Light 'em Up: Increasing student enjoyment in the secondary social studies classroom

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Abstract: Students often consider social studies classes uninteresting. This issue stems, in part, from the common teaching methods that are used. In this project, I examined the effectiveness of different techniques in increasing student enjoyment and learning. In this project, students were asked to report on the degree to which they enjoyed each of the adjusted instructional classes and to describe why they felt the way they did. At the end of the unit, students were tested and their grades were compared to test grades from previous units for growth. Following the intervention, students reported a significantly increased enjoyment of the classes. However, this did not result in a significant increase in student learning when compared to other methods.

Introduction

My major in college was Political Science. I have been labeled as a "history person" and I have fielded questions about how something so boring could be interesting enough to teach. This question bothers me for two reasons. The first is that I do not believe that any social studies subject (e.g., history, government, psychology, economics, sociology) is boring. The second is that many of these individuals have made peace with the subject being boring to them and do not wish to engage with the possibility that social studies may be interesting. As a young student who once could not find the subject engaging, I experienced first hand the difference that teaching techniques can have on one's perception of the subject.

When I was in middle school, the social studies classes I attended were always regarded as unpopular. Students regularly complained about how boring and irrelevant the classes were, and this trend continued for many students through high school, college, and into adult life. During the few units we did find interesting, our grades tended to increase. In reflection, I began to think about how enjoying a subject may help boost performance within that content area. To further explore this idea, I developed an action plan to identify and practice pedagogical techniques that secondary social studies teachers could use to help increase student enjoyment of their classes. Additionally, I aimed to examine if an increase in enjoyment was able to simultaneously increase grades. For this study, the students were able to interpret the meaning of enjoyment for themselves. They were given a questionnaire that allows them to rank their enjoyment of the daily lesson, as well as elaborate on their feelings in a few sentences.

Schug (1982) investigated the causes of boredom in social studies students and found that lectures, a perceived repetition in subject matter, lack of engagement with material and a lack of perceived relevance were all major contributors to student boredom.

Students also reported that social studies was not valuable or interesting when compared to other major subjects in school such as math, science, or English. The authors concluded their research by advising readers, "it is apparent that if the social studies are perceived by young people as not being valuable, then learning social studies will be adversely affected" (Schug & Others, 1982, p. 3). Bollinger and Warren (2007) outlined more recent systemic influences in education that may be affecting student views on the subject. They found that the recent push for success on standardized tests has altered pedagogy from exploring depth of knowledge, to widening the breadth of knowledge. This change in focus shifted teaching strategies from active to passive; and in doing so, decreased relevance for students. Students who feel the information is not relevant or engaging are less interested and therefore learn less (Bollinger & Warren, 2007). It was my goal to implement lesson strategies that increased enjoyment for students in my class.

Literature review/theoretical framework

Student Perceptions

Schug (1982) studied students' preconceived notions of their classes and found that students desired skills that were career-oriented and prepared them for something concrete. She also noted that students' low interest in classes was due to their general perception of social studies as being irrelevant and not engaging. However, students also cited creative problem solving as a large part of why they enjoyed subject areas other than social studies. Schug (1982) concluded that "it is apparent that if social studies is perceived by young people as not being valuable, then learning social studies will be adversely affected" (p. 3). Additionally, Bollinger (2007) noticed that the pervasive usage of passive teaching methods, alongside policies that focused on student achievement on standardized tests, incentivized teachers to use methods that were not geared towards student engagement, motivation, or interest.

Bollinger (2007) also noted that a "prior focus on citizenry, though not abandoned, became at the least marginalized by a continuing push to meet the perceived market needs of a growing industrial power" (Bollinger, 2007, p. 71). He pointed out that these changes were perpetuated by fears that students are falling behind internationally, a belief that stemmed from standardized tests' inability to accurately assess citizenry skills and higher order thinking ability. In Australia, Harrison (2012) studied curricula and commented on the state of social studies education there. Harrison's critique of Australia's history curriculum was that it did not address the question of "why teach history" and that lead to a decontextualized, boring curriculum. It seems that American schools face the same problem (Bollinger, 2007). Teachers have made the information they wish students to receive stale (partially due to the structures they have been given to work within), and in turn the society has shown its feelings of boredom with the current overall approach (Bollinger, 2007). I personally believe the material itself is not boring; however, but it was difficult to ignore a trend towards students identifying the material as boring.

Psychological Perspectives

There are also underlying psychological benefits to increasing enjoyment in the classroom. Anderson, Hirsh, and Rowe (2007) found that when participants were experiencing a positive affect (defined as a happy mood in their study), noticeable changes

in attention occurred, which affected perception and cognition. Subjects noticed an increase in visual field perception – allowing them to internalize more information from the wider ranges of their existing visual field. The researchers extrapolated that finding into a theory that positive emotions allow students to broaden their thought processes and more effectively engage in activities that require global thinking. Similarly, Alice, Ashby, Gregory, and Turken (1999) suggested that people in positive affective conditions gain the capability to classify material they are given in a more flexible manner and are able to see situations in more creative ways. When enjoyment of a task rises, students' ability to think globally and creatively about the task they have been given also rises. Social studies is an academic area that requires students to engage in global thinking, to be able to arrive at informed and balanced conclusions about events, people, or trends in the world. Students who enjoy the lesson (and thus, experience a higher positive affect as Anderson, Hirsh, and Rowe [2007] would describe) would be more likely to actively and efficiently engage in global thinking perspectives.

Self-determination theory is a psychological theory developed by Deci and Ryan (2000) to explain what intrinsically motivates individuals to act. Self-determination theory has three major components that are seen to feed motivation – autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Students naturally desired to be in control of their own life, actions, and education; allowing them an appropriate level of choice in their classroom lives helped to satiate this need and could pay dividends for their motivation and interest. Students also wish to feel competent in the subject they are engaged in. Providing structures that help build the skills necessary to be able to achieve the tasks given to students, could help to ensure a feeling of capability in completing their task. Finally, executing lessons where students understand how the material is relevant to their lives is crucial for securing interest in the classroom.

Achieving a classroom environment that successfully engages all three of the criteria self-determination theory provides for students will help to secure student interest in the subject. An interesting and engaging classroom that meets students' inherent psychological needs can help students enjoy their classes as well. The methods Perlman (2013) applied in a physical education classroom were based on self-determination theory. Perlman set up an environment in the classroom that was structured to first teach students basic skills, and then have small games in which students could test and display their new skills at a low stress level. This process repeated until the skills that needed to be covered in the unit were taught. Students at this point were allowed to play full-fledged games. Perlman found this structure helped support the needs laid out in self-determination theory and was effective at increasing the amount of information learned and retained, as well as increasing the enjoyment of the class.

Interpersonal relationships, in addition to the structure of the class, also hold the possibility for increasing enjoyment. Ryan and Wilson (2013) explored the effects of student-teacher rapport in the classroom. One of their findings was that a positive rapport was directly related to the amount students perceived they learned. The researchers also commented that teachers who had generally high rapports were seen as teachers who do what they can to make the class more engaging for their students. The increased positive feelings towards these teachers suggested that students enjoyed being in class with teachers who they viewed as putting in effort to make the class interesting. Students enjoyed being in class with teachers who they noticed was making an effort to make class

enjoyable for them (i. e. meeting self-determination theory needs for learning). By engaging students in this type of classroom structure, educators place their students in an environment tailored to meet their natural psychological needs. In doing so, students become naturally more interested and engaged with the class and, according to Ryan and Wilson (2013), end up enjoying the class more due to the understanding their teacher is attempting to make it interesting for them.

Strategies for an Engaging and Enjoyable Classroom

One strategy to implement in any discipline of teaching is gradual release of responsibility. This is a form of scaffolding in which students are given high levels of support while instructed to engage with new material, but teacher support gradually goes away as students develop skills (Lapp, Moss, & Roswell, 2012). This can be structural scaffolds the teacher builds into a lesson or it can be differentiated on a personal level. There are four different categories for gradual release of responsibility. Focus lessons are lessons in which teachers establish a purpose for learning and model the strategies they want their students using. Guided instruction lessons are lessons in which the instructor prompts, questions and facilitates a student activity. Collaborative learning is when students combine their understandings of content and work together to solve problems and discuss. During an independent learning lesson, students can practice applying skills they learned on their own (Lapp, Moss, & Roswell, 2012). Douglas (2004) determined that students who understood their learning needs and were knowledgeable in how to advocate for themselves saw improvements in attention and learning. Douglas also found that about 61% of students were interested in finding out more about their own learning. A suggestion in the findings of this study was that providing some form of self-assessment or survey about styles of learning for each class at the beginning of a year or lesson could inform the teacher how to help the students and introduce them to an environment where they feel welcomed and thought about.

Developing a nuanced perspective on the information one is teaching can prove crucial to best assisting students. Many of the studies previously described relevance and engagement as determining factors in students' positive perception and enjoyment of a class. However teaching students how to engage in content-relevant thought structures are helpful for ensuring students feelings of competence. Yilmaz (2009) noted that historical knowledge is not absolute; instead it is open to interpretation due to shifting discussions among academic historians and the revelations of new points of view. She suggested students should be taught how to look at historical information that is given to them from multiple perspectives and digest that information critically; allowing the student to develop their own nuanced opinion. That is, students must be taught to approach history (and thus social studies) not only as a collage of many perspectives, but also how to sort through those perspectives.

In a recent AP Central article, Rudalevige (2015) provided an outline of some specific strategies for teaching AP U.S. History. These strategies were designed in such a way that the instructor was presenting much of the information to the class directly. Rudalevige proposed using a lecture type style to introduce material to the students and then asking reinforcing and guiding questions as the lesson progressed to test and build knowledge. This was used to set basic understandings of subjects before delving into the more complex ideas also contained within historical narratives and documents. This

complimented the scaffolding strategy from Lapp, Moss, and Roswell (2012), which further reinforced its relevance as a strategy.

The layered curriculum approach has become popular in recent years as well. This strategy helps guide teachers towards an ideal unit design in addition to the lesson design (Gun, 2013). The first step is to introduce the aims, tasks, and behaviors that will be acquired during the lesson/unit. Next, learners are presented with a task list and, to provide choice and autonomy, allowed to select a task from a provided list of options. Tasks on the list receive different scores relative to the difficulty of the task and learners are encouraged to move from low to high difficulty as they progress. Students then engaged in a variety of activities that guided students to practice interpretation, writing, composing, or creating artistic works. Finally, students must reflect and analyze the knowledge they have acquired (Gun, 2013). This strategy gives students a clear path to follow while it also allowed them the freedom to pick many of their own assignments. Additionally the strategy also supported components of self-determination theory and could increase student enjoyment and motivation to complete assignments because of this.

Many student complaints about social studies pedagogy boil down to boredom due to lecturing and textbook work. Martell and Hashimoto-Martell (2011) argued that textbooks tend to portray a dominant narrative in history that serves to politically indoctrinate and marginalize non-group members. Furthermore, they noted that the books had an authoritarian tone that can be very convincing for students without critical thinking training. They suggested creating reading packets of primary sources to be read over, analyzed, and commented on within a teacher-provided structure. This approach yielded results that included increased memory of topics, increase perspective awareness, and increased identification with those involved (Martell & Hashimoto-Martell, 2011). Like previous studies, introducing students to various viewpoints while guiding engagement and analysis was an effective method for success and increased interest and enjoyment.

Barton (2005) also cautioned teachers not to relying too heavily on primary sources. A primary source is not always normatively better than a secondary source. Primary sources are subject to more bias in some cases (depending on the writer) and not all primary sources are testimony (written by someone who witnessed the event). Some sources are written in the period, but are not testimony from a witness and thus subject to skepticism. Conversely secondary sources can provide a removed perspective that synthesizes a large amount of primary sources into a scholarly agreed upon recounting (Barton, 2005). The argument was not to remove primary sources from use, but simply to use them appropriately and to incorporate appropriate secondary sources when necessary as well.

Addressing cultural differences is a great way to increase relevance to all students and provide a view that is contrary to what they may think of as history, thereby stimulating interest. Suleiman (2000) suggested students to take action to learn through social discourse, transform the curriculum to enable learners to build cultural links, have teachers provide students with new ways to think globally and scaffold them through the process, and have students see themselves and their culture through the contributions of their ancestors. Although not all of this is regularly possible on an individual level, teachers can facilitate the social discourse and scaffold global thinking more easily on a regular basis for their students. This may increase relevance while making students feel supported

through difficulty – both keys to meeting the psychological needs in self-determination theory and through that, increasing student enjoyment of their class.

Blanken (1999) researched student opinions of social studies classes and developed a theory for teachers to implement. The crux of his idea was to have teachers "as mediators of students and environments" (Blanken, 1999, p. 31). This is akin to many of the other studies that posit teacher-centered, but student-constructed lessons to increase engagement and motivation.

Trier (2007) focused the uses of modern technology in the classroom; specifically Youtube videos. He viewed them as a mechanism to increase autonomy in lesson choice, relevance, and enjoyment. Youtube can be used to search for a few select key terms the teacher wants to lead the students toward. These can include pre-searched terms where the teacher wants students to find specific videos, or free-form searches where the algorithms of the site are allowed to lead students to new places. Additionally videos (selected by the teacher or the student) provide visual and auditory support to lessons that may not always have both presented in the same manner. Finally, Trier suggested that teachers incorporate an online discussion board into Youtube lessons so that students could post videos they found and comment on classmates videos. Doing so opens the class into a discussion of the topic and further increases enjoyment (Trier, 2007).

Closure and Aims for Research

It is unfortunate that the American social perception of social studies tends to be that is a boring topic (Barton, 2007). However, I believe it is possible to change student attitudes towards the subject through appropriate pedagogical strategies. By accounting for students' psychological needs in the classroom, educators can create an environment that students find engaging, interesting, and enjoyable. This change in atmosphere in a social studies classroom should also lead to increases in learning.

Research Questions

1) Does my enhanced/altered curriculum increase enjoyment?
2) To what degree does my altered/enhanced curriculum increase student enjoyment of the subject being taught?
3) As a product of increased enjoyment, does learning also increase?

Methods

Intervention

The goal of this intervention was to increase student enjoyment of social studies content and classes. I aimed to achieve this goal by using strategies that engaged students with their work so that they became interested in the subject, motivated to complete work, participate in the lesson, and enjoy the interactions they had with the material. To accomplish this, I incorporated a variety of researched teaching strategies into lessons that I taught on a daily basis. Each strategy was chosen according to the level of appropriateness for a given subject that is being covered in class. Due to amount of class time available to complete a unit, each strategy discussed in the Literature Review was not

able to be implemented in the unit. However, in addition to making the daily lessons with researched engaging pedagogy, I also structured the unit to tie in other principles discussed earlier in this paper.

It is important to increase enjoyment of the subjects students are taught in school. Enjoying an assigned task allows individuals to approach tasks with a wider lens, processing information in a more comprehensive manner (Anderson, Hirsh & Rowe, 2007). Social studies classes frequently operate in the abstract and tend to involve broad ideas that affect many individuals in a variety of ways. Doing this type of mental work in an environment where students feel motivated, interested, and happy increases their ability to broadly process the information and thus, retain it more effectively – possibly leading to higher test scores. Each of the lesson strategies I have selected to use in my intervention has been chosen to help increase student enjoyment in the classroom.

My intervention was sculpted to increase student enjoyment on a variety of levels. The unit took place in an AP Comparative Government class and occupied the entire Iran Unit. Last year when my mentor was in charge of the Comparative class, she set up a project for the students that spanned the entirety of each country's unit. The project was a "Country Profile" (see Appendix A) and students were required to complete various sections of the profile to (a) demonstrate specific areas of knowledge about the country and (b) help review for the test at the end of the unit. Because students were familiar with this, I decided to base my daily lessons around this long-term project. Students were normally expected to complete this outside of class, but I made this a part of my daily lessons. Each day's lesson was dedicated to the section of the country profile students would have been on if they did one section a day. There are five sections in the profile, and I only had five days to complete the lesson, so the pacing was perfect. For example, day one's lesson was on the historical background of Iran and section 1 of the profile asks students for a historical timeline and context of the topic country. Designing the unit to reflect the pace of their project immediately provided a familiar backbone to an unfamiliar structure; a change the students reported enjoying in their daily feedback. Each day's class was structured to reflect three components at about fifteen minutes each. The first piece was an introduction activity (lecture, reading, video, etc.), next came an activity or question period, and the last portion of class was work time to take what had been covered and put it into the country profile. This was designed with self-determination theory in mind. The theory suggested that autonomy, competence, and relatedness were all needed for students to be motivated to engage themselves (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Introducing them to material daily through my instruction was intended to increase the feeling of competence, allowing individual work time was directly allowing student autonomy, and relatedness was found through the direct daily ties to the project as well as in the content for the day.

Day one was an introduction to the history of Iran from ancient times through the 1979 revolution. The lesson began with a seven minute Youtube video outlining Iran's tumultuous history through the 1979 revolution. This was reinforced by a ten minute lecture I gave covering broad topics and filling in holes I felt the video missed. Students then had the remainder of class to use their new notes from the lesson, or information from their books, to complete section one of their country profile (i.e., the historical timeline). Day two was a constitutional research day. Students were assigned groups, each with an assigned section of the newest version of the Iranian Constitution to research. They were to work together in their group to create a poster outlining specific information from their

section of the constitution to present to the class. An artistic representation of the overall theme was also required on the poster. This took about 15 minutes, and presentations of the posters took about 10. With the remaining time, students were instructed to use their new information to complete section two of the country profile. Day three of the unit diverged slightly from the profile because section three of the assignment is a smaller section, and much of it had been covered in days one and two. The first half of class was a quick visual outline of the major political parties on the board, followed by a face matching game with the leaders of Iran since 1979. I would give a few minutes of information from a lecture, and students were asked to identify the individual I described from a series of pictures on the board. Pictures displayed the leaders acting out something I had discussed in lecture. This was used to give students a picture of what leaders of the country actually looked like. The last half of class was still dedicated to finishing the third section of the country profile (i.e., citizens, society, and state). Day four of the unit was an individual research day for the students. They were instructed to use laptops to access information from websites I provided them to find information about the state of women's rights in Iraq. After 15 minutes, I brought students' attention back to a discussion about their findings and whether their findings matched stereotypes they previously held about the country's treatment of women. The last few minutes were given to students to complete section four of their country profile. The final day's lesson was a group reading day on Iranian current events. Students were allowed to choose their own groups of up to three and were then assigned a news article reading that had been printed for them. Groups were given 15 minutes to read and discuss with themselves. The class reconvened and then discussed how their reading related to Iranian current events. I had displayed on the board a list of current event topics that were popular in Iran at the time and students based responses off of the cues on the board. They finished the class working on section five of their country profile. As the unit progressed, if I felt that students needed additional readings, I would scan, and then post, readings from my own book onto the class Moodle website for them to view at home. At the end of every class, I handed each student an anonymous response sheet (see Appendix B) with an optional written opinion area for them to record their feelings for me to see.

Many of the strategies described above require practice to properly utilize, and appropriate scaffolding will help the confidence of students (Lapp, Moss, & Roswell, 2012). Furthermore, allowing students a carefully constructed space to investigate differences in perspective (like the discussion on day four) can improve their motivation and enjoyment (Yilmaz, 2009). It was crucial for students to compare different viewpoints from the same period of time as well as compare the information presented by primary sources and secondary sources on the same event. Many ideas that students encounter while investigating social studies topics can be difficult to comprehend through individual or group reading. Often, knowledge must be imparted directly from someone with more expertise than themselves. Guided teacher lectures (with stops for questions and recapping) are another way to improve student confidence and motivation with new and difficult subjects (Rudalevige, 2015). Video usage was also utilized to increase interest and enjoyment of interacting with the country's history (Trier, 2007). Students also appreciated options and avenues to control their own learning. Providing them a space where they may construct and explore content that is new to them also increases enjoyment in the class (Trier, 2007). This was reflected on day two with the constitutional

research poster project. Using collaborative and guided learning exercises throughout this unit helped to scaffold learning activities for students that desired extra support working with the quick pace of the five day unit (Lapp, Moss, & Roswell, 2012). Feedback forms were used not only to measure research variables, but also to increase student-teacher rapport – another way an educator can aim to increase student enjoyment of their class (Ryan & Wilson, 2013). Finally, the research on scaffolding conducted by Perlman (2013) was reinforced through my usage of the unit-long profile project. Students' knowledge was provided a scaffold on a daily basis by having them recount what we had learned that day and their studying for the final exam was also being bolstered – as the profile is typically used as a study guide by students.

Sample

The participants for my intervention were students in an AP Comparative Government class at Leonardtown High School. This class had 14 students in it, with ages between 16 years old and 17 years old. The boy: girl ratio for the class is 6:8 and all students in the class were White.

Data

I first engaged the students in my classes in a pre-intervention discussion. They were asked to describe their personal views of social studies as a subject area, share how enjoyable they found social studies as a subject, and share how enjoyable they found my class. The responses given by students were used to compare with their responses to the same prompt at the end of the testing period. Students' grades for the unit in which the Iran test occurred during were cross-referenced with their grades from previous units, taught by the same instructor. Using a pre-test and a post-test was avoided because this research was aimed at comparing the effectiveness of different methods as opposed to one specific method's ability to increase base knowledge. Comparing test scores at the end of each unit shows where students' knowledge had reached at the end of instruction. After each lesson was given during the experimental unit, students were given a Likert-type scale questionnaire to assess their level of enjoyment of the lesson on that specific day. This questionnaire had two components – a 1 question (scale of 1-4) Likert-type scale rating for enjoyment and a small area for free response (2-4 sentences) where students were asked to elaborate on their answer, justify their decision, or comment on the activity. This provided quantitative as well as qualitative data for analysis after testing. All data sources for each research question can be found in Table 1. A non-paired two tail t-test was used to assess changes in student test scores from beginning to end of this intervention. Through analyzing pre- and post-intervention data from the Likert-type scales as well as notes from the student interviews, I aimed to gain a better perspective on student views on my social studies classes.

Table 1
Research Questions

Research Questions	Data Source #1	Data Source #2
1. Does my altered/enhanced curriculum increase enjoyment	Pre-post discussions	Daily Likert Questionnaires
2. To what degree does enjoyment increase?	Pre-post discussions	Individual Likert Questionnaires
3. Does learning also increase in this environment	Comparison of Test grades from unit to unit	n/a

Findings and Interpretations

Does my altered/enhanced curriculum increase student enjoyment of the subject being taught? AND To what degree does enjoyment increase?

All 14 students completed a Likert-type assessment of their enjoyment of each class I taught throughout the Iran unit in the AP Comparative Government class. Prior to this unit, class discussions and interviews focusing on the enjoyment of the Russia and China units in the same AP class, led to scores of 2.4 (out of a possible 4) on the Likert-type scale. After the intervention was completed, scores saw a significant increase to 3.23. The class consensus before intervention was relatively neutral for enjoyment of the class material and teaching methods. After the intervention, students reported a significantly higher enjoyment of the material and methods, with a reported p value of 0.003 ($p < 0.05$).

During the Russia and China units I also conducted student interviews and recorded notes on student behavior during my lessons. There was a group of students on the right side of the room who chose not to take notes. It was therefore easier for me to see off-task behaviors or observe a lack of interest in the subject. During the first two units, someone on that side of the room had to be reminded to put their phone away, pick their head up, or (during group activities) stop socializing. However, during video sessions or group

presentations, the students always seemed alert and engaged. There is also one student in the class who is notorious for sleeping during lectures and other non-interactive lessons. During the first two units he was frequently found sleeping and had to be reminded to wake up. Additionally, students reported a sense of monotony in the class during those two units. Many commented on the helpfulness of the notes and the consistency of the class, but became frustrated with the lack of energy and used "bored" to describe the feeling they first thought of when they were in the class.

After the intervention began, student oral and written reports of the class improved. A frequent observation from many of the students was how much they enjoyed time at the end of every class to work on their country profile assignment. The sectioned out class time for this work ended up cutting down their homework for the class and was also directly tied to the lesson – both were conscious changes in teaching style that the students actively reported part of their enjoyment of the class. Students also regularly reported that they found the lessons "fun," "exciting," or "interesting" – words that were not used to describe the previous units. Students also shared opinions on the specific lesson types each day. During the video, day one student noted, "I enjoy watching videos because it makes the content more enjoyable." Another was more specific in saying, "I enjoyed watching the video and pausing at certain times to get specific information." The students also enjoyed the alteration in the constitution research activity. One wrote, "group work is fun and ten times better than the other constitution work." Another stated, "group activities are fun an engaging." Finally, a third pointed out, "splitting up the constitution into groups reduced the workload and still got across the same information."

Many of my strategies were rooted in self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000). One component of this theory is relevance. A day of my unit was dedicated to talking about protests, controversial leaders, and marginalized groups (women) in Iran. Not only are these topics that come up occasionally in the United States news media, but 8 of my 14 students are female. On this lesson one student observed, "it was interesting to learn about women in Iran." Similarly, a second student stated, "the notes were interesting because we learned about the leaders and election controversy." Finally students shared their thoughts on the class period dedicated to modern Iranian politics readings. Comments included "the articles we read provided a good look into Iranian politics" and "I enjoy current events and going outside was ridiculously bomb." Throughout the responses, students consistently reported lessons or topics to be fun, interesting, or exciting. Achieving this end was the goal of my intervention. One consistent negative report students had was that the notes were boring, they did not enjoy they notes, or they wished we did not have to take notes.

Does learning also increase in this environment?

The 14 students who participated in the discussions and Likert-type questionnaires were also monitored for grade progress throughout the units. From the China unit to the Iran unit, there was a statistically significant decrease in average unit test grades, with a p value of 0.031 ($p < 0.05$). Grades dropped from an average of 82 in the China unit to 70 in the Iran unit, after the intervention. However when averaging the test scores of the students from both the Russia and China unit (both of the units taught in the AP Comparative Government class before the Iran intervention unit) and using a t-test to

compare to the Iran unit test, a significant change was not found, with a p value of 0.29 ($p < 0.05$).

Discussion of Results

As the results show, the students responded positively to the changes in pedagogy during the intervention. The class generally reported enjoying every lesson that was taught and student-provided comments reflected that sentiment. Discovering a statistically significant increase in enjoyment with only 14 subjects and 5 days to conduct the study is a large achievement. T-tests account for the number of subjects in a study, and with more subjects, it is easier to achieve a *p* value below 0.05. Achieving this level of significance with a small sample size and a very limited amount of class time to practice my intervention should not go unnoticed. This is evidence to the strength of these methods and their effectiveness within the unit and lessons I designed. Additionally, the only consistent theme that emerged as a negative for the students was the continued presence of note-taking. To some extent this is an unavoidable consequence of teaching. Occasionally, formalized note-taking must happen so that students both reinforce their listening with writing, as well as have something to refer to later on in the unit or class. In reflecting on note-taking as being a "boring" or "unenjoyable" part of class, I also realized that not every facet of every class is going to be enjoyable for all students. Even lessons I specifically designed for my AP class to enjoy were not universally enjoyed by the students I had. Students must be shown the importance of understanding that occasionally the path to our goals as a class is not glamorous or fun, but they will be effective. It is likely that this is a difficult rationale to communicate to teenage students, but from the teacher's perspective, understanding this may help ease the worry of making all parts of every class "enjoyable."

There was not a significant increase in student performance on their Iran test when compared to previous unit tests. Seeing a significant decline in grades from the China unit to the Iran unit was disheartening, as the data seemed to indicate my intervention was not more effective than the way in which I had taught the previous unit. However, in reflection I realized that the China unit was almost three times as long as the Iran unit due to snow days and spring break. Additionally, students pointed out to me at the end of the Iran unit, that they did not have the same coverage of that country in their copy of our text book as they did for other countries. The later edition teacher copy of the book had an equal coverage of countries. This was an oversight that likely cost students point on their test. The combination of deeper text for home reading and a longer unit likely lead the China test scores to be higher. This was reassuring because it indicated that my intervention was not a negative change, the students were simply working in less than ideal conditions. Even with these conditions, this study showed a clear increase in enjoyment of the classes. Although my lessons may not have specifically increased their success on tests, it is possible that the increase in enjoyment sticks with the students beyond my class. Students may take more classes in the subject area, apply themselves more in future social studies classes, or possibly pursue a career in the field. All of these outcomes would benefit students in the long-term and are not able to be measured within the confines of this study. With a change in student grades being statistically non-significant (no noticeable change) and enjoyment increasing significantly, it seems wise to continue to practice the methods of

the intervention for any practicing educator. The possibility of increasing students' interest in a subject they will likely have to interact with throughout their academic career is a positive one that I believe all educators should be willing to attempt. Increasing interest may not increase learning in the short-term, but it may very well increase it in the long-term.

Conclusion

Every day I enter the classroom there is a small part of me that fears the student reaction to my introduction of a topic. I fear that one student will vocalize his or her dislike for the topic and, as a consequence, other students will begin to realize that they, too, dislike the new subject. Although this may not lead to outright revolt in the room, it can change a classroom environment from positive, to bored or antagonistic. Making adjustments to the teaching methods one uses in the classroom can have a large effect on whether that negative student reaction persists or disappears. Whether or not an increase in learning occurs in the classroom, every teacher has within them the desire to ignite passion, interest, and excitement in their students. Practicing methods that are shown to do elicit these emotions from their students is a path that I hope all teachers would choose. Unfortunately the wonder of the world can be lost in schools and students can be left disenfranchised. Returning our students to a vibrant educational environment that ignites interest and sparks curiosity may just help the next generation find their passion, create happiness through those passions, and do great things for the world because of their passion.

Limitations

There were two main limitations in this study: size and time. A sample size of 14 is a small sample size for any study. The intervention could only have taken place in this class or one of the Certificate of Merit (on grade-level) classes I also taught. Though I had four of those classes, each with close to 30 students, there were ethical issues with implementing this form of intervention with them. First, their units were longer, and by the time this intervention was ready to be implemented, we had already begun the final unit, leaving none of my own teaching to compare to. I would have been comparing my teaching to my mentor's, which would not have been consistent for the study or professionally appropriate. With this in mind I would have had to use two classes as a control and two as my test group. In a study in which I believed the intervention methods to be superior to traditional techniques, I would have been consciously denying my control group those methods – essentially meaning I would have been purposefully teaching them in a way I viewed as inferior; also unethical. There are also two components to the size limitation. First, due to the program at the high school, the fifth period class I used has two, year-long AP classes condensed into one school year. Instead of having AP Comparative Government and AP American Government in two separate class periods, these students had both classes in one year. The first half of the year was AP American Government and the second half was AP Comparative Government. This means that from day one, before I arrived, the class had less time than any other AP American Government or AP Comparative Government class to complete its intended goals. Furthermore, AP test dates do not move for snow days, but instruction time was shortened. When my implementation came

around, units had to be cut to 5 days, instead of the normal 7-8 days. A lack of adequate time also affected my ability to conduct an ideal study. Second, as noted in the discussion section, this study tracked improvement of grades, due to increased enjoyment, over the course of a few units. Although helpful, this does not provide the full picture. Student interest and achievement should be tracked year-to-year and over the course of their young academic lives for the full picture of the impact of a change in pedagogy. It is likely that this small amount of time spent with an altered strategy would not have a substantial effect on student interest across longer spans of time, but it is possible.

Implications

From this study, secondary social studies teachers can gain insights into strategies to increase student interest in their subject and see the results of such a change. Although the strategies I used did not seem to improve learning to a greater extent than when I used lecture-based methods, I was able to increase students' enjoyment of the subject. As discussed in the conclusion and implication sections of this paper, that is a significant accomplishment. It is impossible to know what the long-term effects of this intervention will be on the students who participated. It is very possible that the actions taken in this study did not spur a change within its given time-frame, but could spur a positive change later on in the students' lives. I would implore any educator to explore these research-based strategies to increase their students' enjoyment of their subject matter. Inspiring and empowering students are important a goal as is the learning itself. Students are only in a class for a year, but the resonance of one's teaching will be in their minds for a lifetime – it is the job of the teacher to make that resonance count.

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Appendix

Appendix A

Country Profile Assignment
25 Product Points

Theme 1: Sovereignty, Authority and Power (4 points)

- Include a basic historical timeline. Map of state with capital identified. 2 points
- Description of constitution and/or regime type. 1 point
- Major source(s) of political legitimacy. 1 point

Theme 2: Political Institutions (12 points)

- Levels of government, unitary or federal system 2 points
- Diagram of the structures of government (Executive, Judicial, Legislative) with description of basic powers and roles of each. 6 points
- Identify the electoral system type and describe how it functions. A diagram may be beneficial. 2 points
- Identify the party system. Provide the names of the major political parties as well as their major platform items and membership. 2 points

Theme 3: Citizens, Society and State (4 points)

- Overall population size, Cultural information and breakdown: ethnicities, religions, languages. 1 point
- Major social cleavages and a description of related social movements. 1 point
- Role of the media. 1 point
- Methods in which citizens can and do participate in government. 1 point

Theme 4: Political and Social Changes (2 points)

- Identify a major political change. Consider if there were revolutions and/or coups d'état. 1 point
- Identify any major economic changes. Consider privatization, economic liberalization, globalization, nationalization. 1 point

Theme 5: Public Policy (3 points)

- Identify and explain 3 major current policy issues in the country. Policies must be related to the following areas: economy, social welfare (e.g. education, health & poverty), civil liberties/rights/freedoms and environment, population/migration.

Appendix B

Likert Scale and Free Response

"I enjoyed the activity in today's class"

On a scale of 1-4 (1 being strongly disagree and 4 being strongly agree), circle the number that indicates how much do you agree with the above question?

1 2 3 4

In 1-3 sentences, explain what you liked or disliked and why:

_____

_____

_____

_____