TRACK: TEACHING POLITICAL THEORY AND THEORIES

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The 2011 Teaching Political Theory and Theories track drew scholars from Europe and the United States and featured work from political scientists representing the four major subfields. While analyzing the nine papers presented, participants articulated a range of perspectives on questions of pedagogy and the relationship between political theory and political science; indeed, the variety of perspectives confirmed the ongoing contestability of many central concepts in both the scholarship of teaching and learning (SOTAL) and the discipline of political science. Whether discussing ways to develop assignments for undergraduate research projects on the Tea Party or how to employ insights from deliberative democratic theory to assess the role of education in addressing racial violence in the United States, participants confronted important questions regarding the role of theory in the discipline, the broadening of undergraduate and graduate teaching strategies, and assessment of the effectiveness of alternative teaching strategies.

What is Political Theory's Role?

Perhaps no question surfaced more frequently in discussions than this: Why should political scientists look to theory? This question's inescapability underscored a tenet of the SOTAL literature itself—namely, questions that make political science research interesting and relevant can also enliven our teaching. To illustrate, Peter Mohanty ("How to Teach Political Theory to Non-Theory Graduate Students") argued for the creation of graduate political theory courses for students in nontheory subfields (e.g., "Political Theory of International Relations") to expose them to authors ranging from Thucydides to Marx and beyond. This paper sparked lively exchanges on whether political theory should be viewed as a source of ontological or normative insights, and the ensuing discussions recalled longstanding, important debates in the literature (Spence 1980; Mayhew 2000). Moreover, if our track is any indication, TLC participants remain concerned not only that theory could be trivialized when "plugged into" nontheory applications (Wolin 1969), but also that political theorists "not affect a stance, and speak in an idiom" that perpetuates subfield isolationism (Gunnell 2006). There was significant agreement that theory as a teaching tool has the potential to bridge the divide between positive (empirical) and normative (prescriptive) inquiry in political science.

Innovative Teaching Strategies

Deliberative democratic theory's (DDT) success in speaking across disciplinary subfields was evident in our track. Shane Ralston ("Deliberating with Critical Friends: A Strategy for Teaching Deliberative Democratic Theory") called for the incorporation of the concept of "deliberating with critical friends" as a means of formalizing structures for graduate peer review not only in coursework, but also in dissertation research. He suggested, moreover, that the "critical friends" deliberative approach can help create an intellectual community across courses. In the same area, Matthijs Bogaards and Franziska Deutsch ("The Deliberative Referendum: Learning Democracy by Doing") presented the results of a "Deliberation Day" held at Jacobs University in Breman, Germany. Bogaards and Deutsch designed a course in which undergraduate students were taught DDT and deliberative polling techniques prior to developing, implementing, and assessing the results of a deliberative poll that measured attitudinal change on the question of mandatory community service. Their work illustrated a successful approach to teaching theory and quantitative research methods in a single project-oriented course.

Assessing How We Teach Theory and How Our Students Learn

Presenters shared a variety of approaches to promoting and assessing student learning. Lucrecia Garcia Iommi ("'Let's Watch a Movie!' Using Film and Film Theory to Teach Theories of International Politics") shared the results of the incorporation of film into her international relations class. She argued that film is an especially approachable "text" for undergraduates and is thus particularly suitable for directing student attention to textual dynamics that are less transparent to them when they study international relations theory in a more conventional manner. William K. Delehanty and Ann Wyman ("How to Teach Political Theory to Non-Theory Graduate Students") collaborated on an empirical investigation of the factors associated with student openness to new political ideas; although 83% of students surveyed reported enjoying hearing about new ideas, the researchers were surprised to find that extra credit options did not appear to produce higher levels of openness. Benjamin Mitchell ("Head in the Right Direction: A Model for Discussion Leader, Peer-Reviewed Undergraduate Seminars in Political Science") shared his results from using multiple instruments (e.g., student self-assessment responses, peer reviews) to measure the effects of student discussion-leader assignments on student learning. Mitchell found that while students reported that they learned material more fully when assigned the task of leading a discussion, they also expressed dissatisfaction with the requirement of providing peer review for other student discussion leaders. In sum, while scholars in our track differed in their choice of approaches (qualitative versus quantitative), they broadly embraced the notion of measuring outcomes and incorporating creative responses into the classroom.

REFERENCES

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TRACK: TEACHING RESEARCH METHODS

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The Teaching Research Methods track at the 2011 APSA Teaching and Learning Conference built upon many of the themes from past years and brought to fruition some of the recommendations made at previous meetings. The group touched on numerous

topics, but there were a few main themes that informed each conversation. First, the papers and commentary focused on determining the best way to give our students, especially our majors, a solid research methods background. Because faculty from many types of colleges and universities were present and offered varying accounts of the particular needs and career goals of their school's students, the group did not reach a consensus as to a uniform course of study that would be appropriate for every institution. Although participants had different ideas about how to implement a methods course of study, many presentations highlighted the necessity to forefront methods training and further integrate it into the political science curriculum.

A second main theme dealt with the way that political scientists should characterize research methods. While there was some disagreement over how broadly the term should be understood (i.e., should logic, legal studies or political theory be included in methods training? Is the emphasis on the construction of a thesis statement on par with the formulation of a hypothesis?), track members strongly agreed that a robust methods course should feature various quantitative and qualitative approaches.

The track's papers and the comments that followed connected these two themes to discussion of the best ways to approach methods instruction in our classes, curricula, and discipline. In terms of individual courses, many of the papers made suggestions about how to make methods courses more engaging for students to promote significant learning experiences. One paper (David H. Sacko, "Teaching Multimodal Methods to Undergraduates" discussed a multimodal method in which students used logic and qualitative and quantitative approaches to arrive at the same conclusion. Two of the papers outlined how instructors could use problem-based learning to guide students through the formation, execution, and interpretation of a survey assignment (Charles R. Boehmer, "Learning Research Methods through Practical Learning"; Daniel Mulcare, "Collaborative Surveys as Problem-Based Learning Assignments"). From these papers, the group discussion moved to tackle issue of how to effectively implement these projects. Discussion points included students' difficulties in successfully completing a literature review and their problems articulating and analyzing scholarly work. The track members noted other challenges, such as the need for students to practice using methodological tools in a way that is scientifically valid, the difference between individual student work and group work, and the potential benefits and dangers of having students become more self-directed (e.g., would they embark on more activist projects at the expense of a more scholarly approach?).

Many papers touched on institutional support for research methods. Most of these presentations focused on what departments are doing to integrate methods more systematically into their curriculum. One paper (Christi Siver, "Taking the Next Step: Assessing Different Strategies for Methods Instruction in Political Science Undergraduate Curricula") explored a department's syllabi to see if the particular methods course influenced the skills that students developed. Another paper (Aaron P. Boesenecker and Elizabeth Cohn, "A Collaborative Teaching Strategy in Undergraduate Research Methods Courses") offered a university-wide approach to the creation of a research methods program. Using a model similar to the faculty learning community approach, the university's numerous methods instructors joined together to build a core course with multiple sections. This bottom-up approach enabled the faculty to join together, share ideas, and find common objectives that they could bring to their own methods course. Yet another paper (Salvatore Lombardo, "The Evolution of Student Knowledge and Perceptions in an Undergraduate Research Methods Course") examined the methods instruction at the author's college and recommended that students undergo a two-semester methods training course with a lab component for each section. From these discussions, the track participants suggested that a methods component should ideally be included in as many courses as possible but should definitely be part of the capstone experience. For such an aim to be met, departmental buy-in is necessary. Indeed, further innovations in methods training are directly connected to the willingness of department faculty and chairs to lead on this issue.

Although technically not part of the Teaching Research Methods Track, the OPOSSEM workshop (http://opossem.org) displayed what members of the political science discipline are doing to advance methods instruction. In the spirit of open-source programming and social networking, this online portal enables methods (at this point, only statistical methods) faculty to share ideas, use posted lectures and datasets, and upload their own material to build the expanding resource database.

The track participants put forth the following recommendations. First, departments should try to incorporate methods into the capstone class, and consequently, at future teaching and learning conferences, a capstone track may be useful to direct discussions on how to accomplish this task. Since institutional and departmental buy-in are necessary to make methods an integral part of a curriculum, the participants encouraged departments and faculty to consider how to further integrate methods training into their curricula and courses. Last, it is essential to continue to explore the innovative ways that political scientists can present methods to students and to assess the success of particular pedagogical approaches.