

# Knowledge in Action: Social Studies Simulations as Project-Based Learning

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Advanced Placement (AP) coursework is often considered the “gold standard” of American high school.<sup>1</sup> Yet, any social studies teacher who has ever taught AP knows that the courses are packed with content and information. This often leaves teachers catching their breath at the end of the year, hoping they covered all the content in enough detail by exam time. Through lessons learned in a multi-year research project, we believe that AP classes don’t have to be synonymous with frantic coverage. We found that students can engage strongly, learn effectively, and find relevance in AP coursework through Project-Based Learning (PBL).<sup>2</sup> Specifically, the Knowledge in Action project leverages political simulations in a high school government course to help students engage in PBL. Like the other articles in this special issue, we believe PBL is a great way to help students learn content and skills through tackling authentic issues and problems.

The curriculum presented in this article, which was developed by an interdisciplinary team of researchers from the University of Washington and teachers for the AP U.S. Government and Politics (APGOV) course, uses PBL to help students engage with the structures and functions of government and politics, as well as the controversial nature of politics in America through simulations. In this article, we briefly describe the curricular approach of PBL in a high

school government course, present lessons learned by two master teachers of PBL, and share a lesson plan for teachers to try out in their own government courses.

## The Course

The PBL course includes five political simulations.<sup>3</sup> Throughout each project cycle, students draw upon assigned roles (e.g., a congressperson, Supreme Court justice, presidential candidate) to answer questions, solve issues, dissect information, and present final products that are relevant to the content of the course.

- In the first project, students are assigned roles as delegates to the Constitutional Convention of 1787, where they have to debate the merits of the Constitution, understand the tenets of federalism, and decide whether the federal government or state governments should make important decisions.
- The second project is a U.S. Presidential Election simulation, where students are assigned roles as candidates, campaign managers, media, political parties, and interest groups. Through the project, students learn about the complexities of the electoral process as they try to elect the candidate that best serves their interests.

- In the third project, students are placed in roles as Supreme Court justices and lawyers as they hold moot courts (mock appellate court hearing) on landmark Supreme Court cases.
- The fourth project is a legislative simulation, where students work together as members of Congress to pass laws.
- The last project assigns students to roles as political advisors to interest groups. In this last project, students utilize all of the information they learned through the course to provide comprehensive political action plans for their interest group clients.

In the Research and Practice section of this issue, Walter Parker provides an in depth description of the design principles of the curriculum. Since making PBL work in an AP course can be a daunting task, in this article, we focus on one of the projects and provide some insights into how PBL transformed the way we taught landmark Supreme Court cases.

## Overcoming an Onslaught of Cases

One of the things that has always been daunting for APGOV teachers in the current course design is that there are

*Attorney Preparation*

**Case Background**

Gavin Grimm, a transgender student at Gloucester High School, filed a lawsuit against his county's school board after his high school created a policy that required transgender students to use the bathroom of their biological sex, or use a single stall unisex bathroom rather than the bathroom of the sex with which they identify. Grimm won his case in U.S. district court, and again prevailed at the 4th Circuit Court of Appeals. The Supreme Court accepted the case, and oral argument was scheduled for this month.

In May 2016, under the Obama administration, the Justice Department issued guidance urging school districts to allow transgender students to use bathrooms consistent with their gender identity. The Justice Department told school districts that if the districts did not follow this guidance, they would be risking violation of Title IX of the Education Amendments Act of 1972.

However, in February 2017, the Justice Department sent a letter indicating that the Trump administration would not be defending the guidance issued previously by the Justice Department.

In response to this letter, the Supreme Court vacated (canceled) the 4th Circuit's ruling in the case, and sent the case back to that appeals court for re-hearing.

The case may yet make it to the Supreme Court, but not during this term.

2. Each member of the legal team should tackle a specialty. Please see specific briefing sheets for preparation.

**Team Member A:** Precedent cases & your interpretation of the 14th Amendment's equal protection clause.

**Team Member B:** district policy & other facts of the case: What was the school district policy, and how was it applied? Does Gloucester County's policy cause GG harm? Should this issue be decided at the local level or regulated by the federal government?

**Team Member C:** Title IX: What does this section of the Education Amendments Act of 1972 require in terms of gender equity?

3. Additionally, **ALL petitioners** will prepare a Petition for Certiorari to be submitted to the court. (See format sheet to know how to prepare) **Due 3/31**
4. **ALL respondents** will draft an Answer to Petition (see format). **Due 3/31**

Moot Court will be held **April 3rd**.  
**All members of each team must participate.**

***The Constitutional Question***

*Is requiring students to use a bathroom consistent with their biological sex, or a single unisex stall, a violation of Title IX, and of the 14th Amendment Equal Protection Clause?*

**Hearing the Case**

1. Each side will have 20 minutes to present oral argument. Plan for a two-minute opening and follow the framework given in our "How to Prepare for Court" presentation. Justices will ask questions as you present. You must know enough about the case that you can handle these questions skillfully. As a team, you'll need to run through your arguments prior to the day to ensure that you have 20 minutes' worth of legal reasoning and argumentation to share.

**Resources**

- Begin with the **briefing sheets** to guide each attorney through their particular specialty.
- To go deeper (a good idea if you want to win), SCOTUS blog is an amazing resource, not only for the original court documents but also for key media coverage about the case:
- [www.scotusblog.com/case-files/cases/gloucester-county-school-board-v-g-g/](http://www.scotusblog.com/case-files/cases/gloucester-county-school-board-v-g-g/) All legal documents, including amicus briefs and the petitions for certiorari, are available on the ACLU website:
- [www.aclu.org/cases/gg-v-gloucester-county-school-board](http://www.aclu.org/cases/gg-v-gloucester-county-school-board)

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“Justices” deliberate their decisions in the court case (SCOTUS Project, Garfield High School, Seattle, spring 2011).



A student role plays being a lawyer and presenting his case to the justices, while other students (who are also lawyers for other cases) look on (SCOTUS Project, Garfield High School, Seattle, spring 2011).

anywhere from 40–60 cases that might show up on the exam. Various court case lists float around teacher online communities and no “official” list has been produced by the College Board. This is all set to change with the redesigned framework launching in 2018, with a list of 19 cases students should know. Nonetheless, the following “before and after” story is instructive to understanding what is different about PBL.

When I (Katie) first began teaching APGOV, I tried to zero in on 40 cases that seemed to show up on multiple teachers’ lists, and simply divided them up among 7 or 8 groups of students so that I could cover them all without lecturing. In those early days, we sat through 30 or more frequently tedious, often painful, PowerPoints.

Students absorbed little, but at least most cases had been “covered,” and I hadn’t resorted to lecturing them all. With the PBL approach, I have students focus on *one* case per major concept that students need to know for the exam (e.g., Incorporation, Affirmative Action, Freedom of Speech, etc.). As mentioned above, students are assigned roles as attorneys or judges/justices through three rounds of moot court. In the first round, students are assigned to one of four core First Amendment historic cases that are useful to learn for the exam. Students are able to master one case (and usually one or two key precedents additionally). They listen and take notes on oral argument in one of the other three First Amendment cases. They learn these less well, but watch-

ing other students practice oral argument is definitely more engaging than “death by PowerPoint.” Additionally, students have the opportunity to hone their oral argument skills as they watch and learn from their peers.

Round two offers more opportunities for critique and revision of legal questioning and argument—and students build their core case knowledge. This round focuses on key historic cases concerning other civil liberties (i.e., those found in the second, fourth, and ninth amendments among others). In round three, students focus on civil rights (i.e., cases concerning race, gender or sexual orientation), and I tend to choose cases currently before the Court that require students to use precedents they should be familiar with. Students do considerably better on the civil rights and civil liberties portion of the exam now even if we haven’t fully “covered” 40 cases. They know fewer cases better, and more importantly, they learn an authentic skill—written and oral legal communication. They also have a lot more fun!

### Deepening Student Engagement and Thinking

Speaking of fun and engagement, I (Jerry) see PBL as a great way to help students engage with content that is relevant to their lives. Much like Katie, I also have three rounds of moot supreme courts, focusing on free speech, separation of church and state, and affirmative action. I picked these three concepts hoping they would be the most relevant to students. In each, there is a culminating case that the students study precedents for, and those precedents are all landmark cases that are included in all the typical AP lists of important cases. For example, the church and state precedents we use are *Lemon v. Kurtzman*, *Lee v. Weisman*, *Lynch v. Donnelly*, *Allegheny v. ACLU* and *Engel v. Vitale*. Along the way, students talk through how each of the landmark cases contributes to the culminating case. For example, in *Lee v.*

*Weisman*, a prayer at graduation was ruled unconstitutional because it is coercive, and the Supreme Court Justices wrote that families couldn’t just skip the graduation ceremony because it’s such an important day in people’s lives. My students are seniors a few months from graduation when they do this project, so they can easily connect with this decision.

For free speech, our moot court case is *Snyder v. Phelps*. It is a case about the Westboro Baptist Church demonstrating at a soldier’s funeral. Katie notes that her students find the moot court simulations more engaging and more fun and I certainly see that as well with this case. We start by talking about the Westboro protesters and looking at pictures of their signs. We then talk about funerals we have attended, and try to empathize with a soldier’s funeral disrupted by the signs. The students assigned to argue for allowing Westboro’s challenging speech struggle with having to play that role at first, but come around to seeing that their real task is to fight for the importance of protecting free speech even when it’s upsetting. The students assigned to the other side struggle themselves with the slippery slope they can see in silencing controversial speech: if we don’t allow this, what else do we not allow? We prepare for this moot court by studying five standard landmark free speech cases, including the *Schenck* case that gave us the “clear and present danger” formulation. And along the way we talk about how the Court has expanded, limited, and clarified our free speech right, as well as how the students evaluate the Court’s decisions.

The student lawyers report that they feel a little nervous in our moot court simulations, with the student justices interrupting to question them, and with half the class watching. But they also say this method works well for them to learn how free speech works, because they really have to understand what has been allowed

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and what hasn't, and exactly why, to convince the justices. I think it is highly engaging, partly because it feels relevant to them, and partly because there's performance pressure. To build writing into the class, I have the students write a ruling as if they were writing for the majority. This lets me assess their precedent reasoning and their understanding of the precedent cases more. As for the 19 cases they need to know for the AP test, or the 40+ we used to think they needed? This method doesn't teach all of those. But the students understand the ones it does teach and remember a lot more than if they had read a textbook chapter or taken notes on a lecture from me about key court cases. For example, students can reason through whether a certain government program would pass all three prongs of the Lemon Test, a much deeper level of understanding than memorizing *Lemon v. Kurtzman*.

I also like this method because it's more cognitively challenging than note taking and memorizing. Precedent reasoning is difficult. Showing the justices how a certain precedent case is applied requires clear analytical thinking. For example, arguing that Mr. Johnson's flag burning protest in the *Texas v. Johnson* case was allowed only because it caused no rioting reveals the Court's concern for violence and harm in controversial speech, and that the speech at the soldier's funeral was clearly hurtful to the family so shouldn't be allowed. My students also get nervous for moot court performances. It is the most challenging type of oral performance they do in high school since they have to think on their feet at such a high level. I have legal experts come in and play chief justice for my final round of oral argument. It makes the task feel more authentic. Some of my experts have said to me, this really is essentially what they did in law school. While this method works well for AP U.S. Government, it can also be great in a U.S. History, regular government, or a contemporary issues class. In the final section, we provide some advice for teachers who want to try this in their classes.

### Advice for Teachers New to PBL

If you are new to PBL or would like to try it as a new teaching strategy, we have a few tips for those of you who would like to try doing a moot court in your classes. First, do what you can to make PBL as authentic as possible. Legal experts are more plentiful than looking for experts in some other fields—ask parents or community members who are lawyers or judges to serve as your chief justice. It helps to play up the dramatic part. Consider graduation robes for student justices, attorney teams dressed up (bring ties for those who forget), and teach them how to formally begin oral argument and address the court. Project an image of the court chamber and hang the flag. Set a 30-minute timer that buzzes. Listen to a real court case audio so they know how the justices behave and how the lawyers start and proceed. All of these tips are fun, take only a few minutes, and can make all the difference between an adequate and excellent performance. Finally, choose cases that feel relevant to students. Obviously those that involve school will help (race in college admissions, prayer in school, students' rights concerning search and seizure), but you can also be guided by the particular interests of your school setting (e.g., Immigration, Criminal Justice). Luckily, the AP framework allows for this.

### Trying This in Your Classroom

To help you get started, we have provided an example lesson on p. 31. It is the assignment sheet for attorneys arguing *Gloucester County School Board vs. GG*, a case that was set to be heard by the Supreme Court in March 2017, before the new administration's Justice Department pulled its support for the interpretation of Title IX on which the lower court ruling was based. As such, the case was instructive not only in understanding core civil rights concepts such as the meaning of the 14th Amendment's equal protection clause and the application of Title IX, but additionally how the role of the federal gov-

ernment in protecting individual rights can shift with time and varying ideology. It also is of particular interest to high school students, since the respondent in the case was himself a high school senior.

Justices on the case received a similar assignment to research the case's history, though what they produced in the end were questions for oral argument and a written Opinion. There is a wealth of great resources for research on current cases, most particularly [www.scotusblog.com](http://www.scotusblog.com). Depending on the needs and research ability of students, teachers may also want to directly provide the information on core legal concepts for their students. We hope you will try moot court in your own classrooms and find, as we did, that it is amazing what students are capable of when given a content rich, authentic challenge. 🌟

### Notes

1. The Associated Press, "Advanced Placement Surges as Tool for Schools Raising Standards," AP (May 5, 2012), [www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2012/05/05/521983\\_ap.html](http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2012/05/05/521983_ap.html).
2. Walter C. Parker et al., "Beyond Breadth-Speed-Test toward Deeper Knowing and Engagement in an Advanced Placement Course," *American Educational Research Journal* 50, no. 6 (December 1, 2013): 1424–59, doi:10.3102/0002831213504237.
3. For a complete description of the projects, see Walter C. Parker and Jane C. Lo, "Reinventing the High School Government Course: Rigor, Simulations, and Learning from Text," *Democracy and Education* 24, no. 1 (May 4, 2016), <http://democracyeducationjournal.org/home/vol24/iss1/6>.

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