Fostering political understanding using *The West Wing*: Analyzing the pedagogical benefits of film in high school civics classrooms

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Abstract:

This study describes one high school civics teacher's use of film as a way to improve his students' understanding of politics. Using episodes of The West Wing, an award-winning political drama, over the course of a semester, the teacher was able to create an authentic context for political instruction that allowed his students to practice thinking politically, better understand real-life political events, and make connections across the formal curriculum. The findings from this study offer several implications for both the teaching of politics in secondary education as well as the use of film in secondary social studies courses.

Keywords: Education | Politics | Civics | The West Wing | Instructional Tool | Film

Article:

Introduction

Over the past two decades, political scientists have documented a steady decline in Americans' knowledge of politics, trust in government, and participation in democratic processes and civic associations (e.g., Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996, Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 2002, Macedo et al., 2005 and Putnam, 2000). Although Americans of all ages are represented in these statistics, 18–25 year olds inevitably score the lowest in almost every measure of civic engagement (Kirby and Kawashima-Ginsberg, 2009 and Snell, 2010). Reports of young Americans' civic disengagement has become so commonplace that when the U.S. Department of Education (2010) released the results of the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in Civics, relatively little national attention was given to the fact that only 64% of 12th

grade students were deemed to have shown “basic” knowledge of civics concepts, and of those students, only 24% achieved scores that were considered “proficient.”

Certainly, multiple factors are contributing to young Americans' civic apathy (Snell, 2010); however, both political scientists and educators agree that a dearth of quality civic educational experiences is playing a prominent role in young people's lack of civic efficacy (Kahne and Middaugh, 2008 and Macedo et al., 2005). Research has shown that high school students often have strong political opinions and enjoy engaging in discussions of controversial political issues (e.g., Forrest and Weseley, 2007, Hahn, 1998, Hess and Posselt, 2002 and Journell, 2011b), but unfortunately, a large percentage of civics and government classes do not capitalize on this interest (Journell, 2011a and Kahne and Middaugh, 2008). Too often, traditional civics instruction focuses exclusively on complex democratic processes, such as describing how bills become laws, without providing a proper context for students to take that information and apply it to real-life political or social issues (Journell, 2010a, Kahne and Middaugh, 2008 and Macedo et al., 2005). Over the past thirty years, social studies educators have attempted to address this problem through efforts such as issues-centered instruction (e.g., Avery et al., 1996 and Engle and Ochoa, 1988) and service-learning (e.g.,Hart et al., 2007, Kahne and Sporte, 2008 and Wade, 2008), but these approaches have not led to a widespread change in the way teachers approach civic instruction due, perhaps, to the challenges associated with implementing these types of programs in high-stakes testing environments.

This article describes yet another approach to providing students with an authentic context from which to learn about politics and democratic processes. In this study, we analyze one high school civics teacher's use of film as a way to foster political understanding over the course of a semester. The findings from this research suggest that film has the potential to encourage political thinking among students as well as provide opportunities for students to apply aspects of the formal curriculum into real-life contexts.

Review of related literature

The need for political instruction in high school civics/government classes

Kahne, Chi, and Middaugh (2006) argue that civics and government courses are “the part of the formal high school curriculum that is most explicitly linked to the democratic purposes of education” (p. 391). Of course, that statement assumes that students are receiving quality instruction in their civics and government classes which, as Kahne and Middaugh (2008) note, is not the case in most high schools across the United States. Although determining what constitutes sufficient civic knowledge is difficult and open to interpretation (Hyslop-Margison et al., 2006 and Kuklinski and Quirk, 2001), Kahne and Middaugh describe high-quality civic education as giving students the opportunity to apply their knowledge of government to better understand national politics, current events, and issues within their own communities. They then

argue that students should be given the opportunity, through service-learning activities and after school programs, to apply this newfound knowledge to civic causes of interest to them.

Although descriptions of exemplary high school civic education programs exist (e.g., Kahne and Westheimer, 2006 and Westheimer and Kahne, 2004), the vast majority in the United States fail to substantively address politics and current political events. Analyses of civic textbooks and state curriculum standards have found that they typically emphasize descriptions of government and rights of citizens rather than the dispositions needed to be politically informed and civically active (e.g., Journell, 2010a and Avery and Simmons, 2000), which has been shown to negatively affect students' civic efficacy (Bos, Williamson, Sullivan, Gonzales, & Avery, 2007). Moreover, considerable research over the past half century suggests that the quality of a school's civic instruction is strongly correlated with factors such as students' race and socioeconomic status, leading to what Hess (2008) has termed a “democracy divide” in the United States (p. 373). Suburban school districts that cater to predominately White populations are more likely to offer civics and government courses as part of their social studies curricula (Niemi & Smith, 2001), and research has shown that African-American and Latino students from low-socioeconomic communities are less likely to receive high-quality civic education when compared to their more affluent, White counterparts (Journell, 2011b, Kahne and Middaugh, 2008 and Litt, 1963).

Perhaps not surprisingly, then, research on students' political knowledge has shown students to be politically unaware and disengaged. In their analysis of NAEP data, Niemi and Junn (1998) found that most students could not identify basic beliefs of the two major parties or the role of politics and lobbying in common governmental processes, findings that have also been documented qualitatively in other contexts (Journell, 2011a). Other studies have found that students often hold negative opinions about politics and politicians (Forrest and Weseley, 2007 and Hahn, 1998), that many students are either uninformed about current political events or willing to receive their political information from satiric or other non-journalistic sources (Journell, 2011a and Journell, 2011b), and that students do not value discussing political issues on a regular basis with their family and peers (Journell, 2011b and Hahn, 2003).

When all of these factors are taken into account, we would argue that most high school civics and government courses are not adequately preparing students to “think politically.” Akin to the more publicized notion of thinking historically, we define political thinking as the process by which individuals can better understand political decision-making and public policy by placing political actions into a proper context. If politics is defined as the art of influencing public policy, then being able to think politically means that students can rationalize why politicians and other political actors make certain decisions (e.g., to gain political influence and win elections, control media, minimize a politically damaging story, etc.). If students are not properly versed in the ways in which politicians use various measures of public opinion and other factors, such as electoral math, that often dictate how they make decisions, then students run the risk of being

naïve or misguided when interpreting public policy or making their own political decisions as adults.

An illustrative comparison of students who had been taught to think politically versus those who had not can be found in the first author's (2011b) study of high school government teachers during the 2008 Presidential Election. In two of the classes, both of which happened to be at predominately White schools, students were privy to discussions of polling data, electoral math, and campaign strategies on a regular basis. In the majority of the other classes, which were primarily at low-income, high-minority schools, students rarely, if ever, engaged in discussions of these issues. On the day after the election, students at the two predominately White schools made comments that suggested they knew, based on their knowledge of polling data and electoral math, the election was over once Obama had won the pivotal Eastern swing states of Virginia and Pennsylvania. Comments from students in the other classes indicated that they had waited in anticipation for the election result, which was not formally called until polling had closed on the West coast.

Of course, part of the challenge of teaching politics is that since most students are under 18, they are not allowed to vote and often feel excluded from the political process. Moreover, the traditional civics and government curriculum tends to focus on issues related to the rights of citizens and civic activism within one's community (Journell, 2010a). Although this aspect of civic education is important, political scientists have argued that knowledge of national politics and political decision-making is also essential to developing civically aware citizens (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996 and Macedo et al., 2005). In this article, we argue that the use of film in high school civics and government classes can be a way for teachers to make their political instruction more authentic by creating an environment where students can “see” political decision-making at work, which can serve as a springboard to connecting the curriculum to real-life events and stimulating critical discussions of public policy (Newman & Wehlage, 1993).[1] Although research on using film in civics and government classes is limited, we believe that many of the educational benefits of film that have been found in other contexts offer considerable potential for political instruction.

The pedagogical potential of film to teach Politics

The widespread availability of VHS and DVD players in high school classrooms over the past thirty years has made film a common instructional tool in secondary education. A quick perusal of journals in all academic disciplines will find articles advocating the use of popular film to teach content (e.g., Chappell and Thompson, 2000, Goll et al., 2006, Hibbing and Rankin-Erickson, 2003 and Smilanich and Lafreniere, 2010). Specifically within the social studies, scholars have advocated film as a valuable medium to aid in the teaching of history (e.g., Marcus, 2007, Marcus et al., 2010, Russell, 2007 and Russell, 2012b), and research has found that the vast majority of secondary history teachers use film on a regular basis in their classrooms (Marcus & Stoddard, 2007).

Film has been advocated as a tool for teaching history for a variety reasons, such as increasing excitement and understanding about a specific topic (e.g., Marcus, 2011, Metzger, 2005 and Metzger, 2010), acting as a springboard for discussions of specific issues or concepts (e.g., Russell, 2012a), fostering historical empathy (e.g., Stoddard, 2007 and Stoddard and Marcus, 2006), as a tool for historiography (e.g., Russell, 2012a), encouraging historical thinking (e.g., Marcus, 2005 and Seixas, 1994;), and broaching controversial historical events and social issues (e.g., Hess, 2007, Stoddard, 2009 and Russell, 2009). To date, the majority of literature on the use of film in K-12 social studies education has focused on history, although a few recent studies have critiqued ways in which film could be used in other social studies disciplines (e.g., di Palma, 2009, Journell and Buchanan, 2012a and Mathews, 2009). Yet, the literature on teaching social studies content areas in higher education offers several examples of using popular film to teach political science, economics, and geography (e.g., Alderman and Popke, 2002, Beavers, 2002, Kuzma and Haney, 2001, Leet and Houser, 2003 and Sunderland et al., 2009).

Specifically within the literature of both film studies and political science, there exists considerable research about the ways in which politics and the American presidency have been portrayed in popular film (e.g.,Rollins and O'Connor, 2003a, Rollins and O'Connor, 2003b, Gianos, 1998, Giglio, 2000, Gladstone-Sovell, 2006 and Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles, 2006), and it seems at least plausible to suggest that many of these representations could be used to provide students with a better understanding of the American political system. In addition, research on K-12 students suggests that visual texts have the potential to serve as tools for educating for civic understanding and increasing students' political efficacy (e.g., Journell, 2009, Forrest and Weseley, 2007, Gaudelli, 2005 and Gaudelli, 2009).

In this study, we are focusing specifically on *The West Wing*, which was a highly acclaimed television show that many scholars argue is a fairly accurate representation of the American presidency (e.g., Gladstone-Sovell, 2006 and Rollins and O'Connor, 2003b). Although television has been adopted under the umbrella of film studies by leading scholars in the field (Boddy, 2005), there are several salient differences between Hollywood movies and television series that may have instructional ramifications for teachers. Movies are designed to be watched in a relatively short (1.5–2 h) amount of uninterrupted viewing, whereas television shows are typically meant to be viewed over a much longer period of time, albeit in shorter (22–45 min) segments.

Both mediums have distinct instructional advantages and disadvantages. Movies allow for the telling of a complex narrative over a fairly short amount of time, but in doing so, directors may have to cut elements of the story or limit the amount of character development that occurs within the film (Marcus et al., 2010). Television series, on the other hand, allow for the development of complex characters and multiple plotlines, often over the span of several episodes (Vest, 2003). As a result, students may have difficulty following the plotlines of a singular episode. When working with television series, therefore, it may be preferable, at least from a comprehension

standpoint, to show episodes sequentially and on a regular basis. However, teachers may be unwilling to allot the amount of instructional time necessary to reach this level of understanding.

Regardless of the medium being used, teachers must realize that films are a type of “text” that students must read and interpret (Giroux, 2002, Kellner, 1991 and Trier, 2001). As such, knowledge of the motivation and biases of filmmakers becomes essential to placing film into a proper context, as do theatrical effects such as lighting and sound (Hess, 2007, Metzger and Suh, 2008 and Stoddard, 2009). Teachers must also recognize that film is often considered a passive form of instruction that requires a considerable amount of instructional time. Simply pressing “play” and hoping students pay attention to and learn from film has been found to be a poor pedagogical practice (Hobbs, 2006). In order to make film a productive and worthwhile instructional activity, teachers need to make viewing film an active process by having students complete instructional activities as they watch a film and engaging in critical discussions of content both during the film and after the viewing has concluded (Marcus et al., 2010, Russell, 2007, Russell, 2012a and Woelders, 2007).

The remainder of this article will describe the way in which one teacher used film on a regular basis in his high school civics classes. Throughout the semester, the teacher used film, specifically *The West Wing*, to provide an authentic political context for his students, which he then used to supplement the rest of his formal curriculum. Given that this study is one of the few on using film in high school civics and government classes, we intend for our findings to serve as a starting point for future research in this area.

Context of the study

Setting and Participants

This study took place during the Fall 2010 semester at Madison High School, a school of about 1000 students located in a small town in the Eastern United States. The student body at Madison was predominately White (66%) with African-Americans (24%) and Latino/a (8%) comprising the remainder of the student population. Based on our interviews with teachers and other school personnel, Madison contained a mixture of students from upper-middle class suburban communities as well as students from working-class neighborhoods. In total, 24% of the student body qualified for free and reduced lunch. Academically, the school's performance on state assessments during the 2009–2010 school year earned Madison the title of “school of distinction” by the state.

The teacher we observed over the course of the semester was Mr. Monroe, who was recruited to take part in the study after he replied to an email that the first author had sent to several school districts seeking high-quality civics or government teachers who would be interested participating in a study that used film, specifically *The West Wing*, to teach civics or government. Mr. Monroe was White, in his mid-thirties, and in his third year of teaching. He held a master's of teaching degree, and the principal at Madison considered him to be an exceptional teacher, an

opinion supported by strong student scores on state assessments. Our personal observations of Mr. Monroe over the course of the study found him to be a caring professional who strived to create learner-centered activities for his students that made them think critically about aspects of the formal curriculum.

After talking to Mr. Monroe, we found that he was familiar with *The West Wing* and had even used clips of the show in prior semesters of teaching civics. Although Mr. Monroe had never used full episodes of the show in class, he was intrigued by the idea and agreed to show one episode per week over the course of the semester. In order to lessen the burden on Mr. Monroe, the authors created the guided-viewing activities that students completed during each episode; however, Mr. Monroe had complete discretion over how he chose to use each episode as part of his civics instruction.

We observed two of Mr. Monroe's civics classes, one honors-level and one general-level. At Madison, civics was a required course for sophomores and was subject to an end-of-course state assessment that held graduation implications. The general-level class was considerably more diverse than the honors-level class, a characteristic that was, according to Mr. Monroe, typical of general-level classes at Madison and typical, according to research on tracking, of general-level classes in the state and across the nation (Kelly, 2007). The general-level class contained 22 students, nine of whom were White, six of whom were African-American, and five of whom were Latino/a.[2] In addition, two students were Eastern European immigrants who had moved to the United Sates at a young age. In contrast, the honors-level class was comprised of 29 students, 25 of whom were White, two of whom were African-American, and two of whom were Latino/a. Both classes operated on a 90-min block schedule which met every day throughout the course of a semester.

The West Wing

The film used by Mr. Monroe throughout the semester was the first season of *The West Wing*, an award-winning political drama that aired on NBC from 1999–2006.[3] The series provides viewers with a behind-the-scenes look at life in the White House through the eyes of Democratic President Josiah Bartlet and members of his senior staff. Although fictitious, creator Aaron Sorkin strived to make the show a weekly civics lesson for viewers and hired high-profile White House staffers from both sides of the political spectrum, such as former Reagan speechwriter Peggy Noonan and former Clinton press secretary Dee Dee Myers, to serve as consultants in order to make the storylines as realistic as possible (Levine, 2003 and Pompper, 2003).

Given the show's scope and critical acclaim, *The West Wing* has been the subject of considerable scrutiny among both political scientists and film scholars (e.g., Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles, 2006 and Rollins and O’Connor, 2003b). Advocates of the series argue that it provides a realistic look into the political landscape of Washington that is often hidden from the average citizen (Levine, 2003 and Pompper, 2003). Others contend that by establishing Bartlet with a clear

political ideology, as opposed to having him play a “neutral” political character, Sorkin created a more authentic version of the presidency than what is typically portrayed in American film (Alkana, 2003, Gianos, 1998 and Gladstone-Sovell, 2006). However, critics of the series counter by arguing that Sorkin's depiction of presidential politics is paternalistic (Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles, 2002 and Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles, 2006), exceedingly liberal (Graber, 2009 and Podhoretz, 2003), inaccurate when compared to “real” Washington politics (Levine, 2003, Jones and Dionisopoulous, 2004 and Skewes, 2009), and too idealistic in its portrayal of the presidency (Holbert et al., 2005, Podhoretz, 2003 and Quiring, 2003).

Admittedly, research on using *The West Wing* for educational purposes is limited. However, scholars have argued that if teachers place the series into a proper context for students by clearly addressing the limitations of using a fictional portrayal of the presidency to learn about the federal government, then *The West Wing* offers a wealth of information that could be useful for furthering students' political understanding (Beavers, 2002 and Journell and Buchanan, 2012a). The first season alone addresses a range of topics, such as the legislative process, the Census, the death penalty, and Supreme Court nominations, that would fit within the curriculum of a traditional high school civics or government course (for more detail on the pedagogical potential of *The West Wing* in secondary classrooms, see Journell and Buchanan (2012a)).

Unfortunately, few examples of using *The West Wing* in classroom settings exist. Both Beavers (2002) and Holbert et al. (2003) have described successful use of the series at the undergraduate level, but the only other documented instance of using *The West Wing* among secondary students can be found in Gaudelli's (2009) study of students' responses to democratic visual texts. Gaudelli showed a single episode from the series and found that students appeared generally uninterested and confused as they viewed the episode, often appearing more concerned with trying to understand the characters' connections with each other rather than the civic issues being discussed. However, when Gaudelli interviewed the students after the episode, he found that they were able to identify basic civic themes and apply elements of the show to their prior knowledge of government and current events.

Data collection and analysis

Data were collected using a case study approach (Stake, 1995) in which we observed Mr. Monroe's honors-level and general-level civics classes over the course of a semester. Every Friday, starting with the first week of the semester, the first author observed Mr. Monroe showing a *West Wing* episode to both classes. During each episode students completed an advanced organizer (for an example, see Journell and Buchanan (2012a)) and then afterwards, Mr. Monroe led each class in a discussion about the episode. In total, 14 out of 22 episodes from the first season were shown over the course of the semester. The decisions of which episodes to show were made collaboratively between Mr. Monroe and the first author, and episodes were chosen based on their civic content as well as their ability to advance the plotline and further character development.

In addition to the Friday observations, one of the authors would observe both classes one to two additional times per week. The purpose of these observations was to see whether Mr. Monroe or his students applied civic information learned from *The West Wing* to other aspects of the formal curriculum. In total, we observed both of Mr. Monroe's classes 34 times over the course of the semester. During all classroom observations, both researchers kept detailed field notes that included both our observational data as well as our interpretations of classroom interactions. Both researchers also maintained regular communication with Mr. Monroe throughout the semester and even after the study had concluded as a way of member-checking our interpretations. Finally, due to IRB restrictions, classroom conversations were not recorded; however, both researchers kept detailed notes of class discussions and tried to transcribe as many verbatim quotations as possible, especially when certain words may have affected the meaning or tenor of what was being said. Therefore, the dialogues presented in this manuscript may not always contain exact quotations; however, they all reflect the spirit of the communication as it occurred in the classroom.

Additional data came from semi-structured interviews, student surveys, and artifact collection. We formally interviewed Mr. Monroe twice, once at the beginning of the study and again at the end. The first interview served to define Mr. Monroe's teaching philosophy and his plans for using *The West Wing*, and in the concluding interview, we asked him to reflect upon his use of the series over the course of the semester. Both interviews were audiorecorded and transcribed for accuracy.

Surveys were given to students at the beginning and end of the study. Both surveys contained Likert statements designed to assess their understanding of politics, and the post-survey asked students to respond to statements assessing their interest in *The West Wing*. The post-survey also required students to respond to three open-ended questions that asked them to list their favorite and least-favorite aspects of *The West Wing*, as well as what they had learned from watching the show. Finally, additional data came from various artifacts throughout the semester, such as the students' guided viewing activities, *West Wing*-themed projects, and short writing assignments.

All qualitative data (observations, interview responses, and open-ended survey questions) were analyzed using the procedures for case study analysis outlined by Stake (1995). We first identified items of interest within the data, which we then were able to separate into relevant themes. Specifically, we identified ways in which Mr. Monroe's use of *The West Wing* furthered his students' understanding of politics and the formal curriculum. We then looked for patterns within the data based on the themes we had established and triangulated among data sources whenever possible. Although the findings presented in this manuscript are specific to Mr. Monroe's classes, we believe that others wishing to use *The West Wing* in high school civics and government classrooms can take our findings and make naturalistic generalizations that would be applicable to other contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Findings

Throughout the semester, we regularly observed ways in which *The West Wing* seemed to accentuate Mr. Monroe's political instruction in both classes. Appendix A describes the topics found in each episode along with a brief explanation of how Mr. Monroe used the episode to further his students' knowledge of politics or current events. Due to the fast-paced nature of the show, however, the students in the honors-level class initially seemed to have an easier time following the dialogue and plotlines than their peers in the general-level class. However, after Mr. Monroe implemented several techniques designed to scaffold the viewing experience for the general-level class, the comprehension gap between the two classes began to narrow, and the majority of students in both classes seemed to be able to consistently grasp the major political themes discussed in each episode (for more information on this aspect of the study, refer to Journell and Buchanan (2012b)). Once this issue was addressed, we found that *The West Wing* seemed to offer the following pedagogical benefits in both classes: (a) generating enthusiasm for civics content, (b) fostering political thinking, (c) providing an authentic context for content, (d) allowing for connections to real-life political events, and (e) making connections across the formal curriculum. Below, we will discuss each of these findings in greater detail.

Generating enthusiasm for civics content

Throughout the semester, it was evident that nearly all of Mr. Monroe's students enjoyed watching *The West Wing* on Fridays, and it appeared as though students were able to make connections between the show and the formal civics curriculum. Table 1 shows the pre and post survey responses by class.

Table 1. Pre and post surveys by class.

Statement	Pre survey		Post survey	
	Honors	General	Honors	General
I consider politics important	3.78	3.33	4.14	3.57
	(0.73)	(0.91)	(0.80)	(1.01)
I pay attention to politics and current political events	2.60	2.09	3.21	2.73
	(0.95)	(0.62)	(0.91)	(0.56)
I consider myself knowledgeable about politics	2.42	1.80	3.46	2.26
	(0.69)	(0.81)	(0.96)	(0.87)

Statement	Pre survey		Post survey	
	Honors	General	Honors	General
I enjoy discussing politics with others	2.07	1.80	2.78	2.36
	(0.93)	(0.87)	(1.22)	(0.95)
I often talk about politics with my family and friends	1.92	1.80	2.57	2.31
	(0.85)	(0.74)	(1.13)	(1.20)
I enjoy discussing current political events in school	2.67	2.09	3.39	2.42
	(1.27)	(0.094)	(1.16)	(1.16)
I think following politics is important to being a good citizen	3.21	3.09	3.53	3.15
	(0.87)	(1.33)	(0.92)	(1.30)
I feel I have a pretty good understanding of how the White House operates	2.25	2.28	3.89	3.47
	(0.92)	(1.00)	(0.83)	(0.90)
I feel I have a pretty good understanding of the differences between Democrats and Republicans	3.10	2.95	4.28	4.21
	(1.16)	(1.35)	(0.76)	(0.78)
I feel I have a pretty good understanding of how the White House works with the other branches of government	2.39	2.42	4.03	3.42
	(1.03)	(1.07)	(0.83)	(0.83)
I feel I have a pretty good understanding of how the media influences the action of the President	3.21	2.76	4.42	3.73
	(0.95)	(1.30)	(0.63)	(0.87)
I feel I have a pretty good understanding of how foreign events influence the action of the President	3.60	2.80	4.28	3.52
	(1.06)	(1.20)	(0.65)	(0.69)
I feel I have a pretty good understanding of how	2.67	2.38	3.82	3.52

Statement	Pre survey		Post survey	
	Honors	General	Honors	General
the President makes policy decisions	(1.05)	(0.92)	(0.86)	(0.90)
I enjoyed watching *The West Wing* this semester	N/A	N/A	4.89	4.78
			(0.31)	(0.71)
I feel I learned a lot about politics from watching *The West Wing* this semester	N/A	N/A	4.71	4.36
			(0.46)	(0.83)
I would recommend future civics classes watch *The West Wing*	N/A	N/A	4.92	4.73
			(0.26)	(0.73)
Watching *The West Wing* has made me appreciate politics	N/A	N/A	4.57	3.63
			(0.57)	(1.01)
Watching *The West Wing* has made me want to follow politics more closely	N/A	N/A	3.92	2.94
			(0.89)	(1.12)

Note: For each statement, the mean response is given with the standard deviation in parentheses.

The scores for each of the items assessed on the pre-survey increased on the post-survey in both classes. Of course, those changes could be attributed to a variety of factors, so it is impossible to make any explicit link between Mr. Monroe's use of *The West Wing* and students' increased enthusiasm toward to politics. However, when asked specifically about *The West Wing*, students in both classes reported enjoying the show, and more importantly, they also indicated that the show made them both more knowledgeable and appreciative of the political process. These responses also reinforced many of our observations over the course of the semester. Almost every week, we observed students remarking about how much they enjoyed the show and how they were excited to see that week's episode. Despite this enthusiasm, however, it is worth noting that when asked whether watching *The West Wing* made students more likely to follow politics more closely, the responses were not as strong in either class.

These Likert results were supported by the students' responses to the open-ended questions, which were also overwhelmingly positive. None of the students reported disliking *The*

West Wing, and it was clear from the comments in both classes that the students found the show to be both informative and entertaining. In addition to superficial comments about favorite characters or plotlines, several students responded that they found watching *The West Wing* to be an enjoyable way to learn. As one student noted, the show was "entertaining while educational." Another student commented that "it really did allow you to see how the White House works. The storyline was interesting, the characters were funny and dramatic. It was very entertaining and attention-grabbing. I looked forward to it every week." Similarly, another student stated, "It was a fun way to end the week, and I still learned a lot about politics and policy making." Finally, one of the more interesting comments came from a student who compared *The West Wing* to other types of educational film he was accustomed to watching at school when he described the show as "dramatic and an actual show, not like a PBS educational thing." The vast majority of students could not think of anything negative to say about the show, and of the handful that did, all of their comments focused on the pace of the dialogue and plotlines, such as the student who noted that "people talk too fast, making it very easy to miss some of the things they said. And once you miss something they said you can lose track of what is happening in the episode."

Mr. Monroe recognized the popularity of the show among his students and considered it integral to the success of his classroom instruction that semester. When we interviewed him at the end of the study, he stated that

> I think [using *The West Wing*] went very well… I know that they really enjoyed it. I know it's something they looked forward to. They told me they looked forward to it. I could tell they were excited on Friday when they came in here… I think it was a successful experiment.

In previous semesters, Mr. Monroe had used clips from *The West Wing* that he had found on YouTube, but he said that teaching only with clips had not generated the same type of excitement among his students as he had observed throughout the course of our study. He attributed this difference to the character development that occurred from being able to show full episodes on a regular basis. As he stated,

> In the past, I had shown clips. And I would say that showing full episodes is more helpful. I think it's hard for a kid to see a clip with characters they don't know. "Who are they?" "Who the hell is Sam?"… And the next thing you know, the clip is over, and they don't know what happened… [I can tell them that] this is a perfect scene of this. "That's the President. That's the Chief of Staff. There's the—you know, the Supreme Court nominee. Here it is." But they don't know any of that and I think it's probably very hard for them to, even with me telling them that, it's hard for them to hear it, get it, and then understand what is happening in front of them.

Of course, Mr. Monroe's primary objective in showing *The West Wing* was to improve his students' knowledge of politics, and according to him, the show accomplished that goal. When

asked what he felt his students gained from watching *The West Wing*, Mr. Monroe responded by saying,

> I think that this group—and I mean both the honors and regular class—has a better understanding of what really happens in Washington with policy and lawmaking. You know, how the branches work together, what is considered when all this stuff is happening. And we were able to tie a lot of current stuff, a lot of current events, in as we were watching the episodes. So, I think that this group, you know, sort of "gets it" more than other groups have… I think that, if you ask them, "tell me about the White House" or "tell me how a bill gets turned into law," they are going to give you a much more detailed and realistic response than in years past where they are just going to say, "Step one is a senator or a representative introduces the bill on the floor"… I think now they are going to sort of understand what really happens, and I think that they will have a better understanding and a higher interest in politics because of it as well.

Throughout the semester, our observations suggest that Mr. Monroe's interpretations of his students' political understanding as a result of *The West Wing* were accurate. The rest of this section will focus on how Mr. Monroe used the show to foster political thinking and provide an authentic context for understanding politics and current political events.

Thinking politically

Part of the pedagogical potential of *The West Wing* is that viewers are privy to the decision-making behind the Bartlet administration's attempts at controlling public policy and the media's portrayal of the White House. Oftentimes, these decisions have as much to do with political strategy as they do with ideology. For example, in the episode, "Take This Sabbath Day," Joey Lucas, a campaign manager for a Democratic Congressional candidate who is running against a long-standing Republican incumbent, has an appointment with a member of Bartlet's senior staff to discuss increasing funding for her candidate's campaign. However, the White House dismisses Lucas' request because they actually prefer having the Republican in office because his inflammatory, right-wing rhetoric can be used to generate fundraising for higher-profile Democratic candidates. After the episode was over, Mr. Monroe had the following conversation with his honors-level class:

> *Mr. Monroe:* I want to briefly talk about Joey Lucas. Who is she?
>
> *Jim:* She is a campaign manager for someone trying to get elected to Congress.
>
> *Mr. Monroe:* Why did she come to the White House?
>
> *Mandy:* They cut her funds.
>
> *Mr. Monroe:* Right. Why did the DNC, which stands for the Democratic National Committee, cut her funds? Why would they want to do that?

Denise: Because she was doing too well.

Mr. Monroe: Why would the White House not want her to do well? She is representing a Democrat.

Reggie: The devil you know is better than the devil you don't [quoting President Bartlet from the episode]

Mr. Monroe: That is what Bartlet says in the episode. But wouldn't you want the Democrat to win?

Tom: Both candidates were not good. One just wants to be in Congress and the other just raises money.

Mr. Monroe: Why is that Republican candidate able to raise them money? They describe him as someone on the radical right.

Mandy: It makes them look better.

Mr. Monroe: Right. What does the DNC do every time he says something about immigration?

Reggie: They call him out on it.

Mr. Monroe: Yeah, he is such a bad Republican that it makes the Democrats look good. They said they put out a pamphlet and it lets the Democrats raise a lot of money.

As this conversation shows, students were able to take information from the show to understand why a strategy that initially seems counterproductive would actually benefit a political party.

Another example of this type of political thinking can be found in the episode, “The Short List,” which focuses on the nomination of a Supreme Court Justice. In a scene at the beginning of the episode, Bartlet meets with the retiring justice, who tells the President that he had waited until a Democrat was in the Oval Office before deciding to retire. After the episode, Mr. Monroe had the following discussion with his general-level class:

Mr. Monroe: Why would [the retiring justice] wait until a Democrat is in office to retire?

Ralph: He is a Democrat.

Mr. Monroe: We don't usually describe justices as Democrat or Republican, but we can probably assume he is a liberal. Why would he want a Democratic president?

Ralph: He is more likely to pick a Democrat.

Mr. Monroe: Right. If he had retired under a Republican, who would he have picked?

Several students: A Republican.

Mr. Monroe: So, let's go back to the original question. Why did a justice retire right after Obama got in office?

Several students: So he could pick a Democrat.

Again, Mr. Monroe was able to walk his students through a common political strategy among retiring Supreme Court Justices, and he was even able to relate what happened in the show to the real-life retirement of Justice David Souter, which was announced soon after President Obama took office.

A third example took place after the episode, “Enemies,” in which the Bartlet administration is struggling with how to handle the inclusion of a Republican-backed rider bill on banking legislation supported by the administration. The rider bill was sponsored by two representatives from Montana and called for an increase of strip mining in that state, which would infuriate the environmental lobby. The response to the rider bill is mixed among Bartlet's senior staff; Deputy Chief of Staff Josh Lyman wants the President to veto the banking bill to avoid angering the environmental lobby, but Deputy Communications Director Sam Seaborn argues that the banking bill is too important and urges the President to sign the legislation despite the inclusion of the rider bill.

When Mr. Monroe showed this episode, he had just started the part of the formal curriculum that focused on the legislative process; therefore, most of his students were probably not familiar with rider bills. Prior to starting the episode, Mr. Monroe told his classes that the show was going to cover something that they had not yet talked about in class, but that he wanted them to use context clues to better understand for what rider bills are commonly used. Then, after the episode, Mr. Monroe had the following discussion with his classes (this conversation is from the honors-class):

Mr. Monroe: What is the main bill they are trying to get passed?

Several students: Banking bill.

Mr. Monroe: What has happened that has caused a problem?

Salma: They attached a land use rider.

Mr. Monroe: What do you think a rider is?

Dean: Something added to it.

Mr. Monroe: Right. It is an addition, a change to a bill. Why do they want to add the rider?

Several students: For strip mining.

Mr. Monroe: Where in the legislative process can congressmen make these additions to a bill?

Julie: Step three.

Mr. Monroe: Which is?

Julie: When it is in committee.

Dean: It doesn't make sense to me. Why is a land bill added to a banking bill?

Mr. Monroe: Great question. I am glad you brought that up. Why do you think?

Amelia: They said it was retribution.

Mr. Monroe: Right. These were Republicans angry that Bartlet won the presidential election. What else?

Jim: It makes them look good.

Mr. Monroe: Right. These guys are from Montana, so this legislation could be considered what?

Several students: Porkbarrel.

Mr. Monroe then explained how the minority party in Congress will often attach a rider bill to a popular piece of legislation because it would not be passed otherwise. The discussion then moved to Bartlet's decision about whether to veto the banking bill because of the rider:

Mr. Monroe: Why do you think Sam says to sign the bill?

Dean: To stay on their good side.

Mr. Monroe: Not necessarily.

Julie: He is saying [Montana] is only worth three [electoral] votes.

Mr. Monroe: So, why does Josh want to veto?

Amelia: He wants to show Broderick and Eaton [the Montana representatives] that they aren't going to be pushed around.

Again, this scene from *The West Wing* provided students with considerably more depth in terms of political decision-making than they would typically find in a textbook. What seems like a fairly straightforward process—presidents sign bills with which they agree and veto ones they

oppose—becomes considerably more complicated when students are given an actual example and allowed to see the grey areas that influence the eventual outcome. According to Mr. Monroe, he believed that being able to engage in this type of political thinking provided his students with a more realistic understanding of politics and policymaking. As he told us in our final interview,

I think that when [his students] listen to a news broadcast in the future and if they are talking about a bill, I think they are going to look back and remember Toby and Josh talking to guys in a small room, and that is the type of stuff that kids don't normally get [in the traditional civics curriculum].

In addition, many of the comments made by students on the survey given at the end of the study indirectly described aspects of political thinking. When asked what they learned about politics from watching *The West Wing*, a majority of students referenced some aspect of the influence of the media and public opinion on the president's political decision-making. As one student wrote, "*The West Wing* made it really easy to understand what goes on in the White House and how the media and government are all inter-connected." Another student stated that the show taught her that a major focus of any presidential administration was "making the White House and staff look good," while another student took a more cynical view, stating that "reelection is always kept in mind when any politician makes a decision." In other words, it appears as though one aspect of *The West Wing* that seemed to resonate with students was that, as one student wrote, "politics requires lots of strategy."

Providing an authentic context for content

In addition to providing a forum from which students could practice thinking politically, these real-life scenarios portrayed by *The West Wing* also allowed Mr. Monroe to place much of his formal curriculum into an authentic context for his students. The first season of *The West Wing* is filled with examples that teachers can use to better explain aspects of the formal curriculum. However, for the sake of brevity, we are only going to focus on the pedagogical aspects of one episode, "Mr. Willis From Ohio" (for additional examples, refer to Journell & Buchanan, 2012a).

This episode is representative of most *West Wing* episodes in that it contains multiple plotlines that often intersect. In this episode, the administration is pushing for passage of an appropriations bill, but they oppose a Republican-led amendment calling for a ban on sampling as a way of determining the decennial Census. At the same time, the White House has learned that they have a budget surplus based on the previous fiscal year, which leads to several discussions among the main characters about what the government should do with the extra money.

Mr. Monroe was able to use all of these topics to further his students' understandings of the federal budget and government spending, as well as the politics behind both of those issues. For example, after the characters had discussed the amount of porkbarrel legislation that had made its way into the appropriations bill, such as money to build a device that would detect ash from

Alaskan volcanoes and money to beautify sections of the Appalachian Trail, Mr. Monroe had the following conversation with his general-level class:

> *Mr. Monroe:* Let's talk about that appropriations bill. What were the things they were going to spend money on?
>
> *Andrew:* Railroads and transportation.
>
> *Paula:* Education.
>
> *Mr. Monroe:* No, that is what Toby says the administration gets out of it.
>
> *Brittany:* Random constructions.
>
> *Mr. Monroe:* Right. All of these small side projects [he then lists several that were mentioned in the episode]. Why are they doing all of this? Who does it benefit?
>
> *Ralph:* Hikers [referring to the renovations to the Appalachian Trail].
>
> *Mr. Monroe:* Yeah, but how will they improve the trail? Who is going to do all of that work? It is going to create what?
>
> *Andrew:* Jobs.
>
> *Mr. Monroe:* Right. These things always benefit somebody, so why are they doing it? Why are these congressmen trying to get all of this money?
>
> *Andrew:* They are trying to get reelected and they want to show how they got their state this money.
>
> *Mr. Monroe:* Exactly. This is often called pork, where congressmen get money for projects in their states or districts. Congressmen want to get this porkbarrel money because it looks good.

The appropriations bill also contains the sampling amendment, which leads to several conversations about the Census between two of the main characters, Sam Seaborn, the Deputy Communications Director, and CJ Cregg, the White House Press Secretary. In the episode, CJ finds that her knowledge of the Census is lacking, so she comes to Sam for help. Over lunch, Sam educates CJ on the nuances of the Census, explaining that

> Because representation at the various levels of the government—federal, state, and municipal, is based on population. The only way to find out how many congressmen California gets is to count the people in California… The decennial census has always been done by a door-to-door headcount. Some 950,000 professionals are hired. The process costs approximately 6.9 billion dollars. The process is also very inaccurate. It

> tends to be significantly disadvantageous to inner city populations, recent immigrant populations, and, of course, the homeless.[4]

After the conclusion of the episode, Mr. Monroe was able to refer to Sam's description of the Census and relate it back to the Great Compromise of the Constitutional Convention, which his classes had covered at the beginning of the semester, and then engage both classes in discussions about the accuracy and expense of the real Census, which coincidentally, had occurred earlier that year.

> The final subplot of the episode involved the government's response to the budget surplus. In the episode, this issue is presented primarily through several discussions between Deputy Chief of Staff, Josh Lyman, and his administrative assistant, Donna Moss. Below is a transcript of their conversations from that episode:
>
> *Donna:* We have a 32 billion dollar budget surplus for the first time in three decades?
>
> *Josh:* Yes.
>
> *Donna:* The Republicans in Congress want to use this money for tax relief, right?
>
> *Josh:* Yes.
>
> *Donna:* Essentially what they are saying is that they want to give back the money?
>
> *Josh:* Yes.
>
> *Donna:* Why don't we want to give back the money?
>
> *Josh:* Because we are Democrats.
>
> *Donna:* But it's not the government's money.
>
> *Josh:* Sure it is. It's right there in our bank account.
>
> *Donna:* But that is only because we collected more than we ended up needing.
>
> *Josh:* Isn't it great?
>
> *Donna:* I want my money back!
>
> *Josh:* Sorry.

At this point, Mr. Monroe stopped the DVD in his general-level class and stated,

> The last thing I want to talk about is the budget surplus. Donna says the Republicans want to use it for tax relief and she asks Josh, “why don't we?” and he says “because we are Democrats”. Traditionally, Republicans want lower taxes and less spending and

Democrats want higher taxes and more spending. That isn't always true, but it is an easy way of explaining the differences.

Mr. Monroe then continued with the episode; however, Josh and Donna would continue their conversation about the budget surplus in a later scene:

Donna: What's wrong with me getting my money back?

Josh: You won't spend it right.

Donna: What do you mean?

Josh: Let's say your cut of the surplus is 700 dollars. I want to take your money and combine it with everybody else's money and use it to pay down the debt and further endow social security. What do you want to do with it?

Donna: Buy a DVD player.

Josh: See?

Donna: But my 700 dollars is helping employ the people who manufacture and sell DVD players, not to mention the people who manufacture and sell DVDs. It is the natural evolution of a market economy.

Josh: The problem is the DVD player you buy might be made in Japan.

Donna: I'll buy an American one.

Josh: We don’t trust you.

Donna: Why not?

Josh: We're Democrats.

After the episode had concluded, Mr. Monroe used the conversation between Josh and Donna to reinforce his previous definition of the monetary policy differences between Democrats and Republicans:

Mr. Monroe: I want to talk about Josh and Donna's conversation.

Brittany: Why do the Democrats want to keep the surplus?

Claire: They want to pay off the debt.

Mr. Monroe: And I think he said something about paying off social security.

> *Andrew:* She said something about buying a DVD player in Japan. [Andrew then proceeds to recap Donna and Josh's conversation with a little help from Mr. Monroe]
>
> *Mr. Monroe:* Right. Donna represents the Republican mindset and Josh says no. He kind of represents the Democratic mindset.

Again, these vignettes are from one episode and only constitute a fraction of the content applications afforded by *The West Wing*. In their survey responses, students in both classes listed an array of topics of which they felt they had gained better knowledge from watching *The West Wing*, ranging from general topics, such as foreign policy and the ideological differences between Democrats and Republicans, to specific issues, such as the death penalty and banking reform. As one student wrote, “the real life situations helped me comprehend the information better than just taking notes or listening to a lecture.”

Perhaps more importantly, it seems as though Mr. Monroe believed that his students were able to retain this information and apply it to other contexts. When we interviewed Mr. Monroe at the end of the study, he told us that earlier that morning, “I gave them John McCain's speech from December 14th when he was complaining about all the earmarks in the big spending bill. [The students] start reading this and they are like, “Volcano monitor!” He continued by saying, “I think there is a lot of stuff that, when their memory is jogged, it is going to come back.”

Connecting to real-life current events

Throughout the semester, Mr. Monroe would occasionally relate the *West Wing* plotlines to current events and aspects of the Obama administration. For example, after watching the episode in which Bartlet nominated a Supreme Court Justice, Mr. Monroe had students in both classes read a short news article about the confirmation of Justice Elena Kagan, which had occurred a few weeks before school had started. In the episode, Bartlet had considered nominating a moderate justice who would have received 90 votes in the Senate, which his staff felt would have led to a bump in the President's approval ratings. Therefore, when Mr. Monroe gave his students the article and told them to underline items they thought were important, it is not surprising that one of his students quickly said, “She was confirmed with a 63-37 vote.” Mr. Monroe then had his students dig a little deeper, noting that only five Republicans voted for Kagan, as opposed to all but one Democrat. When Mr. Monroe then asked what that information suggested about Kagan, Ralph was quick to respond, “She is fairly liberal.”

Other examples of relating *The West Wing* to current political events were not as structured and often occurred as side comments during the discussion of an episode. For example, the episode in which Bartlet delivers the State of the Union shows Communications Director Toby Ziegler discussing parts of the speech with Democratic congressmen who are concerned that sections of the speech could hurt their reelection chances. Mr. Monroe was able to relate that scene to the 2010 midterm elections in which several Democratic congressional candidates from moderate districts made negative comments about President Obama in order to distance themselves from

an unpopular administration. Similarly, Mr. Monroe was able to use the friction between Bartlet and his vice president to discuss how Vice President Biden had originally opposed Obama in the 2008 Democratic primary but that oftentimes presidential tickets are based on electability rather than on the candidates' ideological similarities or ability to work together.

Using the episodes as a springboard to discussions of real-life current events was not as much of a priority for Mr. Monroe as using the show to bolster his students' knowledge of the formal curriculum, which he admitted in our final interview. However, comparisons between the Bartlet and Obama administrations were always implicit even if they were not being made directly by Mr. Monroe. Many of the students made comments on their surveys about their newfound appreciation for the presidency after watching the show and realizing that “people working in the White House barely have a life, let alone sleep.” Similarly, many of the students wrote that they were surprised to find that the president has multiple advisors who help him make decisions. As one student wrote, “I didn't know that there were so many people doing everything they do.” Again, although this transfer from a cinematic portrayal of the presidency to real-life was rarely stated explicitly, it seems as though students were able to make the connection between the chaos depicted in *The West Wing* to the ever-present demands placed on those who work in the White House. As one student wrote on his survey, the show gave him “new respect for the Obama administration, all previous administrations, and administrations to come.”

Making Connections across the formal curriculum

One of Mr. Monroe's goals for the semester was to use *The West Wing* as a way to make connections across the formal curriculum, even on days in which he was not showing an episode. For example, when he started the section of the formal curriculum about the various types of legislation created by Congress, Mr. Monroe supplemented his lecture by going back and reminding his students about the appropriations bill from the “Mr. Willis From Ohio: episode. Similarly, when he covered Supreme Court nominations during his Judicial Branch unit, Mr. Monroe intentionally referred back to “The Short List” episode and the vetting process undertaken by members of Bartlet's staff of the potential nominees to fill the vacancy on the Court.

Another way in which Mr. Monroe incorporated *The West Wing* into his daily instruction was through individual and collaborative projects. Early on in the semester, Mr. Monroe had discussed the idea of a candidate's political platform; however, simply describing it as a set of ideological positions came across as fairly abstract to many of his students. Therefore, about midway through the semester, Mr. Monroe drew a graphic organizer on his whiteboard entitled “Bartlet's Platform,” and both classes would add to it as Bartlet's ideological positions on issues were revealed on the show. By the end of the semester, items such as “family oriented,” “gun control,” and “pro-choice” had made it onto Bartlet's platform, providing a stronger context from which students could understand a politician's set of core beliefs.

Other projects involved creating *West Wing*-themed campaign posters and propaganda advertisements. Research has shown that without providing students with realistic examples, such activities often become too abstract for students to place them into a proper context (Journell, 2009). However, Mr. Monroe avoided this problem by having students create campaign materials that either supported or opposed Bartlet's reelection. For example, when students created their propaganda advertisements, Mr. Monroe gave them mini-camcorders and told them to film a short commercial using a specific propaganda technique. To make the advertisements more authentic, he also required that students use information about Bartlet's platform that they had acquired from watching the show up to that point in the semester. Although the cinematic quality of the students' advertisements varied considerably, it was clear that his students understood the different propaganda techniques and were able to use them appropriately.

Overall, Mr. Monroe found that his students in both classes came to the majority of their units with considerably more prior knowledge than students in years past, a finding that he attributed to *The West Wing*. As he told us in our final interview,

> All the little minor things that happen before policy becomes policy, you know, I think they really sort of get that. I remember specifically, when we got to the legislative branch, just in class when we were rolling through the curriculum. Usually, when we start a unit, I do some sort of brainstorming, seeing what they know and what we need to go over, and they knew almost everything. And all of it was really because of *The West Wing* because they saw the Senate and the House of Representatives. They knew about lobbyists. They knew about what these Representatives and Senators are considering when they vote on a bill because I think it was the second episode that goes into that… I mean they had a lot more prior understanding when we got to a lot of the sections. So much so that I probably wasn't—you know, more than I was expecting.

A few of the students also made comments on their post-surveys that suggested *The West Wing* helped them better understand elements of the formal curriculum. As one student wrote, “I like how every time in civics we would talk about a subject and when watching *The West Wing* it would either be about that subject or talk about that subject.” Another student stated that “[the show] made many things discussed in class clear. They were clear because I was able to watch [Bartlet] put them into action.”

Limitations of Mr. Monroe's use of *The West Wing*

Although we would argue that the pedagogical experience afforded by Mr. Monroe's use of *The West Wing* was generally positive, a couple of limitations also need to be addressed. From a pedagogical standpoint, perhaps the most glaring is that Mr. Monroe rarely framed the show as a type of visual text that needed to be critically analyzed. Only once did we observe him ask his students to evaluate the show beyond face value, which occurred in his honors-level class after

the “Take This Sabbath Day” episode on the death penalty. Several students commented that the show's take on the death penalty made them change their personal feelings on the issue, which prompted Mr. Monroe to question whether a television show should sway individuals' political views:

> *Mr. Monroe:* So, some people in here were swayed by the show. Should we be swayed by a TV show?
>
> *Dean:* Maybe. It was awarded best drama.
>
> *Mr. Monroe:* Well, not just this show—any show. Should it sway our opinions? One of the criticisms of *The West Wing* is that it has a liberal sway. Sometimes people jokingly refer to it as “The Left Wing.” When is it ok? What about the news?
>
> *Rick:* It educates you.
>
> *Amelia:* But it's biased.

The conversation waned soon thereafter and Mr. Monroe moved on to other topics. Yet, it was clear that many of his students were conflicted about whether a television show or a news program should change one's opinion about a political issue. Unfortunately, this was the only time we observed this type of critical discussion about *The West Wing'*s liberal bias throughout the duration of the study. Given that Mr. Monroe seemed aware of other aspects of active film use, we are inclined to believe that his failure to have his students analyze *The West Wing* as a form of media was less of an oversight than it was a lack of familiarity with the processes of critically analyzing visual texts. Therefore, the findings from this study support those who argue for increased training of pre-service and practicing teachers in reading and comprehending visual and multimedia texts (e.g., Serafini, 2011 and Werner, 2002).

Mr. Monroe found that another limitation to his use of *The West Wing* was the time it took to view, process, and discuss each weekly episode. Although each episode only runs about 40 min long, the scaffolding required for student comprehension of the dialogue and plotlines often made each episode last over an hour (Journell & Buchanan, 2012b). Then, the post-episode discussion would typically take the rest of the 90-min period. Given that civics was subject to an end-of-course state assessment, devoting a full class period every week to *The West Wing* posed a challenge to Mr. Monroe's instructional planning. As he told us in our final interview,

> It took 90 minutes to show a 42-minute episode. I would have never thought that. But it really did. And when we tried to show it the first time, I remember we just showed it all the way through and they were frustrated. They had tons of questions. I think it still ended up taking almost 90 minutes, but I think breaking it down was the right thing to do, but just the time of it was tough. I mean, I cut out a lot of my favorite activities…So, I had to cut a lot of stuff that I love to do. I felt like, at some times, I sort of felt like I was

> rushing. But again, that is sort of what I was talking about earlier. I think, you know, that is my fault. I think I could have done a better job of planning. But, you know, it's hard to fit seventeen extra days in.

Despite these challenges, Mr. Monroe was adamant that he would use *The West Wing* again in future semesters. He did concede, however, that he probably would be more selective in the number of episodes he showed over the course of the semester and would use more clips once his students had become acquainted with the primary characters.

Discussion

The findings from this study offer several implications for both the teaching of politics in secondary education as well as the use of film in secondary social studies courses. For many Americans, politics is the definition of abstract and irrelevant, and one can only imagine that those feelings are amplified for teenagers who are not yet old enough to vote. However, it quickly became evident that *The West Wing* made learning about politics enjoyable for Mr. Monroe's students. Given the overwhelmingly positive feedback about the show by the students in both classes as well as our observations of the fairly substantive discussions that occurred on a weekly basis about the political issues that surfaced in each episode, these findings have made us question whether traditional methods of teaching politics in high school civics and government classes has contributed to the disinterest many students seem to have toward politics and political issues.

Of course, cynics might dismiss the students' enthusiasm as nothing more than fondness for watching a television program as opposed to doing “real” work, such as taking notes or answering questions from the textbook. We do not completely disagree. We would argue, however, that part of successful teaching is finding creative ways to engage students with one's content, and we feel that Mr. Monroe was able to do that through *The West Wing*. What moved Mr. Monroe's use of *The West Wing* from purely a source of entertainment to a critical instructional activity was the way in which he used the film. He did not just show episodes to kill time or as merely a supplement to his instruction; rather, he used many of the strategies required for making film viewing an active process for students (Marcus et al., 2010 and Russell, 2012a). Everything from the guided viewing activities, to the post-episode discussions, to incorporating *West Wing* content into aspects of the formal curriculum, all helped make Mr. Monroe's use of *The West Wing* both entertaining and productive.

Unfortunately, watching films is still viewed as a passive instructional activity in many educational circles, in part, because many teachers use film incorrectly (Hobbs, 2006). Mr. Monroe even confessed to us that several of his colleagues “rolled their eyes” and called him “crazy” when he told them what he was doing with *The West Wing* in his classes. Sadly, research has shown that the demands of high-stakes testing often cause teachers to avoid taking risks that deviate from traditional approaches to teaching the standard curriculum (e.g., Gerwin and

Visone, 2006 and Journell, 2010b), and we feel that this mindset played a part in Mr. Monroe's reluctance to show as many episodes of *The West Wing* in future semesters. We find it telling that Mr. Monroe enthusiastically believed that, because of *The West Wing*, his students were better prepared to understand the formal curriculum than students in years past, yet he felt that he would need to scale back his use of the show in the future to ensure he was able to teach everything that could be asked on the end-of-course state assessment.

Although we empathize with Mr. Monroe's position, we do not necessarily agree that showing fewer episodes would improve his students' knowledge of politics or their performance on the state assessment. Certainly, devoting over 10 days to one type of instructional activity in a semester-long, block schedule will force teachers to plan differently, but if the instructional activity on those days better prepares students to learn the "traditional" material being taught on the other four days of the week, then would teachers not be better off incorporating both types of lessons on a regular basis? Scholars who study teaching within high-stakes testing environments argue that assessments may force teachers to align their content to that which is required by the state but that testing does not necessarily have to stifle ambitious or creative instruction (e.g., Grant, 2001 and Gradwell, 2006). Mr. Monroe took a risk in showing *The West Wing* on a weekly basis, but he was rewarded when students in both classes seemed more engaged and knowledgeable about elements of the formal curriculum than students in prior semesters.

Therefore, we would argue that a salient implication of this study is that a sustained use of film can be an effective instructional activity in secondary social studies classrooms. Most of the literature on film in social studies education describes best practices on how to use film in the classroom or analyzes the pedagogical potential of individual films. Obviously, the fact that *The West Wing* is a television program aids its ability to be shown on a regular basis; however, the same basic educational benefits of sustained film use that occurred in this study can be transferred to other subjects, such as U.S. History, in which there are a plethora of available films from which to choose.

Finally, Mr. Monroe also believed that his students' political knowledge became deeper because of *The West Wing*. Based on our findings, especially the students' survey responses, it appears that being able to "see" what they were learning in class being applied on film provided an authentic context from which they could better understand both the formal curriculum and real-life political events. As a result, Mr. Monroe was able to move his instruction in both classes beyond fact acquisition to being able to discuss complex political issues. By the end of the semester, Mr. Monroe had his students to the point where they were regularly engaging in aspects of political thinking. Students were able to take political decisions, both those made by characters in *The West Wing* as well as those made in real-life, and critically analyze *why*, from a political standpoint, those decisions were made. As Mr. Monroe noted in his final interview, being able to engage in that type of skill will be far more valuable to his students later in life than most of what he was required to cover for the end-of-course state assessment.

Conclusion

Obviously, this study only represents one case of a teacher using film to teach politics. Yet, Mr. Monroe's use of *The West Wing* provides a much needed example of the possibilities afforded by film in high school civics and government courses. This study only speaks to the viability of *The West Wing* as an instructional tool; however, there are a wide variety of films that portray the American presidency (Rollins & O'Connor, 2003a), all of which could be used as a springboard to discussions of politics and current events. The findings from this study suggest that film can be used to increase students' political knowledge and contribute to their understanding of the formal curriculum, but only if teachers make film viewing an active process and make efforts to scaffold the film when necessary. Given that this study is one of the few to critically analyze film use in this particular content area, more research is needed. However, it seems clear that many of the pedagogical benefits associated with using film in history classes can be transferred to other areas of the social studies curriculum.

Appendix A.

Table A1. List of episodes used throughout the semester.

Episode	Topics discussed in episode	Instructional goals of episode
"Pilot"	Media influence on White House	Character development; Showing examples of how media influences political decision-making
"Post Hoc, Ergo Propter Hoc"	Media influence on White House	Character development; Explaining the roles/importance of White House staff; Relating to real White House staff
"A Proportional Response"	Foreign policy; Responses to terrorism	Clarify role of President as commander-in-chief; relating to response of U.S. Government after 9/11
"Five Votes Down"	The legislative process; The "politics" involved in securing votes	Used as companion to prior classroom instruction on the legislative process; Explain the merging of the executive and legislative branches in practice
"Take this Sabbath Day"[a]	The death penalty	Used as companion to prior student research on death penalty and as preface to classroom debate on the issue

Episode	Topics discussed in episode	Instructional goals of episode
“Mr. Willis From Ohio”	Appropriation bills; federal budget; the Census	Relating to the 2010 Census; Relate to “earmark” legislation debates that occurred in 2008 Election; Relate to “big government” versus “small government” issues
“The State Dinner”	Foreign policy	Determining Bartlet’s political platform (and adding “planks” to visual representation); Discussing role of First Lady and comparing to Michelle Obama
“Enemies”	Political influence on legislation; The Cabinet	Discussions of porkbarrel legislation/earmarks; Relating to current legislation being passed in Congress
“The Short List”	Nomination of Supreme Court Justices	Used as companion to Judicial Branch unit to show politics behind nominations
“Lord John Marbury”	Foreign policy; India and Pakistan conflict	Discussion of role of U.S. as world leader; Role of U.S. in past and current world conflicts
“He Shall, From Time to Time”	Foreign policy; India and Pakistan conflict; State of the Union	Role of White House speechwriters; Compared to Obama’s State of the Union
“Six Meetings Before Lunch”	Confirmation of Supreme Court Justices; School vouchers	Analysis of confirmation process; Relating to Elena Kagan’s confirmation
“Let Bartlet Be Bartlet”	Campaign finance; “Soft money” versus “hard money”	Used as companion to election unit; debate over money as free speech
“Lies, Damn Lies, and Statistics”	Polling data; Campaign finance	The importance of polling data; Accuracy of polling; Analysis of Obama approval ratings

[a] This episode was intentionally shown out of sequence in order to coincide with death penalty discussion.

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