"Research & Practice," established early in 2001, features educational research that is directly relevant to the work of classroom teachers. Here, I invited Walter C. Parker and Jane C. Lo to share their work on designing an authentic assessment of deep political learning. The assessment, the Complex Scenario Test, is part of a course development research project that focuses on students developing deep knowledge through engagement in challenging, real-world tasks.

—Patricia G. Avery, "Research and Practice" Editor,
University of Minnesota

"Give Us Your Best Advice":
Assessing Deep Political Learning

Walter C. Parker and Jane C. Lo

The past 15 years have seen a wealth of civic education initiatives. States have passed supportive laws, a blue-ribbon commission has identified best practices, and new programs are blossoming.[1] Some emphasize knowing, and others emphasize doing; some are geared to academic learning about government and politics, while others emphasize participation in civic action. Both are needed because they add up to a valued hybrid: knowledgeable action or "enlightened political engagement."[2]

We have been conducting course-development research to design one such hybrid. Our aim is to invigorate the high school government course, which remains a mainstay of civic education in the United States (most students take it, many as they turn 18). *Our objective is to deepen students' knowledge of U.S. government and politics while engaging them in it through lively simulations.*

Deep knowledge of U.S. government and politics includes knowing the Constitution thoroughly, of course; it is the basis for both politics (getting power) and government (using power) in this country. Deep knowledge also includes knowing the power of interest groups, lobbying, campaign financing, federalism, civil rights, discrimination, voter behavior, ideology, the three branches, Supreme Court decisions, and more. But these are topics and the question remains: What does it mean to know

them deeply? We characterize deep knowledge as complex and adaptive—applicable to new situations.

How will teachers determine whether their students have learned deeply? Our work includes development of an authentic assessment of deep political learning, the *Complex Scenario Test (CST)*. It is a classroom-based performance assessment that can be used as a summative test at the end of the course or used formatively along the way, or both. In this article, we share the assessment and invite readers to adapt it to their own uses. And, because assessment doesn't stand alone, we organize this article using Wiggins' and McTighe's well-known "backward design" framework: We begin by clarifying the goal, proceed to the evidence needed to gauge progress and provide feedback (the assessment), and end with our instructional model.[3]

Goal: Deep Knowledge

Our definition of deep knowledge centers on what learning psychologists call transfer. Transfer is the ability to access what you know and use it, judiciously, in new situations.[4] To be usable later, classroom learning needs to take a certain form. Most important, it needs to be complex, and the most basic and common way for learning to be complex is for it to involve multiple examples (cases, instances) rather than only one. "Usable knowledge," according to teammate John Bransford "is not the same as a mere list of disconnected facts."[5] The key term here is "disconnected." Deep and usable knowledge is both complex and connected. Put another way, it is both differentiated and integrated: the multiple examples diverge, but they converge, too, because they are examples of the same thing. All wines are different, but they are all *wine*. They share key attributes.

For example, what is deep and usable knowledge of the concept *federalism?* A leading textbook for the course defines it as "a way of organizing a nation so that two or more levels of government have formal authority over the same land and people."[6] In the U.S., the two levels

are the national or central government and the 50 state governments. Now, to know this idea superficially as opposed to deeply is to comprehend this definition and to know perhaps one example. A contemporary example would be the debate over same-sex marriage. Should states be permitted to have different policies? A deeper understanding of the concept would include additional examples, such as the debates over health care, gun control, immigration, and the legalization of marijuana. And these are only contemporary examples. Historical cases would include the famous Hamilton-Jefferson debate over the national bank and the debates over slavery and Jim Crow, where "states' rights" was code for continued racial segregation. The Supreme Court is often asked to rule on these issues because the provisions for federalism in the Constitution require interpretation. Consequently, we have the decisions in *McCulloch v. Maryland* (national bank), *King v. Burwell* (health care), *Obergefell v. Hodges* (same-sex marriage), *United States v. Lopez* (gun control), *Arizona v. United States* (immigration), *Brown v. Board of Education* (school segregation) and so forth.

These are all *federalism* cases. We can see that deep knowledge is at once concrete and abstract. The diverse examples are concrete: They are factual, they occur in time and space. But the unifying concept that connects the examples is abstract. Concepts exist in our heads, not on the ground; therefore, a concept is portable and transferable from example to example.

But how can we measure deep conceptual knowledge and its application? How will teachers and students know if they are making progress toward deep political understanding?

Evidence: Complex Scenario Test

Our team includes curriculum researchers, learning psychologists, high school government teachers, political scientists, and district-level social studies curriculum coordinators. We conducted what is called "design-based implementation research"[7] for the purpose of renewing the high school government course. Together, we designed an innovative high school government course and then implemented, studied, and revised it continually. This occurred in suburban and urban public high schools in three school districts between 2007 and 2014. These schools had moderate to high proportions of students living in poverty. Students in the schools were being encouraged and sometimes required to take the Advanced Placement (AP) version of the course. (This is due to the "excellence for all" and "college readiness" trends that have swept across American schools recently.[8]) Yet, AP courses are not known for deep learning. To the contrary, they are often criticized as "pancake" courses that are a mile wide and an inch deep.[9] We decided to try and achieve our goal on this unlikely platform, figuring that if depth could be achieved here, in a test-prep course crammed with topics, it could be achieved elsewhere.

We designed the CST to measure students' ability to adapt and apply knowledge learned throughout the course to novel (new, unique) scenarios (situations, problems). The test is written like a document-based question, but with a dramatic twist: It provides students with a client (an interest group) and a real-world public policy controversy. Further, it places students in the role of advisor to this client and gives students the task of providing smart political advice on how the group can advance its agenda through the political system. To provide intelligent, persuasive advice, students must access and apply knowledge from across the course and reason with it in ways that are pertinent to the scenario and the client's goals.

A few years into the development of the test, we added a critical incident in which students are given additional information. This comes after they provided their advice. They are asked to *revise* their action plan, if needed. This way, the CST elicits two samples of students' adaptive transfer. The first is their initial advice to the interest group based on the first source document; the second is their response to the additional information provided later in the test.

It is important to understand that the CST does not ask students simply to "Give us your opinion" about either the interest group or the real-world controversy. Instead, it requires them to set aside their position, if they have one, and marshal the subject matter of the course in a way that permits them to understand why the issue is contentious and to advise the interest group at hand.

We have developed two forms of the test. The scenario and the interest group differ in the two forms but the test shell (structure, template) is the same. One has students advise an interest group called Stop Mobile Surveillance. This group wants police to stop attaching mobile surveillance devices to automobiles in order to track the movement of suspected drug dealers. The source document (a story in *Time*) gives the facts of a case and reveals that a federal court has upheld the practice. The critical incident document (a newspaper story) tells students of another case and a conflicting court ruling where such devices were disallowed. What should Stop Mobile Surveillance do now?

The second form of the test has students advise an interest group called Travesty of Justice. This group wants to help indigent suspects in death penalty cases—specifically, a murder suspect in Georgia—to get a speedy trial with competent counsel. The source document (from the group's website) objects to the use of under-qualified, low-paid public defenders to handle capital cases. The critical incident document (a newspaper story) tells students of a Georgia Supreme Court decision that allowed the trial to go forward. What should Travesty of Justice do now?

Different parts of the Constitution pertain to each issue, mainly Amendment 4 in the first and 6 in the second. Students need not only to know these but also to choose and then apply them to the scenarios. Additionally, one of the early prompts in the test asks students to indi-

cate why the issue is controversial. The first form of the test concerns individuals' constitutional expectations of a certain amount of privacy in their lives; but, still, reasonable people argue about the case. Why? The second concerns individuals' constitutional right to a speedy trial, with counsel, but again, what is the controversy in this case?

We believe teachers can generate any number of forms of the CST, for there is no shortage of contentious public policy problems reported by news media every month. Box 1 presents the shell for the CST, regardless of form. The test is an authentic assessment not only because the issue and the interest group are taken from the news but also because the advice given by students is directed toward a real-world group and scenario. In this way, the test and the course join the two dominant forms of civic education programs mentioned in the opening paragraph of this article: academic and active. Notice, too, that the test uses a form of "dynamic assessment."[10] Students are prompted *within the test* to attend to things they know but might forget (2 a, b, and c in Box 1).

Box 1: The shell for the CST

Course: AP U.S. Government and Politics
Role: Advisor/Consultant
Client: An interest group
Procedure:

1. Read Document 1 (taken from the news).

2. Use the content and skills of this course to give the interest group your best advice:

   a. Tell them *why* the issue is controversial (who will disagree and why).

   b. Tell them which level and branch of government they should target to achieve our aim.

   c. Tell them which linkage institutions they should target (media, elections, political parties, other interest groups).

   d. Now, give them an action plan.

   e. Read Document 2: (taken from the news).

   f. With this additional information, how will you revise the plan?

Using the CST
The CST may be used to serve the usual assessment needs: summative, interim, and formative.[11] One form of the test may be used mid-way through the course as an interim assessment

and the other at the end, summatively. Simpler, shorter versions of the CST can be used more frequently and formatively. This formative use will give students feedback on their ability to grasp the policy goals of a particular interest group and to produce smart political advice. To create these shorter CSTs, teachers can omit some of the prompts (or replace them with others) and leave off the second document (the critical incident).

Box 2 contains the bare-bones shell and an example drawn from our APGOV course (it is part of our first project test). It could serve as a paper-and-pencil test or as a classroom activity—a small simulation involving the whole class, with some students in the advisor role and others as clients. Either way, teacher and students together can evaluate the quality of the advice given. This kind of assessment is part and parcel of instruction, not time taken from it for "testing."

Box 2: A simpler shell for formative CSTs

Course: U.S. Government and Politics

Role: Advisor/Consultant

Client: A delegate to the Constitutional Convention, 1787

Procedure:

1. Read the scenario (a description of this delegate, his state and constituents).

2. Use the content and skills of this course up until now to give the delegate your best advice: Should he support ratification? What are the main arguments he should make to sway his opponents?

Test Validity
We convened two panels of teachers to advise us on the validity of the CST. One panel consisted of teachers who had been trained to score the test. This panel understood the CST very well as they had spent a week scoring student responses to both forms from across the several schools and districts. A second panel consisted of APGOV teachers who knew AP culture well but not the CST. We selected them because they had been invited by the College Board to make presentations at the national AP convention the prior year. We asked them to study the test and provided them with both forms as well as sample high, medium, and low-scoring responses to each.[12]

Both panels concluded the CST was a valid measure of deep and applied knowledge of the course content. They agreed or strongly agreed that the CST was a valid measure of three outcomes: (a) learning that will be important to students in their lives beyond school (86%), (b) content and skills from across the whole course (100%), and (c) deep and applicable learning of the course content (100%).

Scoring the CST

A checklist or rubric is needed. It will clarify the target for students and anchor the feedback teachers give students on their progress. The complete rubric we developed for our research would take too much space to present here, but a straightforward, simple checklist is presented in Box 3. A good student response on the test will draw from the full sweep of content and skills studied up to that point in the course, and writing it will require not just knowledge but judgment. The advice given needs to be accurate and its logic convincing. Most important is whether a student grasps why the issue is controversial—what the disagreement is about and what values are at stake.

Box 3: A basic scoring checklist

✔ Displays a grasp of the **controversy**—why reasonable people will disagree about what to do.
✔ Displays a grasp of the **client's policy goal**(s).
✔ Presents a logical and accurate **action plan**:
   1. identifies a logical level(s) of government for action.
   2. identifies a logical branch(es) of government for action.
   3. has a logical sequence of steps.

Instruction: Looping and Simulations

As Elliot Eisner famously wrote, you don't fatten cattle by putting them on a scale; you have to pay attention to their diet.[13] In other words, assessment is only as powerful as the opportunity afforded students to *learn*, which takes us to instruction. Two key instructional elements of our government course are looping and simulations.

Playing an advisor on the CST puts students squarely in a knowledge-application mode. Students will draw on whatever concepts they have learned and are reminded to use by the dynamic prompts. Revisiting core concepts frequently during the course is what our teachers dubbed "looping." It means that a limited set of essential ideas and skills is selected from the myriad topics and then taught through multiple challenging scenarios.[14] Gathered up with the core ideas and skills are many of the lesser topics, facts, and skills, thereby organizing the subject matter of the course into a center-periphery arrangement like suns with their orbiting planets and moons. This returns us to the "complex and adaptive" criterion for deep learning: Deep conceptual knowledge is constructed through multiple challenging examples. Expertise is cyclically "built up" in this way, differentiated and integrated through multiple trials; and this is what the CST aims to assess.

As noted earlier, federalism is a core concept and needs to be

looped for deeper learning. Accordingly, it is introduced early in the course and then revisited numerous times. Similarly, constitutional reasoning—applying knowledge of the Constitution to multiple controversial public policy issues, past and present—is the main skill of the course. It, too, needs to be looped.

In addition to learning cycles, our course involves a rigorous form of project-based learning (PBL), and each project is a lengthy political simulation. PBL emphasizes real-world application, collaborative work, and sustained inquiry over time.[15] Together, these make PBL a suitable platform for our deep-learning goal. Furthermore, political simulations are among the "six promising approaches" for civic education identified by the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools. Fortunately, political simulations are no strangers to the high school government course where they have been a mainstay, at least for some students, for decades.[16]

The course has five simulations. These are the backbone of the course. They are not inserted periodically into traditional instruction; rather, they drive teaching and learning throughout the course:[17]

1. Founders' Intent (3 weeks). Students are delegates to the Constitutional Convention, deciding whether to recommend ratification to their constituents.

2. Elections (6 weeks). Students are candidates, voters, journalists, and leaders of interest groups and political parties.

3. Supreme Court of the United States (4 weeks). Once the president is sworn in, students become attorneys and judges in appellate courts, first circuits and then SCOTUS.

4. Congress (4 weeks). Students are legislators drafting bills and seeing how politics influence public policy. In committees and floor debates, students navigate political pressures for and against legislation.

5. Government in Action (5 weeks). Students are consultants to interest groups with strong positions on immigration policy.

Because students play roles in the simulations, they are not surprised to be assigned to a role on the CST. Also, note that the final simulation anticipates the test directly.

Conclusion

We believe that in civic education, as in all education, deep rather than superficial learning is the goal. This makes careful content selection a critical responsibility, because powerful ideas and skills need to be identified for looping. A means for assessing student progress and providing feedback is also

needed, and this is what we have featured here. Students role-play consultants giving their best advice on a policy controversy to a client with an agenda. This is the CST shell.

Ours is not the only approach to deep political learning, but it may be the only one that addresses all three dimensions of pedagogy: curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Furthermore, thanks to the use of simulations, we integrate what often are treated as opposing models of civic education: learning about government (knowing) and engaging in it (doing).

We invite teachers to adapt the goal, the test, and the instructional model as they see fit. For additional information about the course, see note 17. 🌐

Notes

1. For example, Florida has a new middle-school civics course and exam; the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools has identified six best practices; and the Constitutional Rights Foundation's *Civic Action Project* is spreading across the country.

2. Chapter 3 in Walter C. Parker, *Teaching Democracy* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2003).

3. Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe, *Understanding by Design*, 2nd ed. (Alexandria, Va.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2005).

4. John Bransford and Daniel L. Schwartz, "Rethinking Transfer: A Simple Proposal with Multiple Implications," in *Review of Research in Education*, eds. A. Iran-Nejad and P. David Pearson (Washington, D.C.: American Educational Research Association, 2000), 61–100.

5. John Bransford et al., *How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience, and School* (Washington, D.C.: National Academies Press, 2000), 9.

6. George C. Edwards III, Martin P. Wattenberg, and Robert L. Lineberry, *Government in America* (New York: Pearson, 2014).

7. Barry J. Fishman et al., eds., *Design-Based Implementation Research*, vol. 112 (New York: National Society for the Study of Education, Teachers College, Columbia University, 2013).

8. For details: Jack Schneider, *Excellence for All* (Nashville, Tenn.: Vanderbilt University Press, 2011).

9. Philip M. Sadler et al., eds., *AP: A Critical Examination of the Advanced Placement Program* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Education Press, 2010).

10. H. Carl Haywood and Carol S. Lidz, *Dynamic Assessment in Practice* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

11. Marianne Perie, Scott Marion, and Brian Gong, "Moving Toward a Comprehensive Assessment System: A Framework for Considering Interim Assessments," *Educational Measurement* 28, no.

3 (Fall 2009): 5–13.

12. For a detailed look at student responses see Walter C. Parker et al., "Beyond Breadth-Speed-Test: Toward Deeper Knowing and Engagement in an Advanced Placement Course," *American Educational Research Journal*, 50 (2013): 1424–1459.

13. Elliot W. Eisner, *The Arts and the Creation of Mind* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 191.

14. John Bransford et al., "Learning Theories and Education: Toward a Decade of Synergy," in *Handbook of Educational Psychology* (2nd ed.), eds. Patricia A. Alexander and Philip H. Winne (Mahwah, N.J.: Erlbaum, 2006), 233. Also, see Hilda Taba's seminal work on "spiral" curriculum: *Curriculum Development* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1962).

15. John Larmer, John Mergendoller, and Suzie Boss, *Setting the Standard for Project Based Learning: A Proven Approach to Rigorous Classroom Instruction* (Alexandria, Va.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2015).

16. On the unequal distribution of simulations to students, see Joseph Kahne and Ellen Middaugh, "High Quality Civic Education: What Is It and Who Gets It?", in *Social Studies Today: Research and Practice* (2nd ed.), ed. Walter C. Parker, (New York: Routledge, 2015), 179-188.

17. For a description of the curriculum, see Walter C. Parker and Jane C. Lo, "Reinventing the High School Government Course: Rigor, Simulations, and Learning from Text," *Democracy and Education* 24 (2016): article 6. Available at http://democracyeducationjournal.org/home/vol24/iss1/6. Also, see the film at www.edutopia.org/knowledge-in-action-PBL-research.

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