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## “Involve me, and I will understand”: How to Engage Students in Political Science Classes

“Tell me, and I will forget.  
Show me, and I may remember.  
Involve me, and I will understand.”  
(Confucius, 450 BCE)

Keywords: teaching and learning political science, constructivism, problem-based learning, post-Soviet politics

In the constructivist understanding of instruction and learning, the focus is moved from a teacher-oriented to a student-oriented learning approach and the autonomy of learners and their social interaction become central. The teacher is no longer an authoritative source, but acts as a mentor who supports students' deep learning. The student's role accordingly changes from a passive listener to an active constructor of knowledge. Adopting this perspective, the present paper first discusses the implications of the philosophical view of constructivism for teaching and learning political science, and then analyzes the practical implementation of problem-based learning (PBL) as a prime example of the constructivist learning framework.

### „Was du mich tun lässt, das verstehe ich“: Wie man Studierende beim Lernen der Politikwissenschaft unterstützen kann

Schlüsselwörter: Lehre und Lernen in der Politikwissenschaft, Konstruktivismus, Problembasiertes Lernen, postsowjetische Politik

Die Grundidee des konstruktivistischen Lehr- und Lernverständnisses ist es, anstelle der Lehrenden die Studierenden in den Fokus zu rücken. Diese Verschiebung gibt der Autonomie der Lernenden und ihrer sozialen Interaktion ein besonderes Gewicht. Die Lehrenden agieren nicht mehr als autoritäre Quellen, sondern stehen den Studierenden beratend zur Seite, um ihnen einen möglichst tiefen Lernprozess zu ermöglichen. Entsprechend ändert sich die Rolle der Studierenden, die nun nicht mehr nur passiv zuhören, sondern aktiv Wissen schaffen. Der vorliegende Artikel erörtert, wie sich die philosophischen Sichtweisen des Konstruktivismus auf die Lehre und das Lernen von Politikwissenschaft auswirken, und untersucht, wie das konstruktivistische Paradigma in der konkreten Form des Problembasierten Lernens (PBL) im Unterricht umgesetzt werden kann.

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## 1. Introduction

Is a good researcher in political science naturally a good teacher of politics? Not according to a recent report on teaching at European higher education institutions, which unveiled that the teaching faculty at several institutions lacked the necessary training. As a consequence, the report called for support of pedagogical training for university teachers, who according to the study should learn both the latest teaching methods and the latest development in their specialization area (Mahony 2013). In fact, the European higher education discourse recently shifted towards lifelong learning and the development of skills that enhance students' employability, which requires well-trained teachers at higher education institutions. In the case of the social sciences in general and political science in particular, one of the main challenges resulting from the European harmonization of higher education within the Bologna process is the ongoing shift from a teacher-oriented to a student-centered approach to learning. This means that the curriculum needs to be re-designed and that more guidance has to be provided to teachers in a flexible learning environment where they no longer hold traditional positions (Reinalda 2013, 412–413; Lightfoot/Maurer 2013; Fach 2012).

In Austria, political science is a relatively young academic discipline. It was not institutionalized until the late 1960s and early 1970s – first at extramural research and teaching institutions, and then later at the University of Vienna as well as at other universities throughout the country (Sickinger 2004). As an academic discipline, political science in Austria today still faces various challenges. According to Thomas König, these range from budget deficits to structural and organizational problems to the lack of multidisciplinary and cooperation between various political science departments at universities and research institutes in Austria (König 2011). The problems of this discipline at the University of Vienna seem to be compounded by another challenge: the lack of teacher training for lecturers in political science. The University of Vienna's Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL) offers a basic general introduction to teaching in higher education. However, specializations in teaching a specific discipline – for example, political science or related disciplines within the social sciences domain – remains largely unexplored (see also Muckenhuber et al. 2010).

While teaching at the Department of Political Science at the University of Vienna, my primary concern was the lack of students' deep engagement with the course content. At times, students seemed to consider the classes as a mere opportunity to talk about politics. They frequently presented factual information and summarized the scholarly literature provided without engaging intensively with theoretical frameworks or research process. These deficiencies may have partially originated in the structure of my class, the reason being that it seemed to lack activities that would challenge and engage students and would develop their skill to carry out scientific procedures. The "traditional" strategy of having students read articles at home, present them in class as slide show presentations, and eventually discuss them in class was ineffective. Hence, the question that I asked myself regarding my course was: How can the course be re-designed in order to engage students more deeply with the course content? The solution at hand was to turn away from giving students "traditional" assignments and to introduce activities that would promote students' deep learning and active engagement in the learning process and provide them with a deeper understanding of political processes and political theories.

The current methods of teaching at higher education institutions need to be considered within the ongoing change of learning paradigm. Whereas formerly a college was considered to be an institution that provides instruction, nowadays it is an institution that produces learning.

The new paradigm acknowledges that knowledge does not simply exist “out there”, but that it is situated in each person’s mind, shaped by individual experience, constructed and created. A teacher at a higher education institution is no longer an instructor, but primarily a designer of learning methods and learning environments. In this context, faculty and students at the university work with each other by sharing governance and taking on responsibilities as a team. This is a challenging and complex process since all staff at the university are considered to be educators who produce students’ learning and success (Barr/Tagg 1995, 17).

The aim of this paper is therefore to discuss the implication of a constructivist learning framework and to share experiences in teaching a political science undergraduate class within the new learning paradigm. For this purpose, I will present an example of a problem-based learning (PBL) assignment that aims to actively engage students in knowledge construction and reflect upon its practical implementation in a classroom. The paper is divided into the following parts. First, it presents the changing paradigm of teaching and learning at higher education institutions, then it introduces the essence of PBL within a constructivist framework, and finally it exemplifies this approach by introducing a PBL assignment related to democratization theories in the framework of a comparative politics course. The paper demonstrates how the suggested technique could be used in a flexible manner in classes that do not adhere strictly to the requirements of PBL. The proposed assignment would be beneficial for both inexperienced and experienced lecturers: it helps first-time teachers to become confident in the classroom, and it helps experienced teachers to incorporate deep-learning elements in their teaching.

## **2. The Constructivist Learning Framework**

As Menucha Birenbaum argues, the current perspectives of learning are frequently subsumed under the constructivist framework, which includes modern (individual) and postmodern (social) learning theories. The common denominator is the notion that individual or public knowledge is constructed. From the mid-18th to mid-20th century, the traditional perspective on instruction, learning, and assessment was rooted in the empirical-analytical paradigm of Western thinking in empiricist (positivist) epistemology. The philosophical underpinning of this epistemology was a conceptualization of knowledge as being independent of the knower. It was assumed that there is only one truth, which needs to be discovered. In contrast, a new perspective of instruction, learning, and assessment is rooted in an interpretative or constructivist paradigm, reflecting poststructuralist or postmodern thinking. The underlying philosophy of the new paradigm is the understanding that knowledge does not exist outside of the community that has this knowledge, and that it is therefore constructed or created but not discovered. It is therefore presupposed that there are multiple realities with various sorts of truth. Knowledge is considered to be social and cultural and to be non-existent outside of communities that have this knowledge. Truth thus becomes relative, if possible at all. This new understanding of instruction and learning processes moves the focus from teaching to learning, where the autonomy of learners and the social interaction between teacher and students becomes central. The role of a teacher is no longer that of an authoritative source, but of a facilitator or mentor who supports students’ deep understanding. The role of the students likewise changes from a passive listener to an active constructor of knowledge (Birenbaum 2003, 14–20).

John R. Savery and Thomas M. Duffy conceptualize the philosophical view of constructivism and its importance for instructional principles in terms of three primary propositions: the understanding of learners in their interaction with the environment, the introduction of a “puzzle” as a stimulus for learning, and the evolution of knowledge through social negotiation. This therefore means that the learners cannot be separated from the learning process. Their understanding is an individual construction that they test against the understanding of other learners. Cognition here is not only within an individual, but within the entire context. The learners should be interested in solving a “puzzle” that acts as a stimulus for learning as it creates a purpose for actually being there to learn. Consequentially, the goals of the learners are central in considering what is learned. In this context, the social environment is crucial in the development of an individual understanding, and collaborative groups are very important. In a group, students test the understanding of their interpretations of the world. The social environment provides learners with alternative views that help them to negotiate meanings and therefore understand each other (Savery/Duffy 1996, 135–137).

Engaging students in a classroom today has become an essential component of teaching and learning in social sciences classes. Recently, active learning has become an umbrella term for instructional methods that engage students in a learning process. According to some authors, active learning in essence is any activity that students perform in classroom as opposed to passively listening to a teacher’s lecture. This is frequently contrasted with the traditional lecture, where students are just recipients of information. In practice, active learning ranges from short writing assignments to complex “real-world” activities where students are exposed to new problems and search for solutions. This also involves cooperative learning, which – as a subset of active learning – describes students’ work in groups created for working on complex tasks (Prince 2004, 223; Faust/Paulson 1998, 4). In political science classes, the active learning approach aims at giving students a deeper level of understanding of how political processes work, at encouraging students to be more attentive, at ensuring that they retain acquired information for longer, at enhancing their analytical thinking through collaboration, and at enabling them to develop their speaking and presentation skills (Williamson/Gregory 2010, 290; Smith/Boyer 1996, 690–691).

However, as Savery and Duffy argue, although nowadays many teachers employ collaborative groups, little is understood about what the goals of such group work are and how they are contextualized within the whole of the instructional framework. The authors therefore challenge the above-described understanding of active learning by emphasizing the instructional principles that derive from the constructivist learning framework. This includes an anchoring of learning activities to a larger problem, giving the learners ownership of the learning process, designing an authentic task, creating a learning environment that is complex and challenging to the learners, testing alternative views, and providing an opportunity to reflect on both the content and the learning process. This requires the creation of a problem or a task that is meaningful to the learners. It further leads to a project in which students are engaged together. The learners are supposed to be engaged in the construction of knowledge by executing scientific procedures – and to proceed not as prescribed, but through their own engagement in problem solving. In this process, it is essential that the teacher challenges the learners’ thinking. Since under the constructivist learning paradigm knowledge is understood as being socially negotiated, the learning community is very important. Within the learning environment, learners discuss their ideas and enrich their understanding of the world. Ultimately, the goal of the instruction is that the learners develop skills of self-regulation and become independent learners (Savery/Duffy 1996, 137–140).

### **3. Problem-Based Learning within the Constructivist Framework**

Problem-Based Learning (PBL) is a prime example of a constructivist learning environment. As an interactive problem-based approach PBL was developed in the late 1960s and early 1970s in Canada and was later applied at various North American and European universities. PBL as a general model was developed in medical education, but then adopted at higher education institutions in business studies, architecture, law, engineering, and social work. Recently, PBL pedagogy has also been used at higher education institutions in social sciences, particularly in political science, international relations (IR), public policy, and European studies. Some studies demonstrate a successful implementation of PBL both in innovative learning environments where the whole curriculum is organized around PBL and in more traditional settings where elements of PBL are integrated in traditional lectures or seminars (Maurer/Neuhold 2012; Savery/Duffy 1996; Williamson/Gregory 2010; Savery 2006).

As Wim Gijsselaers explains, PBL is grounded in three principles of learning and instruction: the construction of knowledge, the acknowledgement of a meta-cognition process, and the understanding of social and contextual factors influencing learning. The first principle means that learning is a process of knowledge construction based on already acquired information, which contradicts the traditional concept of teaching as filling students' minds with information by memorization. The second principle means that students self-monitor their learning process by setting a goal, selecting a strategy, and evaluating the goal – they are engaged in a meta-cognition process. The third principle means that students should be led to understand knowledge and be able to use problem-solving skills (Gijsselaers 1996, 14–17).

As Heidi Maurer and Christine Neuhold argue, in practice this implies that the three main preconditions for a successful PBL process are student-centrism, knowledge construction, and collaboration. In terms of a process, students are not only actively engaged in learning, but more importantly they are given ownership of their learning process. Students are actively engaged by taking on the role of chair, secretary, and participants. In this way, students follow a small research project where they identify a research question, engage with literature, search for empirical material, formulate arguments, and then present them to a class. In principle, students can even run tutorials by themselves. In terms of content, students identify their learning objectives by themselves. Hence, PBL is perceived as leading students to deep learning, given that in their learning process students do not primarily analyze factual information that might be important for an exam. Instead, they define for themselves what is interesting in an assignment and look for possible explanations through self-study. It is presupposed that students learn better if they determine the relevance of the problem themselves. Furthermore, PBL is a process where students actively construct knowledge in a context. Learning in a context helps students to understand the relevance of the course content and its applicability in the real workplace. In this process, however, the emphasis is not only on what is learnt, but also on how it is learnt. The ultimate goal of PBL is to turn students into independent and analytical learners. For this goal, PBL strongly considers learning as a collaborative process in small groups – up to 5 or 6 students in earlier days and up to 12 or 15 nowadays. Through collaborative processes, students increase their ability to evaluate the information provided by other students, to relate their own knowledge to that information, and test their own understanding against arguments of other students. Moreover, under these conditions students socialize and train their communication skills while working in a team and reflecting on group dynamics (Maurer/Neuhold 2012, 3–7).

Many studies point out that medical or engineering students of PBL develop more positive attitudes towards the study process. They find the approach challenging and enjoyable. Teachers report that through PBL students make more use of library resources, attend classes more regularly, and study more for meaning than for memorization. PBL fosters a deep understanding of the subject content and helps students retain information longer. Ultimately, it provides a positive environment for developing students' problem-solving and lifelong-learning skills (Prince 2004, 227–229). As Jonathan Williamson and Alison S. Gregory recount, in the introductory politics classes where they applied elements of PBL, students developed critical thinking skills, more advanced oral and written communication, and the ability to do research beyond textbooks by accessing scholarly, governmental, and commercial resources. The students understood the limits of their knowledge and developed a plan of how to acquire new knowledge. According to the teachers, the sacrifice of depth for breadth of inquiry was worthwhile (Williamson/Gregory 2010, 289–290).

In designing a problem-based assignment, Henk G. Schmidt and Joseph H. C. Moust suggest classifying all problem-based assignments according to the type of the problem – explanation problems, fact-finding problems, strategy problems, and moral dilemma–resolution problems. Accordingly, a certain type of knowledge is acquired: explanatory, descriptive, procedural, or normative. Explanations and facts are important for building theories, whereas procedural and normative knowledge are important for the professional part of a study program (Schmidt/Moust 2000, 12–13). As Gijsselaers points out, designing a problem in PBL may be challenging and painstaking, and problems may be ineffective if designed with questions that students merely need to answer, that have the same titles as textbook chapters, that may be just too simple to be answered, or that have only one acceptable solution, with any deficiency resulting in the absence of motivation for self-study of students (Gijsselaers 1996, 20).

After the problem-based assignment has been designed, it can be introduced to the students. Following Maurer and Neuhold, the students' analysis of the problem undergoes several steps. In the first step, the tutor needs to ensure that all students understand the concepts and vocabulary of the assignment. Then, students activate previous knowledge by brainstorming, categorize and structure the knowledge through an appointed "secretary", and formulate common learning objectives. Subsequently, the students leave the group for self-study. During this process, the students search for answers to the formulated learning objectives. For inexperienced students, a list of literature is provided. In the following session, the students report to the group what they have learned and discuss how to respond to the learning objectives as a group. During this session, the students are also encouraged to provide feedback to each other's performance (Maurer/Neuhold 2012, 7–9). Ultimately, the learning outcome is measured in the students' understanding of both the general problem domain and a particular case described in the PBL assignment. This way, the students can observe how knowledge in one particular area can be transferred to solving problems in other areas (Gijsselaers 1996, 19). The work on a specific assignment may last from five to eight weeks. In this case, while the group engages in an assignment throughout the whole indicated timeframe, smaller tasks such as the identification of learning objectives, the collection of data, the formulation of arguments, or the design of a research paper are done each week (Maurer/Neuhold 2012, 13).

As outlined above, PBL requires both students and teachers to revise their role compared to the traditional learning environment: the teacher adopts the role of a facilitator rather than a lecturer, while students take on responsibility for their own learning process. The tutor has to find a balance that allows students to discuss the problem independently while reserving the right



to intervene when critical learning goals are at risk. In order to achieve this balance, a tutor needs to receive prior training on PBL. A tutor is not supposed to tell students whether they are right or wrong, and he or she should resist giving students the “correct” solution. The tutor should not only be familiar with the PBL approach, but also be able to reflect on group dynamics and the course content (*ibid.*, 19–20; Gijsselaers 1996, 19–20).

Although to some extent problematic, an assessment of students’ performance is very important in PBL. As Williamson and Gregory argue, exams and traditional term papers are easier for a professor to judge than group projects. In the latter case, students must know that they are not evaluated on the basis of a “correct” answer, but rather on their analytical skills as documented in their essays and reports (Williamson/Gregory 2010, 278). Moreover, in group work some students might act as “free-riders”, i.e. they might let (better) students do their homework. To avoid this, Williamson and Gregory suggest peer-evaluation within the groups where students score their classmates on the basis of their contribution to the final product (*ibid.*, 284).

#### **4. Example of a PBL Assignment**

In a recent course I taught on the variety of post-Soviet political regimes, I allocated time for a PBL assignment. The challenges for the introduction of this assignment were the rather traditional setup of the course learning environment, and the relatively large number of 25 students participating in my class. The course was an elective, not a compulsory part of students’ work towards their degrees. The students were at BA level, and many were exchange students (mostly from European countries). The course was taught in an intensive format, i.e. it consisted of several sessions spread over 4 weeks. The aim of the course was to provide students with a solid understanding of the theoretical framework applicable to the post-Soviet transition, to empirically retrace the development of the political regimes in the region in the form of case studies, to develop students’ critical thinking, and to enhance their writing and public speaking skills. The course focused on three case studies – Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine – as examples of the variety of political regimes resulting from the post-Soviet transition. By the end of the course, the students were expected to have basic knowledge of how political regimes work in the case-study countries and to be able to apply theories of democratization to the post-Soviet case studies.

Given the large number of students in my course, I divided the students in groups, each of which received the same PBL assignment (see Table 1). The aim of the PBL assignment was to help the students understand democratization theories and to guide their research papers. The PBL assignment was an explanation-problem assignment, and it pertained to building theories. I expected the students to explain why the development of non-democratic political regimes in the course of the post-communist transition differs among the post-Soviet countries. The assignment was used in an introductory session that focused on the theoretical framework applicable to the development of the political regimes. The students were not required to have previous knowledge, but familiarity with the politics in some post-Soviet countries would have been an asset.

As required, each group of students reported to the class on possible explanations of the transition paths of the post-Soviet countries. In their brainstorming and discussions on the “puzzle”, the students referred to the level of the citizens’ nostalgia towards the Soviet Union, the weak civil society, the lack of an EU membership perspective in the case of Ukraine, the strong competencies of the Belarusian president, and so forth. I collected the students’ answers on the blackboard while organizing them by association with theories of democratization, and finally

Table 1

More than two decades after the breakdown of communism and the disintegration of the Soviet Union, scholars argue that there are two major groups of post-communist countries: the Central European countries and the Baltic states on the one hand, and the majority of the post-Soviet countries on the other. The former group demonstrates successful democratization, whereas most post-Soviet countries turned into new forms of political regimes often called defective democracies, hybrid regimes, or new forms of authoritarianism. As Andreas Schedler argues, the electoral authoritarian regimes hold regular multi-party elections, but certain liberal-democratic principles are violated. Manipulations are usually carried out through the exclusion of opposition parties or candidates from the electoral arena, the violation of citizens' political and civil rights, the restriction of their access to media, and electoral fraud (Schedler 2006, 3). The differing states of political regimes are reflected for instance in the Freedom House democracy index, where in 2012 the scores were 4.82 for Ukraine, 6.18 for Russia, and 6.68 for Belarus. The possible scores of the index range from 1 to 7, where 1 indicates the highest and 7 the lowest level of democratic progress (Freedom House 2012). What factors do you think have caused the development of the political regimes in Ukraine, Russia, and Belarus?

introduced the theories by explicitly referring to the students' explanations. For example, we focused on factors such as economic trends, political culture, civil society, state and nation building, type of authoritarian predecessor regimes, transitional mode, design of political institutions, or international context (see Merkel 2004).

At the end of the course, I suggested the students should use their ideas for the research papers that they were supposed to hand in after the end of the course. The research question derived from the PBL assignment was formulated as follows: Choose one of the factors economic development, civil society, ethnic divisions, political institutions, political culture, political and social actors driving the transitions, or international context, and analyze how this factor has shaped the transition paths of the post-Soviet countries in comparative perspective. The students were supposed to select one of the democratization theories, provide definitions of the concepts involved, elaborate on the theoretical framework, and apply the theory to the case studies of Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine in a comparative perspective. To answer the chosen research question in their research papers, the students had to conduct research using scholarly, governmental, and media resources. This way, the students became familiar with the logic of the research process while simultaneously having access to a research paper design. A research paper template was provided, containing a formulated research question, a guiding theory, and a reading literature list. This proved particularly suitable for inexperienced students. In the case at hand, each student was responsible for his or her own performance, and the grades were given on the basis of the quality of the research papers.

Not adhering to the PBL concept, the remainder of the course was set up in a more traditional learning environment, with lecturers delivered by me and discussion groups formed by



students. I did not fully re-organize the “traditional” assignments that required the students to read scholarly texts at home and subsequently present them as slide shows to classmates in class. Under these conditions, the students had only limited ownership of their learning process. It was rather me, not the students, who provided the learning objectives and assigned readings, which was particularly visible in my instructions for their final research papers. All in all, my students were rather told what to study and what to learn concerning the “puzzle”. In general, the setting of the course rather resembled that of case-based learning. As John R. Savery argues, both case studies and project-based learning are valid learner-centered instructional strategies. However, the difference between PBL and case- or project-based learning lies in that the latter diminish the students’ role in setting learning goals. Case studies are frequently used to assess students’ learning after instruction, as they are presented to students in order to help them understand the course content. In project-based learning, it is usually suggested that students should follow “correct” procedures by being assigned a project with a desired outcome (e.g. students are forced to design a website). This way, teachers act more as instructors who provide expert guidance, feedback, and suggestions to students to make them achieve their final product (Savery 2006, 15–16).

Nevertheless, the PBL assignment introduced effectively encouraged the students to deeply engage with the problem solving. Although my course did not fully center on PBL, the core of PBL pedagogy remained intact. In line with the PBL logic, the students were assigned a problem that activated their use of previous knowledge and prompted them to look for a solution and thus think beyond the information introduced by me. In particular, through the PBL assignment political theories were not introduced deductively but were discovered inductively by students: from proposed explanations to generalization, and not from generalization to concrete application. As Gijsselaers convincingly argues, the problem setting provides the context to new learning. The analysis of a problem results in the acquisition of new knowledge and problem-solving skills. For this, students are supposed to encounter a problem before all relevant knowledge is acquired (Gijsselaers 1996, 17). Overall, the feedback by the students on my course was very positive, and it was precisely the “traditional” home reading assignments (those that the students had to present in class during the remainder of the course) that the students suggested revising.

The implementation of this assignment demonstrated how PBL can be used in a flexible manner combining innovative and traditional learning environments. In fact, as Williamson and Gregory suggest, linking PBL and introductory political science classes, i.e. applying a mixed-method approach combining PBL with more traditional pedagogies, can be successful. In their study, the scholars presented an example of a successful adaptation of PBL within a more traditional learning environment. This was an introductory-level American politics class. Though receiving positive evaluations from student surveys and good student performance, the authors argue that they had reservations towards an exclusive PBL approach, especially in introductory-level classes. Their argument is that students need to develop a knowledge base before starting using that knowledge in PBL problems (Williamson/Gregory 2010, 290).

The next time I teach this course, I plan to extend the PBL assignment to at least one additional session. This would give the students some initial time at home for self-study and research on the introduced “puzzle”, and then allow for additional time for a discussion of their findings in the next class session. More time would likewise be needed to make students reflect on the group dynamics and the learning process as such. Ideally, I would increase the number of PBL assignments, focusing for example on one specific aspect of the political regime development in

one particular case study country. However, similar to Williamson and Gregory, I have reservations about turning my course into a full-fledged PBL. Both the students and the teachers need to become accustomed to their new roles in the new learning environment. To be able to fully implement the PBL concept, the course requires a full re-design. As previous studies demonstrate, the PBL curriculum requires sufficient resources, which at more traditional universities are only occasionally at the teachers' disposal. The resources in question include a large number of supportive faculty staff, an adequate timeframe, a small number of students per learning group, and classrooms adjustable to small-group teaching (Maurer/Neuhold 2012). Ultimately, cooperation with colleagues using PBL pedagogy in social sciences would be the optimal way of acquiring first-hand experience with PBL and of devising ways to implement it.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper has sought to share experiences in engaging undergraduate students in political science classes by demonstrating an example of a PBL assignment. The technique presented is embedded in the scholarly literature on the constructivist learning framework and its implications for instructional principles. In contrast to the positivist paradigm, the underlying philosophy of this framework presupposes that our knowledge is constructed, that it does not exist outside of the community having this knowledge, and that therefore there are multiple realities. From this perspective, a teacher is not an authority telling the "truth", but a facilitator supporting students' construction of knowledge. In terms of instructional principles, this implies that students learn in interaction with a social environment, that they have a "puzzle" as a stimulus for learning, and that they construct knowledge through negotiation of meaning with other learners. The ultimate goal of this kind of instruction is to provide students with skills that help them to become independent learners.

To illustrate the constructivist instructional principles, this paper presented an example of a PBL assignment in the context of a post-Soviet politics course. The PBL pedagogy is grounded in the principles of student-centrism, construction of knowledge, and collaboration between learners. Learning is understood as a process where knowledge is constructed on the basis of previous knowledge. Students self-monitor the learning process and use their skills to solve a "puzzle". This way, PBL presupposes activities through which learners take on responsibility for their learning success. As the paper demonstrated, a partial implementation of PBL is also possible under conditions that do not strictly correspond to the requirements of PBL. The proposed PBL assignment promotes students' understanding of political theories in an inductive manner, i.e. from proposed explanations to generalizations. With some adjustment, similar assignments could be employed in other classes in political science, IR, or European studies, both in traditional lecture-type and innovative learning environments.

Despite the effort put into the development of the PBL techniques, in practice some of their elements might not work, depending on the group dynamics, the resources available during teaching, or the degree of students' pre-exposure to PBL. So in order to engage students in a classroom more actively, some aspects of the PBL implementation need to be re-considered and re-structured on the basis of the perceived problems and adaptations to students' learning styles. There is always room for improvement!

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