Lecture versus Classroom Engagement—an example from “political science 101”

Caveat Emptor: It’s an example from introduction to political science—for Loyola folks, it’s the closest thing I have to the social science requirement for advanced common curriculum; for Tulane folks, it’s comparable to the “cultural knowledge” subfield of the “scientific inquiry” core curriculum requirement. For political science professors (if there are any here) it may be the equivalent of your 101 class—unless that class is American Government. Sorry to those who have no interest in this topic, but I think you’d be able to adapt it to your own field—at least in the humanities or social sciences. For physical science people, maybe think of Eric Mazur’s strategies in Physics classes....?

A) Lecture

Sample lectures for a 2 or 3 week unit on 20th century democracy and comparative government in typical MWF 50 minute class period:

1) Learning objective—to have students understand what constitutes a democracy and some of the basic institutions of certain individual governments
2) Method—lecture for most of the class with opportunities for Q and A toward the end of each class. This may caricature some classes, but I don’t think it’s a terrible exaggeration.

Week One:

1) Day One Monday—A lecture on a democratic institutions in general—maybe outlining categories that constitute democratic institutions
2) Day Two Wednesday—lecturing on a particular liberal democracy—probably the US—explaining how it is or is not democratic
3) Day Three Friday—a lecture on the institutional structure of the USSR drawing out some ways in which Lenin and Stalin thought they were working for the people

Week Two

4) Day One Monday—a lecture on a particular developing nation—say India or Kenya—and explaining how that country aspired to democracy in the late 20th century
5) Day Two Wednesday—a lecture on a country post-Arab Spring to see if any democratic institutions are emerging as a result of the revolutions there
6) Day Three Friday—an exam (or paper due) on what had been learned about democracy and the different regions of the world

N.B., these lectures can be extended additional days depending on the number of concepts and/or countries the professor wishes to expose his or her students to. So this could extend into three (or even
four) weeks. In any event, regardless of the length of the unit, it would most likely conclude in an exam or paper.

**B) Classroom Engagement**

Sample Lesson Plan—for a 2.5 to 3 week “unit”

A few rules and expectations first:

1) Learning objective—having students think in higher order terms (imagine Bloom’s taxonomy here) about politics. If the goal is to have them absorb political facts and recapitulate them, then my scheme will not work and you probably won’t be satisfied with the results. By the end of the unit, they should be able to conceptualize the elements of democracy and recognize whether a country has democratic aspirations or not. They will most likely not be able to recount specifically the particular institutional processes of a country (which is the traditional learning objective of a typical political science 101 course).

2) View course as a whole and approach it from at least the weekly standpoint, if not the monthly standpoint. In other words, don’t develop your plan in discrete days—the ideas here carry over from one day to the next.

3) I will try to exemplify a strategy for the 50 minute MWF schedule in a typical week—because it’s probably more difficult to imagine an engagement strategy when there is “less” time to get across the material each day. This would need to be adapted accordingly for the Tu Th 75 minute sessions. If you can capture a 3 hour spot once a week, this strategy would actually almost write itself.

4) My strategy is “radical”—in that I’m providing you with a completely lecture free example—there is no harm in lecturing and you can employ it periodically as you wish. Indeed I even lecture from time to time in class. But I want you to realize that it’s possible to go over the material without lecturing at all if necessary.

5) This is all dependent on two elements of trust:
   a. That you trust students to do the reading—you can build in carrots and sticks to ensure this if you need to
   b. That you trust students are capable of understanding much, if not all, of the reading, that they can think critically about it, and that they are able to articulate at least some basic questions about the readings.

Example: exploring the nature of democracy and the different types of democracy in the 20th century using C.B. Macpherson’s book, *The Real World of Democracy*. In the book, Macpherson compares and contrasts different political systems and how they characterize themselves as democracies. He breaks it down into three types of systems: (1) liberal democracies, (2) communist democracies, and (3) democracies in developing nations. You would assign this book so that they would have completed it
preferably by the first class day of the week (the Monday class), or at the very least by the second class day of the week (the Wednesday class).

Before beginning the week, assign the students further reading on the Arab Spring that they would need to complete by the following Monday of Week Two (This would be their reading assignment from Wednesday to the following Monday). James Gelvin’s, *The Arab Uprisings: What Everyone Needs to Know* is a good one but any background material would do (if you want something more concise, some overview article in *Foreign Affairs* or the *Atlantic Monthly* or even the *New Yorker* can work—just to give them some background on the chronology of events). Have the students find groups of 4 students each or so and choose a country in the Arab world to study. Give them some study questions to pursue as a handout—you can see examples of these in my Democracy and Justice syllabus.

**Week One—The Meaning of Democracy**

Day One (Monday)

1) Write a series of specific questions on the board about the text they had to read for today (i.e., Macpherson). Example from chapter one of the text:
   a. What is historical relationship between liberalism and democracy?
   b. What are the constituent elements of liberalism and liberal regimes?
   c. What is the nature of a republican form of government and how does it differ from a classically democratic one?
   d. What are the undemocratic constraints on liberal regimes?
   e. What does Macpherson mean by the “double system of power”?  
   f. Note that these questions are not particularly evaluative—I want to know if students have actually read the material closely.

2) 25 minutes—break the class into groups of 4-5 and have them discuss the questions. Be sure to move from group to group to both see how students are doing and to provide further questions if they have finished or are not getting the basic ideas. So I often ask them leading questions such as—how important is the doctrine of legislative supremacy to republican government? Or what elements of classical democracy do we see in liberal regimes? Or what role did unionization or the suffrage fight have on the development of liberal democratic regimes? For groups that are particularly keen and/or have finished early, you can let them explore evaluative questions such as—do you think Macpherson’s analysis is correct? Or what do you think Macpherson’s opinion is of liberal democratic regimes and how do you know this? The purpose of this group work is to get them all on the same page and to make sure that they have made sense of the text. These are the kinds of questions I might have otherwise asked them on an exam or a quiz in one of my more traditional classes at Loyola.

3) I would bring them back into “plenary” session, if you will, and then engage them in other kinds of questions in a general conversation for the remainder of the class period (about 25 minutes).
   a. What is Macpherson’s general argument in this chapter?
b. What are the constituent steps in that argument?
c. Did Macpherson leave anything out in his analysis?
d. Are his ideas out of date?

4) At the end of class remind them to review Macpherson’s characterization of liberal democracy and to study well his understandings of the other two forms of democracy in the subsequent chapters.

Day Two (Wednesday)

1) 30-40 minutes—Review Macpherson’s ideas from Monday on the board in a brainstorming session
   a. Ask for particular concepts that need explaining (Suffrage? Franchise? Parliamentary system?, etc.) and explain these ideas.
   b. Compose a list of characteristics of liberal democracies on the left side of the whiteboard—prepare to compare and contrast these with other forms of democracy. 98% of the time students will recount accurately the main characteristics of liberal democracy accurately and completely—fill in anything they may have left out.

2) In the middle of the white board compile a similar list for communist regimes. If you can do this in a matrix, then it is all for the better. So, for instance, students may mention a characteristic of liberal regimes as competitive party politics. If they mention single party politics (organized around a single class) as a characteristic of communist regimes, attempt to place it next to where you’ve placed competitive party politics—so they can see the contrast. You may have to explain concepts along the way (“bourgeoisie”, “dictatorship of the proletariat”, “vanguard state”, etc.)—but you’re doing it as a Q and A instead of a lecture and you are continually trying to contrast the ideas with characteristics in liberal democratic regimes.

3) Do the same for developing nations democracies. Here the matrix is continued as Macpherson described single party democracies in the context of developing nations—so the organizational principle is not class but nation. In this brainstorming session the students not only compare and contrast developing states with liberal regimes, but they can see Macpherson’s nuanced comparison between developing states and communist countries.

4) 10-15 minutes—draw out the central observations of Macpherson’s comparisons in conversation with your students:
   a. What are the most important themes Macpherson suggests?
   b. What are the criteria for comparison?
   c. What are his opinions about the three types of regimes? Does he favour any of them and if so which ones and why?
   d. What are the central considerations in thinking about democracy? Which are the most important political institutions or ideas that constitute democracies?
   e. Has he left out any regions of the world? Which ones and why? It turns out he ignores Latin America and the Middle East—the former because it doesn’t fit his model of
democracy and the latter because when he was writing his book the countries of the Middle East did not claim to be democracies.

Day Three (Friday)

1) Invite the librarians into your classroom (or go to the library) to have them instruct students on how to engage in political research on Arab States—encyclopaedia articles, databases, resources such as the CIA Fact Book or Department of State background papers, websites from the countries themselves, etc. The first 25-30 minutes of class is an overview of these resources; the second half of class (the last 30 minutes or so) the students work in their groups to actually come up with a single theme/argument they want to develop along with the materials they wish to consult (the bulk of this will be left over to their homework for the weekend).

2) During this half, you and the librarian work with the students to ensure that they are asking the right questions and organizing their ideas around themes relevant to the Macpherson text.

3) If you cannot finish your consultations in the time allotted, then you may have to give priority to the groups presenting on the Monday and Wednesday of the following week and ask the groups presenting on the following Friday to visit you during office hours for further advice.

Week Two—Arab Democracy

Day One (Monday)—buy your students some time to prepare for their presentations by giving a lecture overview of the Middle East, Arab Spring, and, prospects for democracy there. You can either lecture on this in the traditional way or you can employ the text you’ve assigned to do the same kind of brainstorming session I suggested for the previous week. If you give them a reading that covers the fundamentals of Arab political institutions, you can then re-organize the facts “thematically”—so that you cover some of Macpherson’s categories—political parties, market capitalism, representative legislatures, Presidential power, etc.

Days Two, Three, and Day One of the following week—build off the final observation from Day Two (Wednesday) by assigning one or two groups to present one or two countries in the Middle East since the Arab Spring every day this week. Their task is to analyze the democratic potential of whatever one or two individual countries they have chosen by employing Macpherson’s categories of democracy. Do the Arab countries represent aspirations to liberal democracy or developing nations’ democracy or some third way that Macpherson did not or could not anticipate? This requires that you have assigned these groups well in advance of the presentation date and have prepped them as to what is expected of them. You can assign the other students to engage in similar presentations for the following week. It’s an excellent way to have them hone presentation skills and assess whether they actually learned anything about Macpherson’s categories by having them apply it to cases Macpherson never discussed. This
exercise will probably consume an entire week, depending on how many students are in the class. I design it for an introductory class and if you have 30-35 students in that class then six groups of five or six students each should fill the time. Remember, the learning that takes place is not simply what happens in the class session itself, but outside the class session, as they work in groups in the library (or wherever). Tell students that when they are audience members, they need to take notes on what they are learning from other students.

At the end of the three days of presentation week, on Monday of Week Three, you can have an optional 15 minute review where you compare and contrast the different Arab States employing Macpherson’s categories of democracy. Where do we see a struggle for the franchise? What form does this take? Are unions more powerful in some countries than others? Do we see evidence of single party democracy or attempted single party democracy? And so on and so forth. If time is short this can also be done on Wednesday of Week Three in a more detailed way. This is conversation or brainstorming session you have with students that will have required that they paid attention to the presentations (and took good notes).

Week Three—Day Two or Three (Wednesday or Friday—depending on time)—Quality Control

I’m not a big fan of exams, but here is where you can do quality control. Give an exam (or you can assign a paper over the weekend if you prefer) where you test what students learned from their fellow students. Using key categories from Macpherson’s book you can measure whether or not the students observed the Arab variant of democracy in any fashion here. Make sure you ask them to exemplify their answers with discussion from at least two, and preferably three, Arab countries, so that they provide evidence from states other than the one they worked on in their particular groups. The broader the evidence (from a wider variety of states, the better—and you can build this carrot/stick into the question). You can also ask them to evaluate Macpherson’s argument in light of what they learned about Arab states.

If you don’t want to hold an exam, then you can run a concluding discussion on democracy in Arab states and Macpherson’s concepts. You can do this in breakout groups and then as a whole class. First you would write key analytical concepts and questions on the board—elements of liberal democracies and developing nations, and the role of market systems in the process. Then for 20 minutes break students into random groups (not the ones they were in for their presentation). In these mixed groups, have them discuss what they learned. Then bring them back for a 25 minute discussion on whether or not Macpherson’s ideas apply to Arab states. See if you can tease out elements of Macpherson’s theory that come up short so that students practice their critical thinking.

In the process of doing so you can make mental notes about which students participate more and who has learned what—it can help you assess their “participation” grade at the end of the class and give you a sense of who is performing better than others. If some students are stronger in class participation and others are stronger writers, then you can do both—an in-class review and a paper assignment targeting particular issues or concepts you have gone over. There is no one-size-fits-all here (that is even true for
other incarnations of the class you will teach in future years—you may want to adapt this to the particular mix of students you have each semester or year if you can intuit this).

N.B.: Don’t hesitate to extend the days on this assignment if you find yourself running behind schedule—it’s a trial and error thing—it’s hard to know how much time will be taken by any of these exercises and presentations. You can shift your timetable so that you cut out something you’ve planned later on if necessary. In this scheme you are attempting to get students to think in higher order terms (evaluate and apply, not just understand, to paraphrase Bloom’s taxonomy), so the amount of information you ask them to retain has to be sacrificed. If you are not prepared to do this, then this kind of engagement is not for you.

Conclusion?: In the end, engaged classroom activities and assignments take longer than lectures and rely more on students getting the job done. They do not ask the students to memorize the facts of different countries as much. They emphasize more active intellectual engagement to apply the facts of the cases to broader conceptual ideas. I know that my characterization of the lecture method may be facile and that I may have succumbed to the “straw man fallacy”, but if I exaggerate then I am only doing so to make the contrast clearer. In the end, students may not know as many political facts (though some may) as they would in a lecture course, but they will have practiced (higher order) thinking more regularly in class. I also think they will have enjoyed themselves more in the process. In any event, it’s more difficult for them to “check out” of any of these classes—and I hope that there is some pedagogical and intellectual value in that.

If you try something like this—using your own materials in your own field, of course—then let me know how it goes.

Eric Gorham
Quest University Canada

www.questu.ca

eric.gorham@questu.ca

604-898-8041