Teaching Political Theory and Theories

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In discussing the pedagogy of political theory, this year's workshop participants acknowledged previous—and as yet unresolved—difficulties. These debates covered the tension between pursuing breadth and depth, the assignment of primary versus secondary sources and the use of excerpts rather than full texts. However, the papers at this year's workshop, ably organized by Michelle Deardorff, largely bypassed these controversies.

Perhaps the strongest consensus that arose was that there is no one right way to teach political theory. Some of this variety arises from particular circumstances—the institution, the personality of the teacher, the kind of students, the level of the course—but these diverse approaches also result from choices made by the instructors. One of the most frequently-noted choices that professors have to make is between course goals that emphasize conceptual knowledge and familiarity with important texts and those that promote developing crucial skills, such as critical reading and deep thinking. These are not contradictory goals, of course, but it can be difficult to balance them. There can also be, as some participants observed, a danger in trying to make political theory coursework acceptable—whether to students or administrators—by focusing on the acquisition of skills to the exclusion of content. Regardless of the particular objectives of a course, participants also agreed on the importance of designing syllabi and structuring assignments with these goals in mind.

One of the fundamental challenges presenters identified was helping students engage with political theory texts. Participants agreed that students' in-depth contact with the readings was

crucial: part of our task as professors is to help students acquire an enthusiasm for learning. In addition to using sources from popular culture and contemporary and historical case studies, a number of innovative methods to increase student engagement were proposed. Some of these pedagogies employed new technologies and going outside of the classroom, and others involved nothing more than old-fashioned pen and paper. Some presenters, such as Meg Mott and Tom Rozinky, suggested encouraging classroom debate and even conflict as a way of sharpening students' comprehension of the ideas being studied. Mott and Kristina Haddad even argued for incorporating theatrical elements into the study of political theory, which would help students appreciate the plurality of perspectives that political action involves. In a more traditional manner, Benjamin Mitchell advocated the revival of the humanists' "Commonplace book" model. Through copying and commenting on the most important passages, this method invites students to appropriate the texts and make them their own. Another tension we recognized, then, was between the development of the internal, private life of the mind and students' ability to communicate to others their discoveries.

Another key point of debate revolved around the place of political theory with the discipline itself. While participants offered differing opinions on whether theory better fit within the humanities or social sciences (perhaps being the keystone that bridges the two), there was general consensus that theory provides significant contributions to the discipline specifically and the liberal arts in general. As Tim Meinke's paper on teaching genocide, evil and politics underscored, many of Political Science's fundamental questions can best be approached through the critical examination, evaluation and definition of concepts. While political theory does not hold the monopoly on the exploration of key ideas that are central to the discipline -- such as democracy, justice, and virtue -- it does have a comparative advantage in this realm.

Political theory's emphasis on reflection, mindfulness and careful deliberation also serves as a central contribution to the discipline's efforts to assess student learning. Two different papers, one by Dan Mulcare and the other by Alison Staudinger, explored how Bloom's taxonomy could be employed to examine the extent to which students engaged in critical thinking. Like in-class debates, theatrical presentations of theoretical concepts, and the "Commonplace book" model, the use of Bloom's taxonomy invites students to respond to the text's main themes, and these methods also enable instructors to observe students' critical understanding of often challenging readings. These methods enable faculty to recognize students' mastery of course concepts as well as students' ability to develop their learning over the course of the semester. These pedagogical approaches also allow faculty to recognize with greater frequency those areas where students struggle with the field's challenging ideas as well as identify the gaps in students' learning skills. In his paper, Asif Siddiqui noted that instructors should be aware of the threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge that students encounter in theory classes. The pedagogical methods discussed in the working group showcased how contemporary theory instruction recognizes students' limitations and enables them to overcome these obstacles.

Insofar as political theory courses have different goals, they will employ unique modes of assessment. Along with the standard methods associated with the measurement of student work, such as surveys, graded submissions, rubrics, and pre- and post-tests, the methods unique to political theory – modeling ideas, critically reflecting on individual practices, and philosophically examining different pedagogical approaches – can also provide the discipline as a whole with valuable information about which teaching methods will best serve our diverse student bodies.

At a time when many colleges and universities are reducing budgets, it can be hard to make the case for supporting political theory courses. As the track members discussed, political

theory is an integral part of the political science curriculum and can certainly help make citizens more reflective, but it also makes a broader contribution to a liberal arts education by helping students develop the ability to read carefully. A growing number of universities are primarily focusing on improving the writing skills of their students, and therefore a greater amount of limited resources are being put at the disposal of writing centers. What is often overlooked is that other skills, such as reading and speaking are also central to the students' academic success. In fact, reading, speaking, and writing are closely connected. Reading helps teach sentence structure, proper use of words, vocabulary, and numerous other important items. Speaking about and defending ideas also help the development of critical thinking and organizational skills as well as filtering out ideas that cannot stand up to scrutiny. Close reading, the main staple of political theory, can play a major role in developing all of these competencies. This contribution of political theory needs to be communicated to institutional leaders as well as to students: we, as political theorists, must show why close reading is worth the extra time required to do it.

Looking to future considerations for teaching political theory, we felt that effective student assessment techniques are beneficial to educators in political theory; it is therefore important to develop rigorous yet useful ways to evaluate students' work. While well-designed examinations, among other assessments, can test grasp of concepts, it is necessary to find ways to better measure our promotion of deep learning. For instance, the teaching methods discussed during our track highlight that theory professors continue to utilize pedagogies that allow for an immediate awareness of students' understanding of the material, and these low-stakes opportunities to direct student learning proved to be a unifying theme of our discussions. Indeed, political theory--with its emphasis on self-reflection, critical reasoning, and careful mapping of an author's argument-- is well suited to assist in gauging meta-cognitive development among students. As an example,

as instructors focus more on the implementation and evaluation of explicitly stated goals and objectives for each course, theory's methods of inquiry can assist in the process of connecting our assignments to our anticipated outcomes. Theory, then, is not only central to the development of critical reading, writing, and verbal skills, but it also provides essential tools to the assessment of them.

Political theory also highlights that assessment can only go so far. After all, one of the essential components of political philosophy is to examine those areas that cannot be easily quantified or measured, and theory has a role to play in challenging the potential over-emphasis on observable outcomes. Although well-constructed alumni surveys could reveal some essential information in this regard, the lasting effects of teaching may not be easily traced. (An alternative means of assessment we discussed was peer evaluation of teaching, which can help us communicate content to students more effectively.) As we continue to consider our contributions to the discipline and the academy, in future theory tracks, it may prove beneficial to examine our role in the assessment movement. While our conversations touched on the ways that theorists offer unique insights to the methods that could be employed to evaluate our students' progress, theory also has a role to play in the critical interrogation of the assessment movement's purpose and efficacy. An interesting and necessary jumping off point in our future discussions may revolve around whether assessment provides us with important tools or serves as a way to further negatively limit our field.