The Use of Student Learning Styles in Teaching World Politics

Don L. Mansfield and Patricia Murrell

ABSTRACT: This article describes how "experiential learning theory" can be utilized to teach introductory world politics. Student learning styles and their modes of learning are considered in course design. The objective is to create a learning environment that facilitates active participation and reflection.

Introduction

Most political scientists would probably agree that introductory courses in politics are generally ill designed to develop analytic skills or encourage curiosity. As James Rosenau points out in The Dramas of Political Life, the lecture method predominates and the classes are too large for the professor "to promote the intellectual exchanges through which reflection can be appreciated and analysis experienced." For their part, the students do not find that the structure of the course makes them actively curious about the subject matter. They see little need to reflect on what they hear because the course format may demand little more than having the "facts" be reiterated coherently. Another reason for passivity in an introductory political science class is that students actually doubt they are capable of moving beyond the facts and speculating about problem issues. They are uncomfortable with a discipline which emphasizes probabilities rather than certainties. They assume that the professor has all the insights and their own views are irrelevant to understanding political phenomenon.

Rosenau (1980), among others, is convinced that the student must play an active rather than a passive role in such a course if learning is
to take place. It is true, he says, that passive students can learn “facts” and do well in the course. Rosenau continues, “this does not mean that their mental capacities will have been stretched . . . that the basis of enduring comprehension of politics will have been laid.”

How might politics be made to come alive in such a course? How might the course be structured to facilitate student reflection and analysis? Northern Arizona University uses the “experiential learning theory,” as developed by David Kolb (1984), in an introductory world politics course to create a learning environment that facilitates active participation and reflection. Ensuring that students deal with course content through the learning modes described by Kolb increases their ability to master the information presented and to develop skills in processing and applying that information.

Experiential Learning Theory

Kolb (1984) describes learning as made up of two dimensions, prehending (taking in information) and transforming (processing that