

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 Bremen, 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