Introduction to Teaching Undergraduate Political Methodology

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Teaching political methodology, or research methods, is one of the more challenging tasks that political science professors face in the classroom. Political science professors struggle with student resistance, with a vast range of knowledge, skills, and abilities that students need to be well-versed and able to engage in successful research, and limited space in the curriculum to impart that information (see for example discussions in Baglione 2008; Bailey 2019; Bergbower 2017; Bernstein and Allen 2013; Bos and Schneider 2009; Buchler 2009; Fisher and Justwan 2018; Leston-Bandeira 2015; Oldmixon 2018; Thies and Hogan 2005; Van der Swan and Afonso 2019). Combined with the different methodological traditions that individual professors bring to the classroom, this makes systematic and quality methods instruction across institutions particularly challenging to achieve.

Political methodology courses can also be extraordinarily rewarding for faculty and students alike if done well. Methodology courses teach critical transferable skills for both undergraduate and graduate students that bolster student job opportunities after graduation. For example, Brown (2015) found a positive and significant relationship between methods education, publishing, and employment after graduate school. Clark (2011) found similar positive effects from methods education for undergraduate students in the UK.

This is one of two volumes dedicated to providing practice advice about teaching political methodology. This volume focuses on the undergraduate classroom, and the related text focuses on graduate political methodology education. Each book begins with general and conceptual advice about teaching political methodology in an academic program, followed by sections of short chapters providing guidance about different aspects of teaching political methodology. Each chapter is also grounded in an evidence base ranging from practical experience of seasoned professors to systematic science of teaching and learning (SoTL) techniques. The faculty who have written these chapters provide practical recommendations and examples of assignments and approaches that can be used with students. Collectively, the chapters in the
books focus on the what, how, and when of teaching political methodology and are meant to provide concrete, actionable advice for all kinds of instructors, from those teaching these courses for the first time to seasoned faculty who desire to refresh and expand existing classes.

When we initially began developing these volumes our goal was that most of the chapters would be based in evidence-based pedagogical research, or SoTL. However, as the authors began their data collection for systematic assessment of their teaching techniques, we all had to pivot our approach to teaching because of the COVID-19 pandemic and the move to unexpected online instruction. Given the realities and pressures of teaching during the pandemic and uncertainty about course delivery it entailed, we greatly relaxed our expectations about systematic, rigorous SoTL and assessment evidence to support the recommendations in the chapters. Nonetheless, the practical, ‘how to’ approaches to teaching methods chronicled in these books is peer reviewed and based in the extant literature about teaching these different aspects of political methodology.

SOTL AND POLITICAL METHODOLOGY

SoTL has emerged as a new and increasingly recognized sub-field of political science. While pedagogy research has its roots in an era long before political science took an interest in it (see for example the work on pedagogy by John Dewey in the early twentieth century (1997)) and has faced controversies over whether it is a science at all (Legemann 2000), the discipline has embraced it in recent decades.

Political science’s interest in pedagogy research tracks that of academia more generally. According to a review by the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL, a division of the American Library Association), there are approximately 113 separate journals dedicated solely to pedagogy research for different disciplines within higher education, breaking out by general higher education journals (16), arts and humanities (30), general humanities (21), science and mathematics (23), and social sciences (23). While this list is not complete in that it does not include journals with multiple foci including pedagogy (e.g., *PS: Political Science and Politics*) nor does it include related sub-field pedagogy journals (e.g., *Journal of Public Affairs Education*), the proliferation of these journals underscores higher education’s commitment to better understanding how we do what we are designed to do: teach.

Comparatively, political science is late to the game. Despite this, interest in how we teach is evident throughout the history of the profession. For example, a year after the inaugural issue of *PS: Political Science and Politics* it published its first pedagogy pieces. The first was a reflective essay bemoaning the
lack of research on how to measure good teaching or “instruction on how to be a good teacher” (Fein 1969). The second pedagogy piece published in *PS* was a quasi-experiment designed to determine whether students learn more through traditional studying for exams or through preparing for oral exposition of learning through student-based interviews (Hanus 1969).

Among the myriad topics covered by political science pedagogy today, how to teach students to conduct research about the discipline is critically important in two ways. First, teaching about research methods runs parallel to sub-discipline and therefore is applicable to almost all sub-disciplines (excepting, perhaps, normative theory), making it relevant to all political scientists and all of our students. Second, research conducted about teaching the topic itself ought to reflect in important ways the quality of what is happening in the classroom. Despite this, SoTL research about teaching research methods for political science is not robust—a cursory examination of all of the pieces published in the *Journal of Political Science Education* between 2017 and 2019 shows eight teaching research methods from 144, or a scant 5.5%.

SoTL about methodology is contentious. In the first state of the discipline book (Finifter 1983), Christopher Achen writes about methodology and teaching that “political methodologists have expended much of their energies teaching the rest of the discipline new statistical techniques invented in other fields. … Intellectual middlemen have their uses, of course. … But remedial teaching is not scholarship” (70).

Indeed, a review of all three of the state of the discipline books published to date demonstrates that teaching and pedagogy generally has historically been seen as hardly relevant, with the term pedagogy itself showing up only in the 2003 edition, and discussions of teaching across all of the volumes as side mentions to part of the work of accomplished scholars that are highlighted in the volumes. While admittedly the purpose of these books is to chronicle the state of research of the field, the fact that there is no mention of research on teaching as part of the discipline quite clearly states the value that has been attributed to this type of work.

But this is not to suggest that the field has focused solely on research to the exclusion of teaching. As early as the 1950s the APSA Committee for the Advancement of Teaching made public statements about the quality of instruction (see for example APSA 1951) and did so indirectly through earlier reports (see for example the 1908 committee report on instruction in government). Note, however, that most of these early efforts were focused primarily on the state of instruction about civics and government in high schools (Ahmad 2017).

Collectively, the disciplinary meetings and journals focused on improving teaching engage to a degree with teaching research methods and political methodology. Among them, APSA’s Teaching and Learning Conference has
consistently included a section related to teaching research methods and has done more than any other effort to support this work. Anecdotally, the research presented at these meetings in particular about teaching research methods focuses primarily on basic statistics, followed by research design, then followed by a smattering of niche interests, and the methods used to engage in SoTL about teaching research methods is in many cases even more nascent than what is being taught.

This points to two themes prevalent in the discipline for teaching political methodology. First, there is no method or set of methods per se of the discipline, which is reflected in both what is taught and the pedagogy research we engage in. And second, the level of rigor in how we try to understand what we do is limited. These volumes attempt to fill these gaps with an in-depth and practical examination of best practices in teaching political methodology.

TEACHING POLITICAL METHODOLOGY

This particular volume is designed particularly for the undergraduate classroom. Faculty asked to contribute chapters come from all kinds of types of institutions and have programs with single research methods courses to curricula with multiple, sequenced courses to programs with stand-alone political methodology courses combined with sequenced and integrated methodology instruction embedded in substantive courses.

The volume begins with a series of chapters designed to broadly consider the different things instructors need to consider in approaching political methodology and research instruction in the political science curriculum. Chapters focus on what needs to be in the undergraduate curriculum and at what point it needs to be taught, the role of applied approaches to teaching methodology, the critical importance of information literacy and integrating methods in substantive courses. The first part also considers texts, course format, and writing.

The second part of the volume considers foundational aspects of teaching political methodology. These topics comprise the linchpins of quality research: how to ask good questions and formulate testable hypotheses, what are the best ways to help students think about research design for political questions and relatedly the importance of thinking about causality and how to establish it, and how to convey sampling strategies in a useful way. This part also talks about how we convey the importance of research ethics to undergraduate students.

In the third part, the authors take up the scariest part of political methodology instruction for most students: quantitative methods. These chapters consider the various quantitative skills taught in most undergraduate programs, including descriptive statistics, bivariate analysis, and multivariate analysis and some extensions. The part also includes a discussion of introducing big data to undergraduate students, as well as important aspects of data visualization.
In the fourth and final part of this volume, the authors provide advice on how to approach teaching qualitative skills in the undergraduate research methods curriculum. Chapters include advice about instruction in developing case studies, interviewing, conducting text and archival data, conducting field and observational research as well as environmental behavioral studies, and finally in teaching qualitative-interpretive research methods more generally.

Taken together, our goal is that readers will be able to use this book for all aspects of thinking about how to best teach political methodology. It may be a reference when thinking about how to construct a course syllabus for a stand-alone methods course. Or it may serve as a starting point for faculty discussion about the undergraduate curriculum and where and how methods should show up across classes. Various chapters should provide specific guidance when thinking about how to teach a specific unit in a course, or in a substantive course how to embed a research methods unit within it. Finally, we hope that the suggestions in this volume will also spark some real interest in systematically testing the efficacy of the various techniques promoted by the authors.

NOTES
2. This is inclusive of all publications in this time period, including SoTL, instruction, reflection, and book and product review articles.
3. Our thanks to former Auburn University graduate research assistant Zach Mahafza for coding these articles for focus and approach.

REFERENCES


