

Experience and (Civic) Education

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Publish or perish, so the formula goes. Beyond that familiar binary, tenure committees occasionally offer the cruel third option to publish *and* perish. Tales from the front hammer home the message that productive research trumps all else, including teaching. Especially teaching.

That message is far too stark. Care for publication should be intensive but not exclusive. In fact, publication and teaching can often complement each other. The first half of that relationship may already be apparent: we know what we research, and we teach what we know. Structuring our courses on our recent or current scholarly work can infuse our teaching with energy and expertise.¹ Less obviously, however, teaching can also drive and direct our research.

Other authors in this symposium address the potential for our teaching to generate research questions and involve students in our research projects. In addition, we faculty can teach subjects that we want to know better, furthering our research as we learn alongside our students. Those prospects for producing publications comprise low-hanging fruit, and we should reap it. But I also advocate for a slightly more challenging approach: the pedagogy of experiential learning, which can turn political science into civic education and turn civic education into publishable research.

This represents good news for civic education, which political scientists should care about but generally ignore (Battistoni 2013). Our failure to care stems less from an intrinsic lack of interest, as is commonly supposed,² than from a lack of understanding, which is easier to remedy. Political scientists do not overlook civic education because our research interests preclude it. Rather, we misunderstand what collegiate civic education actually comprises, how little we would have to do to promote it more effectively, and the incentives that exist for doing so.

DEFINING CIVIC EDUCATION

Civic education at the collegiate level transcends simple *civics*, the K–12 chestnut that teaches youngsters the basics of American government and the available means of participating. College faculty can indeed teach those subjects, but our comparative advantage lies elsewhere.³ The majority of political science courses could fit into a broadly conceptualized program of collegiate civic education, with *civic* referring not only to national citizenship but to a range of human relationships, identities, rights, and responsibilities at the local, state, national, and even global levels. The education would be broadly civic as long as students encountered, between their social science, natural science, and humanities coursework, a vigorous engagement with critical reasoning and ethical principles; understanding of pluralism; and knowledge of political

systems, historical perspective, and the scientific method. Civic education conceptualized thusly—or, borrowing from Alexis de Tocqueville, what we might call civic education properly understood—would not reside in a single course or department but across a curriculum.⁴ Political science offers valuable contributions, but the entire liberal arts stand well positioned to teach those broad elements of citizenship if we help students to map their curricular choices coherently.⁵ Beyond knowledge or expertise, however, citizenship also involves action—the abilities and habits of using knowledge practically—and here much traditional coursework falls short. Experiential learning can help to supply the deficit.

Experiential learning extends beyond familiar classroom modes of lecture, discussion, and reading. All of those components can be valuable in their own right, but as philosophers of education from Aristotle to Dewey insist, we learn especially well when our emotions are engaged through meaningful experience, and we cement memories and mental connections through repeated experience (Dewey 1938). Experientially oriented courses can include off-campus engagements between class members and specially selected community partners (sometimes known as community-based learning), classroom visits by community partners or practitioners, or exercises in which students apply their knowledge and techniques practically. (James Druckman's example, in this symposium, of class-based survey design and implementation fits the bill quite nicely.) These methods may seem daunting because they can require extra preparation time. Readers who focus only on short-term utility might sign off right now with the mental keystrokes *ti;dr* (too idealistic; didn't read). However, just as other types of teaching can stimulate our scholarship, the same holds true for experiential learning. Come for the pedagogical dynamism; stay for the publishable research.

Next, I discuss several relevant examples drawn not only from my own experiences but from colleagues at two related institutions: Swarthmore College and Project Pericles. Each institution functions as a kind of civic education network. Swarthmore's Lang Center for Civic and Social Responsibility, directed by sociology professor Joy Charlton, provides resources, logistical support, and a conversational hub for Swarthmore faculty (as well as community partners) interested in civic education and experiential learning. Project Pericles, a consortium of colleges and universities, connects similarly committed faculty at a national level. The following examples showcase experiential pedagogy that has spurred publications by helping its practitioners generate new research questions and hypotheses, gather and analyze data, and reflect on the pedagogical process itself. These demonstrate experiential education's appeal not only for

political scientists using qualitative or quantitative methodologies, but for theorists as well.

PEDAGOGY AND PUBLISHING UNITE

My own research resides at the intersection of political theory, my primary expertise, and my secondary field of American politics. I draw on the resources of each to enrich and critique the other. For a decade I have offered an experiential learning course, “Democratic Theory and Practice,” that combines normative theories about what democracy ought to entail, empirical scholarship about what contemporary American democracy actually does entail, and a hands-on component

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that illuminates them both. My students engage with the local communities of Swarthmore and Chester, Pennsylvania, two neighboring towns with widely divergent fortunes, to understand more fully the ways in which economic and educational resources can affect citizens’ experience of democracy. We read extensively about local history—a century-old, county-level political machine still holds widespread influence—meet with the current mayors, tour each community with local residents, and choose from a variety of community projects. Over the years, students have volunteered with political campaigns of their choosing; nonpartisan voter registration drives; educational reform committees started by parents; local government as interns; a Youth Court program run for and by Chester high school students; and faith-based communities that work for local betterment. Our aim is not to accomplish goals *for* other citizens but to accomplish goals *with* them—goals that they have set—and in the process to learn about the ways in which citizens in different areas, from different backgrounds, think and talk about the experience of democracy. With the help of fellow citizens we look for ways in which the democratic process works and sometimes fails, not to condemn the “system” outright (although some students develop critical views) but to explore ways of making democracy work better.

The teaching experience has shaped my research profoundly. For example, after several years of offering the course, I considered how students and residents had chosen to cooperate for common benefit. At times they would engage with formal political processes, but at other times, with similar goals in mind, they would intentionally eschew politics and work in the realm of civil society. Eventually I glimpsed the inaptness of the overly broad term “civic engagement” that had (with astonishing rapidity) been adopted by scholars to describe almost all citizen activities ranging from bowling leagues to voting to religious worship. Discussion with my students and reflection on my own inspired an article (Berger 2009) and a part of my book (Berger 2011) that parsed and

critiqued the burgeoning civic engagement literature. More recently, spurred by my teaching experiences and the kinds of reflections mentioned briefly in this article, I have begun a book manuscript on collegiate-level civic education: its history, its relevance for democracy, its controversies, the myth of a now-departed golden age, and the prospects for a better future. In each of these cases, my political theorizing has been shaped and inspired by the observational data acquired through experiential pedagogy. When my experiences in the community have not comported with the scholarly literature’s received wisdom, the tension eventually pushes me toward new research questions and hypotheses.

Swarthmore political scientist Keith Reeves, a Chester native, tells a similar tale about the potential for pedagogy to stimulate new research approaches. During Reeves’ first academic appointment (at Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government) he began planning a book on ex-felon disenfranchisement. After moving to Swarthmore, he undertook outreach and mentorship for Delaware County prison inmates and, under the auspices of Temple University’s “Inside-Out” Prison Exchange Program, developed a Swarthmore course titled “The Politics of Punishment.” That widely praised course matches 15 Swarthmore undergraduates and 15 inmates (“incarcerated students”) in Chester’s State Correctional Institution. Both sets of students invariably leave the semester deeply moved and changed. Reeves’ teaching has led to several publications, including a book chapter titled “Finding a Lazarus” (Reeves 2011) about former prisoners’ re-entry to their communities, and a forthcoming article coauthored with former student Aya Ibrahim. Perhaps most important, however, is that Reeves’ community work and teaching experience pointed him toward new research questions that have significantly broadened and improved his forthcoming book (tentatively titled *The Declining Significance of Black Males? Incarceration, the Inner City, and Public Policy*). As a direct result of Reeves’ community engagement and teaching, his book now undertakes both qualitative and quantitative analysis of the intersection between incarceration and poverty.

In Reeves’ estimation, the scholarly literature on the politics of incarceration has generally lacked personal narratives, or at least a broad enough set of narratives to contextualize the analyses fully. At times, Reeves and his students would read course texts that seemed discordant with the conditions that they were observing first-hand. At those moments, new research avenues arose.

For example, recently Reeves’ incarcerated and nonincarcerated students read a book (McCorkle 2013) that sensitively addresses the impact of imprisonment on children, but does

so solely from the perspective of female inmates. Yet Reeves' class was at that same moment steeped in the perspectives of incarcerated men, some of whom had left behind children of their own. The reading sparked a heated class discussion on the question of whether one can be a good parent while in prison. One of the incarcerated students shared his own story of having never seen his two daughters during his 30 years of imprisonment. He had recently wished one daughter—herself now an adult mother—happy birthday on the phone, but felt certain that to her he was essentially a ghost. What should be done? Should young children be brought to prisons for visitation? Reeves describes the intense emotions of the ensuing discussion, which will surely endure with the students, and

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also the sense of intellectual breakthrough when he realized that his book would need to address the attendant issues with the added perspective of male narratives.

Another Swarthmore colleague, statistician Lynne Steuerle Schofield, incorporates an experiential component with her introductory statistics classes that could serve as a model for other quantitatively oriented scholars (including political scientists). Schofield's students partner with local community groups that may have gathered raw data but need it refined and analyzed. Students experience first-hand the role that statistical analysis can play in charting organizational decisions and solving community problems. Schofield has drawn on her pedagogy in publishing two related articles. One of them, published in the journal *Public Health Promotion* (Shani et al. 2014), analyzes data from the Kids Asthma Management Program, a community partner. The other (Schofield 2012) combines a statistical study with pedagogical assessment. It analyzes and compares survey data from students who took Schofield's experientially based statistics class and those who took a more traditional version of the class, lacking the experiential component.

Professor B. Welling Hall of Earlham College, whom I came to know through Project Pericles' successful peer mentoring network, also turned experiential learning into a publication on pedagogy. To promote not only political knowledge but also political engagement, Hall developed a political science class called "Civic Engagement Toolkit for the Legislative Process." The class combined political science principles, as learned through the texts, with political reality as learned on the ground (informed by Hall's APSA Congressional Fellowship year in Washington, DC). Students—taking turns in the simulated roles of legislators, staffers, and vocal citizens—alternately wrote and responded to letters, offered briefings, and developed constituent responses. Hall also facilitated mock legislative hearings, with her own students preparing expert witnesses drawn from other classes in energy policy and molecular biology. Hall's teaching experience eventually

prompted an article in this journal, titled "Teaching Students about Congress and Civic Engagement" (Hall 2011).

Due to limited space I cannot delve further into experiential learning examples, but they are legion. More can be found in the other symposium entries, even if they do not always self-identify as "experiential." Any class that involves fieldwork, labs, application of knowledge to social and political problems, or direct engagement with the world outside the campus can engage students' imaginations, creativity, energy, and even emotions in ways that make learning expand and endure. And all of these can propel faculty research as well, if only we plan accordingly and harness the results.

CONCLUSION

I agree with James Druckman's introduction: "research versus teaching" represents a false dichotomy. So does the perceived schism between meaningful political science and civic education (Battistoni 2012; Colby et al. 2007). Teaching can be part of faculty's productive research, just as political science can be part of civic education properly understood. Experiential learning helps to make it so by adding action to expertise. Many of us either already undertake experiential learning or could do so without too much difficulty. In the process, we would be helping not only our students to flourish, but ourselves. Experiential educators draw on teaching to generate research questions, hypotheses, and data, and can publish scholarship that reflects on experiential pedagogy itself—all while re-invigorating collegiate-level civic education by adding an action component to students' knowledge and skills. The goal is to place scholarship and teaching in union rather than tension—to move past the stark dichotomy of publish or perish and toward a more attractive balance: publish and flourish. ■

NOTES

1. According to a 2007 report, "there is good reason to think that faculty will achieve most when their teaching has lively connections with their role as expert scholars..." (Teagle Working Group on the Teacher-Scholar 2007).
2. "The focus that has dominated political science for the past half-century... is the objective, often mathematically driven study of political institutions and behavior rather than more normative goals or applied work of educating for citizenship" (Colby et al. 2007, quoted in Battistoni 2013, 1136).
3. Further, young people should be learning such basics before coming to college, and we should support the educators who are promoting and re-inventing that project (Cf. Campbell, Levinson, and Hess, 2012).
4. On this point I diverge from Smith and Graham (2014), who propose a civic education revival based on a specific, action-based curriculum that would teach the practices of American citizenship. We agree on the importance of an experiential component, but I highly doubt that many political science departments would actually heed Smith's and Graham's call to alter their course offerings in a single, prescribed manner. Further, colleges and universities now teach many international students whose best interests may not lie with a mandatory primer on American practices.

5. For example, the collegiate civic education consortium Project Pericles and 26 of its member institutions, with support from The Eugene M. Lang Foundation and The Teagle Foundation, are currently undertaking a multi-year project ("Creating Cohesive Paths to Civic Engagement") to inventory and map each institution's curricular offerings that stress principles of citizen engagement and social responsibility. The goal is to give faculty, staff, and students a clearer understanding of the available courses and the manifold ways of combining them.

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