

# The Teacher

## On Site, Not Out of Mind: The Role of Experiential Learning in the Political Science Doctoral Program\*

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Various forms of “experiential learning” have been the subject of substantial scholarly attention in the last decade. Internships, community-based education, and service learning have all been presented as pedagogical tools for inculcating the mores of active citizenship, breaking down barriers between various groups, and helping to prepare undergraduates to be more effective as they move into the job market. However, experiential programs have not been offered to the political science doctoral student, who is assumed to have mastered the norms of liberal democratic citizenship and who has little perceived need to be trained for non-academic employment, given the academic objectives of most political science Ph.D. programs. We argue that this perspective on experiential learning obscures its value for the doctoral student. Experiential education provides opportunities that are unavailable under more traditional pedagogical approaches: a program that effectively harnesses the potential of site-based education can provide graduate students in political science with opportunities to consider not only substantive issues in governance, but also theoretical questions and methodological issues.

We argue for the merits of including an experiential component in political science Ph.D. programs by considering what has been discovered while developing one such course, the Maryland Graduate Public Service Fellowship Program,<sup>1</sup> which has provided a broad range of Ph.D. students with the opportunity to have structured learning experiences in state and local agencies. We briefly consider the organizational

context and structure of this type of program, focusing particularly on how these elements distinguish it from undergraduate and professional school programs. We then explore the pedagogical merits of such a program for future scholars, arguing that experiential education is a critical supplement to the theoretical and methodological training that are standard in political science doctoral programs.

Early career academic political scientists currently do not have many structured experiential learning opportunities available to them. The APSA Congressional Fellowship Program and the White House Fellowships do come to mind, but these programs are highly competitive and are reserved for scholars that have already begun to make an impact in their professions. Opportunities for political scientists to critically observe and participate in the governing process when their career interests are being shaped and they are beginning to consider the intricacies of various research methodologies are rare. The Department of Government and Politics’s program described in this article addresses this gap.

### The Doctoral Experiential Learning Opportunity

The Maryland Graduate Public Service Fellowship is a one-year, renewable program that supports five graduate students at various junctures in the doctoral program. The goal of the program is to address students’ substantive research interests and provide them with a range of scholarly development opportuni-

ties. The Fellowship Program is designed to encourage students to use their experiences “in the field” to evaluate theory and research, to facilitate the development of their research agendas, to learn and implement qualitative research skills and strategies they can integrate with quantitative approaches, and to broaden their range of “real world” experiences so that they may become better classroom teachers.

The program is structured to be relevant to students at various stages in the doctoral program. Students who are still taking graduate courses enroll in the Seminar in State and Local Government. Students who are further along in the Ph.D. program, and who are no longer taking courses, arrange an independent study with the program director; most write either their dissertation prospectus or a dissertation chapter in lieu of taking a course. The five Fellows meet together in a bi-weekly seminar during the Spring semester to discuss their placements in some detail. Generally, these sessions are focused on the ways in which the Fellows’ experiences illuminate or fail to illuminate the theoretical and methodological issues raised in the scholarly literature of state and local government, though students may also choose to address the relationship between their experiences and some other body of literature (e.g., comparative politics, political psychology, political theory, methodology).

The on-site component of the program is structured as a research opportunity. While Public Service Fellows are expected to perform services for the office they choose to

work with, Fellows are expected choose an office that offers them opportunities to be involved in academically substantial and relevant work. Fellows are encouraged to be aware of what they are learning in relation to their own research interests. It is the academic agenda that drives Fellowship placement and duties—not the needs of the office in which placement occurs. In this context, site-based learning is focused on how experience facilitates and enhances inquiry and understanding, rather than on simply learning about the machinations of a particular office. To promote this pedagogical approach, and to insure that Fellows are not exploited, the program director assists the Fellow in structuring both the on-site experience and his or her relationship with the on-site staff.

### The Structured Field Experience

Placing graduate students in a field learning experience is substantially different than placing undergraduates. With degree(s)<sup>2</sup> in hand, a broader knowledge base, developed writing skills, and, in some cases, other advanced skills (e.g., computer graphics, accounting, legal research skills), graduate students have the capacity to function in an office environment in ways that most undergraduates or M.A. students can not. Generally, these additional skills allow graduate students to observe and participate in situations that help them better understand both theoretical and empirical research perspectives. For example, a Ph.D. student may have the skills to serve as a committee staffer. This would permit the student to observe the workings of the committee and, in doing so, consider the validity of research on committee structures, task accomplishment, and the exercise of power.

The inherent drawback to placing older, experience students in offices is that the lure of “free hands”<sup>3</sup> may lead supervisors to exploit the students, resulting in on-site learning experiences that are more focused on the needs of the office than those of the student. For example, a graduate student might be asked to use

## Reflective Teaching—A Call for Papers

The Searle Center for Teaching Excellence at Northwestern University is seeking contributions for a collection of reflective essays on teaching by established scholars and researchers. The collection is envisioned as a set of carefully crafted, scholarly reflections on teaching which can complement more statistically-oriented pedagogical research. All essays must address the following two questions: What do you expect your students to be able to do—intellectually, emotionally, or physically—as a result of having taken your course? And how do you construct and conduct your course or courses to help and encourage your students to obtain that knowledge or develop those abilities?

We especially invite contributions from teachers who have established scholarly credentials in their fields, and who have taken the time to reflect upon the evolving relationship between their research and their teaching, and upon how their research practices inform their answers to the two questions above. Potential contributors might consider, for example, teaching techniques and methods which they have developed as a result of their research into their own fields, positive and negative experiences teaching their research in the classroom, or instances when a problem or opportunity encountered in the classroom spurred a new direction for their research. In all essays contributors should ensure that they have both reflected sufficiently on their own experiences and offered some broader insight or wisdom to other teachers and scholars.

The editors invite submissions of 20–30 double-spaced pages in length. Inquiries by phone, fax, e-mail, or post; submissions accepted by post only.

**Deadline: July 1, 1998.** Send submissions to the editors James M. Lang or Kenneth R. Bain, at Searle Center for Teaching Excellence, Northwestern University, 627 Dartmouth Place, Evanston, IL 60208-4181. Direct phone inquiries to (847) 467-2338, by fax to (847) 467-2273, or via e-mail to langjm@nwu.edu or bainkr@nwu.edu. For further details, visit the Center's web site at <http://president.scfte.nwu.edu>.

computer software to develop brochures without being briefed on how the ideas for the brochures were developed. This type of situation may be beneficial to the placement site, but the experiential learning aspects of the experience will have been fundamentally compromised.

The Maryland Graduate Public Service Fellowship Program seeks to minimize the probability of students being exploited by working closely with students and employees to negotiate the structure of the placement. Fellows have generally taken one of two approaches to on-site learning. They have chosen to be involved with one specific project during their tenure with the organization, or they have acted as “staff” within the organization, handling a variety of tasks that are catalyzed by day-to-day concerns. Both of these approaches to site-based education have proven to have advantages and disadvantages.

The “project” approach has been particularly advantageous for Fellows who have narrowed their interests and wish to gather and analyze specific data or observe a specific process. One Fellow who was interested in the various aspects of civic education worked with the State Department of Education's Commission on Service Learning; she assisted in coordinating a series of secondary-school-based workshops on the implementation of the new experiential education component of the high school civics education curriculum. This permitted the Fellow to pay particular attention to the state-level dynamics that shaped the construction of these seminars, and also allowed her to observe the relationships among state and local personnel during the workshops themselves.

Though this approach to site-based education has worked out well for most of the Fellows, it does have

serious drawbacks: chief among these is the possibility that the Fellow may not be integrated into the structure of the organization and, thus, may not have opportunities to effectively observe organizational culture and understand the relevance of processes and relationships that are not immediately related to his or her project. It is critical, though necessarily difficult, to insure that the Fellow is not insulated from a range of office dynamics because of a project-focused placement. As one participant noted, "I was in a cubicle inputting data into a computer all the time. I learned a lot about the many ways in which women participate in the governing process in Maryland, but it wasn't as different from the type of research we do at school as I wish it had been." Particularly if the Fellow's project is very data-centered and he or she is substantially sequestered from other members of the office, the on-site experience may prove to be little more than an off-campus version of more-typical political science research.

The other typical approach to on-site placement has been to act as staff within a particular unit. In this capacity, Fellows join the "team" and their duties are largely determined by the demands being placed on the unit at that particular time. In a given week, staff Fellows may be asked to gather preliminary information on the nature of some problem, edit a report, take notes at a meeting and prepare its minutes, prepare a press briefing, answer phones, respond to constituent concerns, and travel to a local workshop. Fellows who have taken this approach find it a useful way to observe the development and implementation of policy, as well as to consider group dynamics at play in the governing process. The Fellow has an opportunity to consider the ways in which the theoretical and empirical literature succeeds and fails to capture the dynamics that he or she is observing on a daily basis.

The primary disadvantage of this approach is that the status of the Fellow will not be sufficiently considered by permanent staff members. The student is likely to become just another individual in the office, to

whom work can be assigned solely for the purpose of task completion. Acting as a staff member may also leave the student with insufficient guidance, particularly if he or she is in the early years of graduate school and lacks substantial work experience. Finally, less-advanced Fellows may not have the background they need to understand the dynamics of the policy process or the relationships within the group.<sup>4</sup>

The structure and substance of the placement are the product of an agreement between the Fellow, the program director, and a member of the site's staff. The staff member takes on the role of "mentor" for the Fellow, and plays a particularly critical role in facilitating the success of the program.

#### **Coteaching: The Necessity of Appropriate On-Site Mentoring**

One of the on-site mentor's primary responsibilities is ensuring students stay focused on their research. The program director and the Fellow must find a mentor who understands that his or her mission is not to train the student for a career in state and local government, but to provide opportunities for the student to gain insight into the machinations and dynamics of government.

Developing informal networks of contacts (those who have or would be interested in mentoring, and those who can refer Fellows on to other potential mentors) is absolutely necessary. This is not difficult. Just as some political scientists believe they may be able to govern more effectively than those in power, so there are administrators who are supremely convinced of their own effectiveness as teachers. The first step in placement is contacting individuals (e.g., former Fellows, published administrators, informal contacts) who are familiar with the area(s) of the student's interest. These contacts may then direct the Fellow to an appropriate potential mentor.

Determination of who will serve well as an on-site mentor is by no means scientific; much depends on timing, the relationship between the student and the mentor, and the

presence or absence of a range of other conditions. The program director seeks to minimize the effect of these variables as much as possible by creating a structure in which the responsibilities of both the Fellow and the field mentor are clearly delineated. The enunciation of clear responsibilities for both the graduate student and the personnel on-site cannot eliminate the intangible factors that determine the success of a placement (e.g., personal compatibility or the ability to handle stress), but it provides a boundary for these externalities, insuring that the experience can still be valuable for the student.

A *Memorandum of Agreement* delineating the responsibilities of all parties to the on-site relationship has been developed for use with the Maryland Graduate Public Service Fellowship as a means for managing these intangibles. The *Memorandum* is more than a "laundry list" of what the Fellow will accomplish. It provides the Fellow and the program director with the opportunity to remind the on-site director that the focus of the program is education, not simply task completion.<sup>5</sup> It provides a solid basis from which to further develop all aspects of the relationship, and it permits all parties to refer to a document that delineates expectations and responsibilities should there be substantial disagreement during the term. The *Memorandum of Agreement* insures that students have some quasi-contractual basis on which to assert themselves as students of government, thus maintaining the research focus of the program, and insuring the parity between what can be taught through an experiential paradigm and the dynamics of the discipline.

## Experiential Education, Theory, and Methods: Strengthening Graduate Education

If experiential education is to be an effective component of a doctoral program in political science, it is critical that the relationship between the on-site experience and the discipline be firmly established. The relevance of the Maryland Graduate Public Service Fellowship goes beyond simply developing state and local government specialists, as graduate students with a wide range of substantive interests have demonstrated. As structured, experientially-supplemented doctoral education provides students with the opportunity to consider the discipline of political science from an alternative perspective and to make a more informed decision as to the path that they will begin to take as scholars.

### An Alternative Approach to Considering Comparisons in Political Science: The Study of State, Local, and National Governments

The study of state and local government is, essentially, the study of comparative government: i.e., studies of the comparative functioning of executives, legislatures, judiciaries, and various policy options abound.<sup>6</sup> Experiential education provides opportunities to reconsider the ways that comparative study is undertaken, using the local, state, and national levels as individual “units” of comparison, and as components of intergovernmental systems.

As is found throughout the literature of comparative government, much of the research in state and local government focuses on comparison of various quantitative measures: e.g., pay, staffing, and length of session as measures of legislative professionalization; campaign spending as a measure of party competition; number of registered lobbyists as a measure of interest group activity. As Brace and Jewett (1995) have argued, though this research is interesting and useful, this type of inquiry and these measures are not necessarily sufficient for leading researchers to gain an understanding of the

phenomena under study. For example, in studying the professionalization of state legislatures, the number of days or the number of staff members may not be adequate indicators of professionalization; the days in the legislative session may not reflect the standing committee meetings that take place between sessions, or the role central and personal staff play in preparing the legislator for the session. Close observation of policies, procedures, and employees is possibly the only way researchers have for developing theories about and descriptions of the importance of the underlying structures of organizations and the role of individuals in making policy, and preventing policy adoption. These political dynamics are best illuminated by the type of research that is fostered by experiential learning.

By developing an understanding of these dynamics through interaction with one particular state or local government, and using this insight to question the broader literature of state and local governments, students can better understand the strengths and weaknesses of the measures employed in the development of broad theory. This approach encourages students to work between (for example) the general characteristics of the fifty state governments and the particularities of a single state government; in doing so, it highlights the difficulty of developing accurate measures for comparison, while encouraging students to consider the broader relevance of their specific daily experiences. Clearly, the insights developed using this approach are also germane to the study of national governments.

Observing the dynamics of institutional life may allow interested students to build on earlier research, using the single “case” that one state provides to seek better data in other states (or other relevant public organizations). Indeed, students’ on-site experience could provide a base for a lifetime of rigorous observation and interviews that could lead to the development of more comprehensive measures of governmental phenomena. From this basis, better empirical measures of, and better theory about, local, state, and national institutions may be developed.

The relevance of this program for training graduate students with subfield interests beyond state and local government suggests that experiential education adds to graduate education in political science more generally. Students’ experiences within this program also suggests that site-based education is also a relevant supplement to the two major requirements of most graduate programs: exposure to political philosophy and training in methodology.

### An Overlooked Nexus: Experiential Education and Political Theory

Site-based education provides graduate students with an alternative vantage point from which to consider some of the basic issues of political theory, but it is important to note that this relationship is reciprocal. Without some knowledge of political theory, experiential learning may have only limited relevance, since “theory is essentially an understanding of abstract and sometimes predictive relationships underlying what happens in ‘real’ life” (Kolb 1992, 24). With no knowledge of theory, the relationships that are defined by public life may seem arbitrary, and the depth and importance of action (and inaction) may not be appreciated. Of course, without sufficient knowledge of the complexities of public life, theory may also fail to capture its depth and intensity. Experiential education provides students, and particularly those interested in political philosophy, with a sustained opportunity to consider the relationship between theory and the daily machinations of public life.

For example, one Fellow who was interested in political theory found her placement a particularly interesting position from which to consider the impact of identity in the public realm. While working in an executive office, she discovered a substantial network of lesbian women who were highly influential in the development and implementation of social service policy. Similar in some ways to an “old boy network,” this collectivity insured that there was a certain basis of shared understandings from which to negotiate the development and implementation of

social service policy. One of the aspects of this network that the student found particularly interesting, though, was its limits: the “identity politics” that provided a basis for shared understandings facilitated, but did not insure, consensus across units and departments; nor did it necessarily override individuals’ loyalties to the members of their unit within the department. Ostensibly private sexual identity intersected with individuals’ other definitions of self, and it was not always clear which loyalties would be primary for any particular person. This observation suggested the need to consider the ways that various forms of identity both intersect and are bounded within the public decisionmaking structure.

Gaining insight into the role sexuality played in the dynamics of public life was facilitated by the creation of daily journal entries and a final paper. These pedagogical tools encouraged the student to make connections between the dailiness of public life and the relevant scholarship. In reviewing the dynamics of the office over the course of the semester, the student was able to make a connection between particular theoretical issues (e.g., identity politics, the dynamics of group life) and the relationships and processes observed in this office. It became clear that various aspects of identity each played some limited role in determining publicly-relevant behavior; this insight suggested a level of complexity in (bureaucratic) public life, particularly for minority groups, that had not been made clear in the literature. This insight may provide a basis for creating a more nuanced approach to conceptualizing the role of identity in the public realm.

### **Experiential Education: An Opportunity to Revisit Methodology**

The failure to sufficiently consider the subtleties of public life is common for practitioners of empirical political science as well. An experiential component in graduate education may assist students in identifying, and possibly overcoming, the problems that adhere to much contemporary social science research.

Doctoral programs in political science typically require at least one, and in many cases two or more, semesters of methodology coursework. These courses necessarily include statistical training. At minimum, departments require the development of statistical competence sufficient for understanding basic descriptive statistics, and some programs require students to gain proficiency in the use of advanced statistical methods. This emphasis on statistics in methodology courses reflects the mainstream of the discipline’s methodology.

There is a strong justification for this. If appropriate theories of public life are to be developed, one must be able to make broad claims, based on large, generalizable, quantities of data. The question that must be asked, though, concerns the nature of the data: what is being measured? As Jones (1995) points out, “ask the wrong questions and you get meaningless answers.” But how are better questions to be generated, and how are they to be analyzed? Experiential education has the potential to play a critical role in developing political scientists who are not only able to analyze quantifiable data, but who are better able to engage in the methodological challenges that adhere to the process of continually developing better questions about public life.

Experiential education allows students to develop an understanding of the particularities of governmental organizations, and to begin hypothesizing about variables of political life that are not easily measured. In short, it allows students to actively consider exploring political life qualitatively.<sup>7</sup> In this way, the Fellowship provides students with an opportunity to expand their methodological knowledge, encourage them to explore methods they are not often exposed to in their coursework. The course associated with the Fellowship makes clear this opportunity to develop the skills of qualitative investigation; a bibliography of relevant qualitative methods treatises is distributed, and students are encouraged to explicitly reflect on the “methods” they used to learn about the organization in their final comments on the course.

As political science moves toward the development and application of increasingly complex statistical investigations and mathematic modeling techniques,<sup>8</sup> it is important to keep in mind that some critical aspects of political life cannot be captured using these approaches. The use of qualitative methods that is implicitly (and explicitly) endorsed in this context provides students an opportunity to consider these aspects of political life without making them think they are sacrificing the rigor that is the basis of good research. Fellows are taught that “good case studies will identify those features of the case or set of cases that are uniform and generalizable . . . At the same time, case studies will also identify those features that appear to be relatively unique” (Bailey 1992, 52).

This approach provides both theorists and empirical researchers with an opportunity to reconnect with the institutions, organizations, and individuals that define and continually reconfigure the public arena. But reaching this intersection is by no means easy; indeed, the difficulties that attend engaging in rigorous qualitative research may contribute to the method’s relative rarity in political science:

Good field research is really hard. Increasingly, it demands the skills of the in-depth interview, the knowledge of the principles of statistics and research design, the ability to find and analyze relevant quantitative data, and the sensitivity to relate findings to theory that itself is context dependent. (Jones 1995, 29)

Assisting emerging scholars as they seek to apply a wide range of both qualitative and quantitative methods that will allow them to effectively investigate public life is a critical contribution that experiential education can make to graduate training.

The benefits of site-based education for the Ph.D. student and future scholar suggest that experiential education is relevant throughout all the subfields of political science, and may be imperative for the maturation of the discipline as a whole. A variety of approaches to studying political life can only enrich our knowledge base; it is time that we, as a scholarly community, begin to acknowledge and legitimate that

which can be learned from carefully structured, self-conscious, and intellectually-grounded experience.

## Notes

\*We would like to acknowledge Professor Emeritus Mavis Mann Reeves of the University of Maryland for her contributions to this program and for her helpful comments on an earlier draft of this article.

1. The doctoral student participants in this program are referred to as "Fellows" to distinguish them—in skill level and focus—from the undergraduate and M.A.-level interns that abound in state and local government agencies, and particularly in state legislatures.

2. Of the five students in the program every year, from one to three have already earned their M.A.S.

3. Fellows are paid by the University, not by the office in which they are placed. Because the office does not have financial responsibility, the imperative to "responsibly" (e.g., fully) use the available talent may be minimized.

4. There is also a third option in which the Fellow works on a primary project and assumes additional staff responsibility. This approach has proven to be successful in allowing student both to have specific responsibilities and to be integrated into the organization. The caveat here concerns workload. Because the student has responsibilities that are not relevant to determining the workload of other staff members (e.g., coursework), the Fellow and the program director must take care to

insure that the student will not be overloaded by responsibilities. A hybrid approach to on-site learning offers the most opportunity to the student, but it is likely to be a demanding experience, and must be carefully considered by all involved parties.

5. Which is not to say that tasks are not completed. Indeed, without exception, the Fellows have all accomplished the tasks set out in their discussions with their mentors, and have all received glowing on-site evaluations. Many have been asked to continue their duties for compensation after completing their Fellowships.

6. See Brace and Jewett (1995) for a fuller discussion of this literature.

7. Qualitative research is generally understood to mean "case studies." Indeed, the opportunity to develop any one of several different types of case studies (including the illustrative case study, the exploratory case study, and the program implementation and/or effects case study) is notable. See GAO (1990) for more on the various types of case studies. It should be noted, however, that experiential education also provides substantial opportunities for other types of qualitative research that may be useful to the political science researcher, including oral histories and ethnographies.

8. Research in state and local government has been particularly susceptible to these trends, as the "universe" of fifty states provides a substantial, yet manageable, amount of data on comparable phenomena (e.g., campaign spending) that are well-suited to this type of analysis. See Brace and Jewett (1995).

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# A Dramaturgical Approach to Teaching Political Science

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*Only through art can we get outside of ourselves and know another's view of the universe and see landscapes which would otherwise have remained unknown to us.*

Marcel Proust, *The Past Recaptured*

Politics has become increasingly theatrical in modern America. While we may expect that during electoral campaigns candidates participate in a certain amount of "acting," it is now commonplace to view the day-to-day behavior of politicians in theatrical terms as they attempt to marshal public support for their ideas. What's more, the predominance of electronic journalism as the most used news source has placed an emphasis on the ability of leaders to create po-

litical spectacles in order to obtain political support (Edelman 1988).

Although this article will describe dramaturgical techniques used in teaching a course on the American Presidency—perhaps the most highly visible public office—the applicability of this pedagogical approach is far broader. Whatever political arena is the subject of study, political actors put themselves before others in attempts to influence them. This is true not just in the external political realm, which is the subject of a course, but it is true of the internal workings of a course itself. Goffman's observation is true of all politics, that which is studied as well as that which occurs within the class-

room: "When an individual plays a part he implicitly requests his observers to take seriously the impression that is fostered before them" (1959, 17).

The teaching approach described here is dramaturgical. It involves employing actions, scenes, agents, agency, and purpose to encourage students to both experience and analyze political behavior. The dramaturgical approach may be applied to many courses, but this article will describe how it has been used in one on the presidency. The presidency, with its emphasis on personality, conflict, and highly controlled staging of presidential appearance, lends itself easily to being taught and un-