns in California and Tennessee, and conducted polls for local, state, and federal political candidates.

name, year in school, and career objectives. They answer the National Elections Study survey question: Generally speaking, do you usually consider yourself a Democrat, a Republican, an Independent, or what? Then, they must post a short paragraph about why they chose that party identification.

The author developed a brief PowerPoint class presentation describing the importance of teamwork in the workplace that students will soon enter. It quotes well-known athletes and American presidents on the importance of teamwork to achieve shared goals. The lecture also highlights Bruce Tuchman's four stages of team development (forming, storming, norming, and performing), which very often reflects the stages their party and committee teams encounter as they prepare for the simulated congressional debate (Tuchman 1965, 396). In addition, the author introduces students to the possible personal styles each team member may represent, such as driver, persuader, analyzer, and organizer, a concept employed in business (Clark 2000). The lecture emphasizes that an effective team requires all four types of personal styles to achieve their team goals. The author sometimes uses survival simulations, like Jay Hall's "Lost on the Moon" exercise, to stress the importance of synergy. Hall defines synergy as "the ability of a group to outperform even its own best individual resource" (Hall 1971, 53).

Immediately after completing the midterm exam, students evaluate their teammates using a World Series peer rating model (Maran and Gresham 1998).⁵ They also classify each team member according to the four personal team style categories—and identify any free riders on their team. Midterm team peer assessments don't count as part of the course grade, but via email each team member learns how teammates have judged their participation thus far in the course. Not surprisingly, returning these scores (translated into a letter grade), personal style classifications, and peer comments serves as the proverbial warning "shot across the bow" to free riders that non-participation will adversely impact their course grade.

Over time, the author has increased the weight of team peer evaluations and instructor assessments of their substantive team discussion forum postings. Unless such collaborative activity counts at least 15–20% of the course grade, some students will ignore the exercise. Even then, the lack of active participation by some teammates emerges as a complaint among students, as noted later in the survey data.

After the midterm, students receive the name of the member of Congress they will represent in the simulated House debates and floor votes. The author tries to assign students to representatives from all parts of the country and reflect the students' gender, race, or ethnicity. Often the students develop attachments to "their" representative; women and minority students especially express empathy toward the personal challenges their member faced in the career path to Congress.

When students obtain their congressional assignments, they begin research on a member profile. The course's online syllabus includes an outline of a three-page member profile, hot links to the House of Representatives' listing of members' official web sites, as well as other Internet sites or library sources (e.g., *Congressional Quarterly* and *The Almanac of American Politics*). These sources provide students with information about the member's district, voting record, interest group ratings, party unity, and presidential support scores. The instructor posts a sample member profile from a previous class on Blackboard.

The last section of the member profile requires students to decide how they will vote on the bills coming before the House and why their member would vote that way. The instructor purposely includes some freshmen members, marginal districts, and controversial issues that require students to carefully reflect on Speaker Sam Rayburn's dictum: "Vote your district first." Congressman Hamilton acknowledged that for all members of Congress, "Their number one objective is to get reelected" (Hamilton 2000, 761). Students must submit the written member profiles 10 days prior to the beginning of the class debates, with a copy of the member profile posted under a group team forum as an attachment. Thus, their elected party leaders have an early indication of why a representative may not support the party's position on a bill.

In the first half of the course, students rotate the roles of moderator and recorder for their team, so that everyone can assess the leadership abilities, commitment, and knowledge of their peers. Recorders must post attendance at meetings, key assignments, and decisions on their team's discussion board.

Several weeks before the scheduled class debates, a Democratic Caucus and Republican Conference of all party members elect their party leadership. When using three committees, the majority party selects a Speaker, majority leader, and majority whip. The opposing

party chooses a minority leader, minority whip, and minority deputy whip. One of the party leaders must come from each committee team, as they serve as majority or minority floor leaders when their bill reaches the House floor for debate and vote. The Speaker yields the gavel to the majority leader when his or her House committee seeks to pass their legislation.

The instructor posts the rules for the debates, acting under a Rules Committee limitation that no amendments are permitted to the proposed bills. The Rules Committee allocates 40 minutes to debate each bill, with the majority and minority leaders determining the order of presentations based upon their strategies. Individual members may speak only two minutes on their bill, with any remaining time allocated for one minute rebuttals or comments by other class members.⁶

Students dress appropriately for this maiden congressional speech, since simulated C-Span coverage televises their speech to their district. During the debate and roll call votes, the House clerk and party leaders identify students by their member's name. Some teams make name badges and wear American flag pins on their dark suits, navy blazers, or business attire. The instructor provides name plates (tents) with their member names that they place on desks and on the podium when addressing the House chamber.

Post-Team Surveys

The author developed and administered a post-team survey instrument in seven political science classes between fall 2000 and summer 2002 (N = 142). Most of the respondents (n = 101) were enrolled in the introductory American government course, while others participated on teams in classes on Congress, the presidency, American foreign policy, and international relations. Students completed the questionnaire after finishing their final exams; the survey had no impact on their course grade.

Students appear increasingly aware that after college or graduate school they may serve as a member of a legal team, a managerial team, a creative team, or a teachers' team. When asked whether they expected to work sometime on a team with fellow workers in their chosen career field, virtually all the students (97%) said "yes." Over two-thirds (69%) of the respondents indicated they had received peer grades for team participation in other classes. Based upon discussions, this appeared most common among education and

business majors. When asked about how comfortable they were working with fellow students on a team, 61% declared they felt very comfortable and 39% stated they were somewhat comfortable working with class teammates.

All seven classes used asynchronous team forum postings on discussion boards using online course delivery software. A majority (52%) of the students found the class discussion forum postings very helpful in understanding class materials, sharing information with teammates, and preparing for the class presentations, while 44% found the forum postings somewhat helpful and only 3% said not at all helpful. A strong majority of students (55%) chose the statement: "I prefer posting my ideas on the class web discussion forum, since I don't have much available time for out of class meetings." The alternate statement was selected by 44% of the student respondents: "I prefer to meet outside of class with my team, rather than post my ideas on the web discussion forum."

In assessing the overall effectiveness of their teams, 39% of students rated their teams' effectiveness as excellent, 49% as good, 11% as only fair, and just 1% as poor. The problem of free riders, students who didn't post information on the team's forum, provide research on issues, or regularly participate in team meetings, emerged as a critical factor in student evaluations of their team's effectiveness. Almost half (49%) of the students asserted that their team experienced a slight problem with free riders and another 7% described it as a major problem; 44% of the students said free riders were not a problem on their team.

The study explored this issue in greater depth, since the problem of free riders appeared essential to a team's effectiveness and student satisfaction with their team experience. Indeed, cross tabulations of the variables team effectiveness by free rider problem yielded a statistically significant relationship. Of the students who stated that free riders were not a problem on their team, 58% rated their team's effectiveness as excellent, 37% as good, and only 5% as only fair or poor. On the other hand, among students viewing free riders as a slight or major problem, only 24% assessed their team's effectiveness as excellent;

instead, about three-fifths (59%) felt their team's performance was good, while 17% said only fair or poor.

A variety of other factors correlated highly with very positive evaluations of team effectiveness. Many of these variables reflect ideal team member behavior—in direct contrast to free riders. Students assigning excellent scores for their teams' effectiveness appeared very satisfied with their team members' motivation to achieve team success (59%), preparations and contributions (59%), shared leadership on the team (58%), and fairly shared team responsibilities (58%). Similarly, students rating their team's effectiveness as excellent also declared they were very satisfied with the sense of team unity (57%), regular communications among team members (57%), and regular forum postings (55%). In other words, on a perceived effective team, all team members participated, contributed, and shared the tasks necessary to achieve the team's goals.

Several other interesting findings revealed that, regardless of their complaints about free riders, students appreciated the opportunity afforded teams to voice and hear divergent viewpoints. Overall, 78% of the students stated they were very satisfied that their team members respected one another's opinions and ideas and 74% felt teammates expressed different ways of thinking, valuing, and seeing during team meetings.

When asked for one recommendation that would have improved their team's performance, 37% of the students enrolled in American government courses mentioned the need for more time (both inside and outside of class) for their team meetings, followed by 21% calling for more participation by all team members (criticism of free riders), and 10% recommending a greater use of the team forum postings. Students also felt they needed a greater understanding of team goals and the legislative project's process (8%), while 7% felt their congressional speeches should have been practiced with their teammates.

Conclusions

Classroom teams increased student involvement in a class. Collaborating with teammates on a project helped students

become more acquainted and comfortable with other students in a large course. Students worked together and often helped one another with assignments. For example, 46% of the American government students stated that they used their teammates as a resource for notes, information, or as a pre-test study group.

Students also gained insights about teamwork. Some comments included: "We all felt like equals, a shared sense of pride;" "Helped me get to know others and feel more comfortable to talk in class;" "I learned more about 'people;'" "The teams helped a lot if I had questions about an assignment or exam;" "It divided the workload to get more accomplished;" "Helped to keep me informed and involved;" and, "I liked how we were able to get everyone's view on different subjects."

In addition, the semester-long team project provided students with a greater understanding of the legislative role of a congressperson, a better recognition of the conflicts between district and party pressures, and a deeper appreciation of the duties of a congressperson. Modern technology offered new ways to encourage student research, share ideas, and collaborate outside of class, despite schedule conflicts among team members. The culminating floor debates allowed students to bolster their confidence in speaking before an audience. One student commented in his course evaluation, "Why do I get only one grade for this class? I want a grade for American Government, English, Computer Science and Public Speaking!"

Course evaluations and individual comments by students reflected the positive aspects of their "congressional" experience. For example: "It made members of Congress more real to me. Finding out about my member helped me to see her ideologies, which made me almost feel like I was her;" "I learned what a tough job they have. They are torn between their constituents and Congress;" "It made me realize that there was someone out there who was concerned about minorities;" "They're not as evil as I thought;" and, "Many members really try hard to be effective, genuine leaders." A number of students echoed the following view, "I respect their job a lot more!"

Notes

*The author began this project while serving as a 2000–2001 Teaching, Learning, and Technology Faculty Fellow at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, under the direction of Dr. Karen Adsit.

1. The approach of this project differs from that of Ciliotta-Rubery and Levy (2000), whose congressional committee simulation relied upon instructor written bills and fictional members representing different "personalities." The author

has also utilized that technique, but feels student exploration of the beliefs and districts of actual representatives, with research and debate focused on contemporary bills, offers other teaching advantages.

2. Former Representative Lee Hamilton expressed concern over the lack of understanding about Congress among ordinary Americans, which increased public suspicions and cynicism. Hamilton suggested 10 things political scientists should teach about Congress, including five lessons this simulation addresses: Congress has a major impact on people's everyday lives; the legislative process is dynamic and complex; the country needs more politicians; members of Congress behave better than people think; and, members of

Congress do pay attention to their constituents.

3. See <http://www.utc.edu/~bswansbr/AmericanGovt/>

4. When an instructor lacks access to Blackboard or Web-CT software, many of the materials and actions described may be accessed by students through an online syllabus, library reserve holdings, or class handouts.

5. Players on winning World Series team receive 2 points for an average performance and 4 points for the Most Valuable Player. The MVP's 2 bonus points could be divided be-

tween two team members. Thus, a team of 6 players will have a maximum of 14 points to allocate among its members, ranging from 0 to 4, based upon each member's contributions to the team; the total could not exceed 14 points for that team.

6. Former Representative Lee Hamilton criticized the increasingly restrictive House rules that "sharply curtail debate, restrict the opportunity for the average member to participate, and limit the amendments and policy options that can be considered" (Hamilton 2000, 763).

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