Finding new, innovative and engaging ways to teach an introductory course can be challenging. The introductory course is the one course which many professors have taught the most, and it is likely one that many of us feel we can teach "with our eyes blindfolded." Lectures have been fine-tuned over the years and a certain level of comfort comes with that long experience. But many educators have come to appreciate that our students are changing (they have been for many years now) and that what once might have worked, is not necessarily still working. The evidence demonstrating wide ranging learning styles among our students is not new, and active learning is increasingly embraced as a way to better engage students with the course material.[1] At the same time the technologies available for use in the classroom continue to proliferate. There is great potential to create courses that incorporate active learning and new technologies with the potential of reaching more students and instilling in them a greater understanding of how geography affects vote choice, while simultaneously creating a more diverse classroom. Students who encounter diversity in the curricular activities have demonstrated higher levels of civic engagement.[2]

This paper shares a project developed by two professors in different regions of the country, designed to incorporate an experiential component into the course and link the two classrooms via internet technology. The goal was to teach students about exit polling and then use the results to demonstrate the various factors that affect vote choice. By linking two classrooms in different regions of the country, diversity of viewpoint and experience in the classroom was expanded and students had very different data to examine and learn about political behavior than they would have if they had only been located in one area of the country. Both of these goals were achieved, and students were left with a better understanding of how

important the influence of geography and culture are in American politics. In participating in the project students were exposed to diversity of viewpoint which has been shown to cultivate higher civic outcomes, but they were also interacting with voters to learn how and why they voted. Witnessing such an overt act of civic responsibility also reinforced the importance of civic engagement.

Diversity in the Classroom

Many college and university classrooms face the challenge of not having enough diversity. Although discussion about diversity commonly refers to racial and ethnic identity, there are other ways in which the students enrolled in our classes are fairly homogenous. Students tend to be mostly from middle class families and are all of a certain age. In my classrooms, I am also faced with the lack of diversity in partisanship and ideology. Most students are Democrats who hail from very liberal families.

There are at least two important reasons to seek a more diverse group of students in our classes. The first relates to the learning process. Learning occurs when one encounters something different.[3] There is no growth in knowledge acquisition when one encounters something with which one already has experience. This fundamental building block of our understanding of learning is often overlooked and underestimated. It also seems that the more pronounced the difference, the greater the opportunity for growth. Students have difficulty growing intellectually without encountering different ideas, views, or thoughts. Professors do their best to introduce students to different ideas through readings, but a tremendous amount of learning occurs through student interaction with their peers. Studies demonstrate students' significant learning experiences about diversity emerge through informal interactions with their

peers.[4] It is not enough to introduce new ideas and perspectives from course readings; students also need to encounter divergent views through their peer interactions. In classes with a lot of student engagement and peer interaction (either through discussion or some type of active learning) it is reasonable to expect proximate gains in learning.

A second important reason to have diversity of ideologies and partisanship present in a classroom relates to civic engagement. Living in a pluralist society, one of the keystones of democracy is tolerance. Students need to be exposed to differing political views and ideologies in order to learn how to thoughtfully engage other viewpoints. Lack of exposure to divergent ideologies risks graduating students who are not practiced in political civility. In the current political environment it is important to not only instill knowledge in our students and teach them how to think, we also need to teach them civility. The potential gains of doing so are significant. Extrapolating again from studies on racial diversity, students who are exposed to diversity in the classroom, through co-curricular activities, or informally through interactions with their peers, demonstrate higher levels of civic engagement.[5] Students who are not exposed to diversity on their campuses are not as adept at engaging in our pluralistic society once they graduate. Many colleges and universities share a core value of civic engagement. A major barrier to imparting lessons of civic engagement is students' inability to interact with those holding divergent political views. Facing this challenge, the "Connecting Classrooms Collaborative Learning" project was born.

The Project

My colleague and I had both conducted successful exit polling projects in our classes previously. We decided within each of our American government courses we would have

students conduct an exit poll on Election Day and then use the data to explore differences in the geography and political culture of an urban area as compared to that of a rural area. Having an experiential component such as this would really elevate students' learning about survey research and voting/elections. With this one active learning component we would be able to demonstrate an unforgettable lesson about how survey research is conducted (exit polling in particular) and teach our students how various factors affect vote choice. While undertaking a project like this can require significantly more preparation on the part of the professor, the payoffs in student learning far outweigh the costs.

In order to introduce diversity into our classrooms, we also decided to bring our classrooms together via "web-conferencing" technology. Our classes would have two web conferences: one in which students would discuss which questions they would like to see on the survey instrument and the following the exit poll in which they would talk about their experiences and the election results.

Some planning facilitated the project. First, our classes were scheduled in an overlap time, on a Monday/Wednesday Friday schedule. It is helpful to have a MWF class if you plan to spend Election Day (Tuesday) out in the field.

The second element which helped our project is we both used a Team-Based Learning (TBL) format. With Team-Based Learning students are assigned to teams for an entire semester and do much of their work (including assessment) within their teams. The semester is broken down into six or seven discrete unit within which there is an assessment of out of class reading, a clarifying lecture/discussion, a team based active learning component, and assessment. For the unit on Public Opinion and Polling, the applied activity required each team to write five questions they would like to see on the exit poll, outside of the standard demographic questions.

This came on the tails of a class discussion on how to write unbiased and reliable survey questions. Each team would then select their two very best questions to bring into discussion during the web conferencing session.

The Voting and Political Participation unit followed with the active learning component consisting of the exit poll and subsequent analysis of the data collected. I was able to enter the exit poll data into a shared database quickly enough so that in our class discussion on vote choice, we were able to compare our local data with what we know about vote choice at the aggregate national level. Unfortunately we didn't receive the other university's data soon enough to use that in our conversation, although students did get a quick look at the data before the semester was over. Ensuring the availability of both data sets before the discussion would be helpful.

Planning the Video Conference Part I

Before the semester began, we worked our technology administrators to ensure proper video conferencing equipment. We used Skype, but had to ensure the proper computer setup to accommodate an entire class. One of us had access to a special conference room equipped for video conferencing, and the other needed an adjustable video camera and microphone in order to get the entire class in the viewing area with appropriate levels of audio.

Students were told about the project at the beginning of the semester and as the conferencing date approaches they were reminded of the project. In the class period before the conference, we reviewed exactly how the web conference will work so they knew what to expect. We scheduled our first conference for the Wednesday before Election Day, giving us

enough time to select the questions to be placed on the survey, finish writing the survey instrument, and to make copies.

On the day of the conference, short introductions commenced our sessions and then we moved straight into the presentation of questions. One team presented their survey questions followed by student discussion and then they were followed by the next team, alternating between schools. We took careful notes as discussion moved quickly and we wanted to have captured the exact question wording as it was presented and modified (through discussion) by the students.

Planning the Exit Poll

We familiarized ourselves with our state's election laws on exit polling. We let the Board of Elections know about the exit poll and identified the precincts at which we would be present. We also received IRB approval from our institutions, all of these considerations occurred prior to the semester beginning.

In my city, we polled at one precinct (strategically selected for various considerations) and each team of students covered a 4 hour shift. The first team worked 8am-noon, the next from noon-4pm and the last from 4pm-8pm. Since polls opened at 7am, I worked the first hour myself. We were properly equipped with plenty of clipboards, surveys, pens, and flashlights for the early and late hours. Students were trained how to approach voters and quickly found out if they could communicate this was part of a class project the voters were more willing to participate. If the voter agreed, they would then hand the survey on the clipboard to the voter. The top page of the survey was a consent letter explaining the purpose of the survey, and contact information for any questions about the project.

My colleague had students at four different precincts for 1-2 hour shifts. At any given time between 8 a.m. and 6 p.m. they had five or six students present at the polls. Rather than spend the entire day at one precinct with the students, he visited each precinct where students were present, not conducting surveys himself.

Because of state election laws, we encountered a fundamental difference in polling in the two states. In one state exit pollsters are allowed to approach a voter as soon as he or she exits the poll. Pollsters in the other state, have to stand 100 feet away from the polling place, which essentially relegates pollsters to the status of electioneers. Voters in the latter state were not as receptive to the students as they were in the former, perhaps because they couldn't differentiate polling from electioneering. The one group of students had a greater completion rate than the students from the other university. Had we thought of this previously we would have found a way to visually differentiate the students from the other electioneers.

Planning Post - Exit Poll

The day after the election, we web conferenced again. Students spent most of the conference talking about their experiences exit polling. Many had "stories" they wanted to share and it nicely drew out differences (e.g. where we were allowed to stand) that helped shed some light on poll results. We only discusses the actual outcome for the election for 10 minutes, which in hindsight was unfortunate as students were really interested in discussing how their counterparts perceived the outcomes. We also could have looked at either national exit polls, or preliminary results from our polls, but we did not as not all data was yet available. In the future we will schedule a third video conference to talk about the differences in the survey results based on region.

Concluding Thoughts

Bringing two classrooms together via web-conferencing for an exit poll project was a success. Innovating the way in which we taught our American government courses and rising to the challenge of homogenous political viewpoints within the classroom, my colleague (at a university in a different region of the country) and I decided to connect our classrooms through the internet. Based on feedback (both in discussion and on course reviews) this part of the course went exceptionally well. Students were excited and engaged in every aspect of the project. Deliberation and discussion among the students revealed differing ideological perspectives. Students were surprised to hear the divergent views from their peers suggesting these were not views they normally encounter on their own campus. Then being able to use exit polling data to understand the ways in which regional differences manifest in public opinion was very helpful to broadening students' perspectives and teaching them about voting behavior.

The project we initiated was limited in size, scope and frequency but the results of it suggest web conferencing offers a means to broaden perspectives in otherwise homogenous classrooms. Exposing students to greater curricular diversity increases civic outcomes among students and being able to interact with voters on Election Day is a strong demonstration of what it means to be civically engaged. The classroom does not have to be only a venue for sharing content and knowledge; it can be used to increase diversity of viewpoint. Similarly, our lessons need not be restricted to the classroom as students learn civic engagement by being engaged.

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Nina Kasniunas is an assistant professor at Goucher College where she teaches courses on American politics. Her research centers on the role of interest groups in the policy making

process, and civic engagement pedagogy. Dr. Kasniunas has written on campaign strategies of

interest groups, using re-enactment of Supreme Court oral argument in the classroom, gay rights,

and how the Bush administration used the courts to advance religion. She also has published a

book on state election rules. Current research projects are examining neighborhood associations

in Baltimore politics, and political ambition and campaign strategies of state level women

candidates.