

Active Learning and the Acquisition of Civic Knowledge, Skills, and Dispositions An Evaluation of We the People Professional Development

Research Summary

April 2015

(full report available June 15, 2015)

Diana Owen

Georgetown University

This study evaluates the effectiveness of teachers who received We the People (WTP) professional development (PD) in conveying civic knowledge, skills, and disposition to high school students. A quasi-experimental design was employed to compare students in civics, social studies, and American government classes taught by teachers with and without We the People PD at multiple school sites across the state of Indiana in the fall semester of 2014.¹ Twenty-one teachers from twelve high schools participated in the study.² All of the teachers had participated in teacher training programs of some type. The WTP teachers took part in WTP summer institutes and other training opportunities that convey the specialized skills required of instructors in the program. The schools vary in size, location (urban/suburban/rural), and type (neighborhood/selective enrollment/technical; public/private).

Pre and post tests were administered by teachers online near the beginning and at the end of the semester during class periods to assess students' civic knowledge gain, their acquisition of civic skills, and their development of civic dispositions as a result of taking a civics course.³ The pretest was administered in September and posttest was given in December 2014. Students of instructors who did not have WTP PD constitute the comparison group. WTP PD teachers taught classes that specifically used the We the People curriculum⁴ and traditional civics courses. In addition to items measuring students' civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions, the survey included measures of classroom climate, instructional approaches, classroom resources, students' media use, demographic variables, and grade point average (GPA).

Complete data were collected on 1,015 students. There are 352 students in the comparison group and 663 students in the We the People PD intervention group. There are no significant differences in the grade level, sex, or race of the students in the comparison and intervention groups. 87% of the students in the sample were seniors in high school, and the rest were mostly juniors. Thirty-eight students dropped out of the study, for an overall attrition rate of 3.6%. There is no evidence of differential attrition for the comparison or intervention groups.

Measures

Knowledge items were constructed after consulting prior research, civics inventories, grade-appropriate civics tests, and state civic education rubrics. Materials related to We the People were not consulted when creating the pre and post tests. Content areas were discussed with the participating teachers at an orientation meeting held in Indianapolis prior to administering the pretest to ensure that the questions covered material that would be presented in class. The teachers who administered the survey were informed of the broad topic areas but were not given specific test items. All knowledge items were in compliance with the Indiana state civics rubric.

The survey items consist of both original questions and those that have been previously tested and have known reliability. The test included multiple choice and a small number open-ended questions. An additive index of overall knowledge consists of 51 items. Separate indexes measuring knowledge of constitutional principles, the Bill of Rights, government institutions, and political parties were created. All of the measures have internal consistency of .50 (Cronbach's alpha) or greater. (Index reliabilities for all measures appear in Table 1.)

Civic skills are the proficiencies that enable people to participate actively and responsibly as democratic citizens. They encompass how efficacious students feel in understanding or engaging in civic and political life. The survey measures how competent students feel they are to fulfill their responsibilities as citizens, express opinions, and become active participants in politics and their community. Civic skills also take into account students' ability to gather and process information, use the media to follow and engage in politics, and think critically about societal issues. Two additive indexes of civic skills are used in the study—general civic skills and media-related civic skills. The Cronbach's alpha for each of these measures is greater than .50.

Civic dispositions are orientations related to democratic character formation. The study includes three indicators of civic dispositions that measure the extent to which students follow government, politics, and issues, have a sense of responsibility toward their community, and their future intentions to follow and engage in political life. The internal consistency for each measure is greater than .50 (Cronbach's alpha).

There are no confounding factors in the study, as teachers with WTP PD had no contact with the comparison group, and the tests were administered to both groups during the same time period in each school. The WTP teacher group and the comparison group were not equivalent at baseline. A statistical adjustment was made, with pretest scores used as covariates in analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) models.

Summary of Basic Findings

The core findings of the study indicate that teachers who have gone through WTP PD score higher than the control group on most measures of civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions. The differences in mean scores between the intervention and comparison group were statistically significant for the overall knowledge measure as well as for knowledge of the U.S. Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and political parties. There was no measurable difference in knowledge of government institutions between the two groups. Students of WTP PD teachers scored higher than the comparison group on both general and media-related civic skills; the mean differences were statistically significant. Similarly, there were statistically significant mean differences on all three indicators of civic dispositions—follow politics, are responsible citizens, and intention to engage in civic affairs. (See Table 2.)

NOTES

¹ The study is ongoing, as data are being collection during the spring semester of 2015.

² In three of the schools there is only one instructor who teaches all of the civic education classes. In the eight schools where there are two civics instructors, the teachers were matched to the extent possible based on their educational background, years of experience, and professional development. The WTP and nonWTP teachers in the study are highly comparable on these indicators. The average number of years teaching—twenty—is identical for each group, and ranges from 5 to 36 for the WTP teachers and 7 to 34 for the nonWTP teachers. 27% of the WTP teachers have bachelor's degrees and 73% have advanced degrees (master's/law degree). 33% of the nonWTP teachers hold bachelor's degrees and 67% have master's degrees.

³ The fall semester in Indiana began in August, and we were not able to administer the pretest until the beginning of September after classes had started. We expect that this may diminish the magnitude of knowledge gain from the pretest to the posttest. The spring semester 2015 data collection took place during the first week of classes to alleviate this problem.

⁴ The WTP curriculum covers the foundations of American government, and is distinctive for its emphasis on constitutional principles, the Bill of Rights, and Supreme Court cases. A WTP textbook reflecting the curriculum is available in both print and ebook versions that facilitates interactive learning. A distinctive aspect of the WTP curriculum is that WTP students take part in a simulated congressional hearing that requires them to engage in a range of learning activities. This exercise requires that they research and develop succinct, yet complete, answers to probing questions. Some classes take part in district, state, and national WTP hearings in Washington, D.C. The finals of the national competition are held in congressional hearing rooms on Capitol Hill.

Table 1: Reliability of measures

Measure	Wave 1 α	Wave 2 α	# of Items
<u>Knowledge:</u>			
Total knowledge	.897	.910	51
Knowledge of the Constitution	.605	.655	12
Knowledge of the Bill of Rights	.555	.619	5
Knowledge of the Government	.735	.775	13
Knowledge of Political Parties	.612	.654	12
<u>Civic Skills:</u>			
General Civic Skills	.876	.924	10
Social Media Civic Skills	.909	.924	2
<u>Civic Dispositions:</u>			
Follow Politics	.823	.878	4
Civic Responsibility	.773	.875	5
Future in Politics	.817	.847	3

Table 2: Estimated differences on civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions between students of WTP and the comparison group students.

Measure	\bar{x} Comparison	\bar{x} WTP	\bar{x} Difference	Significance
<u>Knowledge:</u>				
Total knowledge	28.26	29.67	1.41	.00
Knowledge of the Constitution	5.86	6.56	.70	.00
Knowledge of the Bill of Rights	2.85	3.31	.46	.00
Knowledge of the Government	8.92	9.12	.20	.209
Knowledge of Political Parties	5.34	6.13	.80	.00
<u>Civic Skills:</u>				
General Civic Skills	27.12	29.11	1.99	.00
Social Media Civic Skills	6.60	7.00	.39	.00
<u>Dispositions:</u>				
Follow Politics	13.45	15.58	2.12	.00
Civic Responsibility	19.06	20.29	1.23	.00
Future in Politics	7.30	8.40	1.11	.00