The Methods Café: An Innovative Idea for Methods Teaching at Conference Meetings

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Interpretive research methods of various sorts have long been used to study "the political," but the full range of such methods is not widely known, and many are curious about what they entail. Others, who begin to use one or another of them, have questions about how to proceed. For those just learning about these methods, questions may be as basic as: "What does ethnomethodology mean?" "What is semiotic analysis?" "Are these approaches recognized as legitimate in political science?" Scholars engaging, or perhaps teaching, these methods might ask, e.g., "How do ethnographers overcome problems of accessing their field site, talking to strangers, and turning a year's worth of observational and interview notes into concise text?"

To address these and other questions, we created The Methods Café, a new type of conference session that brings together a variety of scholars with expertise in a range of interpretive research methods, a wealth of resources in a single room and time slot. These experienced researchers make themselves available singly or in pairs to anyone who sits down at their table with a question about doing the kind of study or using the kind of method that they specialize in, as noted on the table "identity card." (The idea is an adaptation of an Academy of Management session called "Ask the Expert" in which one of us participated several years ago.) After organizing successful Methods Café's for two years at the Western Political Science Association meetings, we brought the concept to APSA in 2006, under the sponsorship of the Qualitative Methods section. The informal setting—"a café" with multiple tables and places to sit—provides the opportunity for one-on-one and group discussions as well as networking and support.

How Does it Work? Specialists, Visitors, and Logistics

The Methods Café has specific logistical requirements and program implications. Instead of a session "chair" we have a session "host"; instead of "presenters" we have "specialists." There are topics, not papers; and there is no separate dicussant—we are all discussants!

The Café takes place in a large room in which a number of round tables are set up. At each table sits one or possibly two "specialists" in a particular research method. Each table has a placard displaying the particular method under discussion at that table, e.g., "Discourse Analysis" or "Political Ethnography." The full roster of methods represented at each Café is listed in the conference program, along with the names of the specialists who are prepared to talk to people about each topic. Handouts at the door also include this information as well as "operating instructions" for navigating the session. We are working on expanding the program note both in printed programs and online, in order to explain the procedural and organizational issues in a kind of abbreviated "operating manual" so interested visitors will better understand ahead of time how the Café works.

The Café is not intended to be a regular panel or roundtable session, with each presenter talking in sequence. Instead, Café "visitors" are invited to arrive at any time during the time block allotted to the session (typically, the usual 105 minutes of a conference session), to visit any table they like, and to stay as long as they like. Specialists do not prepare formal presentations on their topics. A visitor might approach a table, sit down, and ask the specialist to talk about how s/he uses the method s/he is (re)presenting. It might be helpful to think about this, as we hope the name suggests, as having a conversation over coffee or a beer at a table in a café. The conversation can resemble one between a student and a professor in the professor's office or between two colleagues in the school hallway: Café visitors might be senior faculty as well as students, and there might well be more than one person involved in the conversation at any given time. If one table visitor has already initiated a conversation, others can join in. Turn-taking is in order if another conversation is already going on: someone who has a different question waits to ask that question until the ongoing conversation winds down. One need not worry about having questions that are "too elementary"—it is fine to ask anything about that method, at any level. It is also possible just to sit and listen. One may leave the table (or the room) at any time, and circulation among as many tables as one wishes is not only allowed, but encouraged. We ask only that participants sign in at each table they visit, which helps us track demand for each topic, and evaluate the Café session as a whole.

Visitors at past Café's have ranged from doctoral students to full professors, and questions have been wide-ranging, such as:

- "What is space analysis [or some other form of method]?"
- "I'm in the midst of metaphor analysis and I've run into [describes a specific problem], how have you handled such problems? How should I handle mine?"
- "A journal reviewer [or one of my doctoral committee members] doesn't believe that interpretive methods are valid. How can I respond to this challenge?"
- "I have a student who wants to do field research, but I myself have no training in that. What can I advise him on [describes a specific issue]?"

Each of these questions, along with many others, has been asked at least once in one of the four previous Café's.

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The Methods Café @ APSA 2007

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A "host"—someone who understands the process and can help people navigate it—stands at the door to greet potential participants, explain the informality of the session, encourage participation, direct visitors to tables/topics, and field questions that they might have as they come in or at any time. The host keeps an eye on tables to see that things are going smoothly. For example, judging by nonverbal gestures that someone wants to leave and go to another table but is leery of offending the table's specialist, the host can facilitate that departure. We have also asked the host to keep a count of the number of visitors. Ernie Zirakzadeh (University of Connecticut) and Joe Bergeron (University of California, Irvine) have filled that role at the recent Café's.

The program timing of the Café is crucial. At the Western, it occupies a time slot in the regular program, such that it is in competition with other panels scheduled at that same time. At APSA 2006 the Café was scheduled on Thursday from noon to 2 p.m., a time when regular panels are not convening. This time was especially useful for those who were already at the conference for a Wednesday "Short Course" workshop or meeting. Our best guess (determined by sign-in sheets at each table and head counts made by the Café host) is that we had between 60 and 70 visitors to the Café. The number is a bit hard to assess as visitors can enter and leave at any time and move from one table to another. The head count is not exactly comparable in meaning to attendance at a regular

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panel session: from this perspective, the Café is more like several roundtables (here in a literal sense, in fact) happening at the same time in the same space. We continue to think about how to keep better track of overall attendance.

Methods and Specialists

Since the first Café we have made an effort to offer as varied a group of interpretive methods as we can, keeping in mind that some methods are more widely known than others, and hence more widely in demand. At the same time, we see our purpose as educational as well, in bringing some methods that are less well known in political science to scholars' attention. Past Café's have included tables devoted to methods for accessing or generating data, such as political ethnography, participant-observation, and conversational interviewing; and tables devoted to methods of analyzing data, such as discourse analysis and narrative analysis, critical language analysis, reflexive historical analysis, and evaluative criteria and standards. We have also offered tables on "Working with 'personal' documents" (such as autobiographies, diaries, memoirs, life histories, etc.), as well as intersectionality research, new historical institutionalism, legal archaeology, science studies, category analysis, metaphor analysis, and space analysis. In addition, we have had such tables as "political theorists doing empirical research," "studying phenomena that bypass the state," and "so you think interpretive research is not rigorous/objective/valid/reliable?" We plan to provide a future table on "teaching interpretive/qualitative methods." We also seek to represent every corner of the discipline, from IR and Comparative to American, from Public Law and Political Theory to Public Policy and Organizational Studies.

"Specialists" receive information ahead of the conference meeting suggesting what they might anticipate and what they might bring with them. We have been enthused by their willingness to tackle something "new and different." Past participants have included Pamela Brandwein (University of Texas, Dallas), Doug Dow (University of Texas, Dallas), Ange-Marie Hancock (Yale University), Timothy Kaufman-Osborn (Whitman College), Cecelia Lynch (University of California, Irvine), Julie Novkov (State University of New York, Albany), Ido Oren (University of Florida), Timothy Pachirat (Yale University), Emery Roe (then at Mills College), Lloyd Rudolph (University of Chicago), Susanne Rudolph (University of Chicago), Kamal Sadiq (University of California, Irvine), Samer Shehata (Georgetown University), Diane Singerman (American University), Joe Soss (University of Wisconsin, Madison), Dorian Warren (Columbia University), and the two of us.

Visitors' Evaluations

Since the first Café at the Western, we have asked both visitors and specialists to fill out an evaluation. We wanted, first and foremost, to get a sense as to whether this innovation was worth doing again and whether we should bring it to a larger venue (the APSA meeting) where more people could take advantage of this gathering of persons and ideas. We also wanted to know if we were on target in our selection of topics and choice of specialists—we continue to ask whether there are other topics people would like to see represented—and we wanted to know if there was anything we had not thought of that might improve subsequent Café's.

Responses from visitors have been overwhelmingly positive. Among the comments we have received to the question, "What worked for you?" are: a "good chance to ask questions and pose personal challenges"; the "informal, interactive format"; "enjoyed the informal setting"; the "variety of topics [and] approaches"; "great opportunity to get personal questions (research) answered"; "conversational style—not a presentation"; "listening to other people's conversations." One person wrote: "It was a great opportunity for a crash course in methods I do not use." And another commented: "People were very approachable and collegial."

On the negative side, some people were looking for methods that we did not have represented. Others found it difficult to start a conversation or to leave a table in the middle of a conversation in which they no longer were interested in order to move to another one. We need to pay attention to the proximity of the tables so as to minimize "noise leakage" between conversations. Visitors have asked for more publicity, which we are trying to arrange. Several also asked for handouts, and we will work with future specialists on this aspect. And one visitor at the 2006 APSA Café advised, "Tell people to bring their lunch!"

We have found that some people at first seem a bit bewildered, wondering how to know what table to go to or feeling intimidated by methods names with which they are not familiar. We find that the bewilderment seems to decrease each time we do the Café, and we think it will decrease further as people become familiar with the idea. Some comments asked for a short introduction delivered at the beginning of the session noting the "rules," specialists, and methods. As the Café is designed for visitors to drop in at any time, we think that such an introduction might not be the best way to handle these matters. At the same time, we recognize that the lack of familiarity is part of any "start-up" that breaks the familiar conference frame, and we are working on other ways to address the matter.

Specialists' Evaluations

We encountered skepticism initially among a few of the people we approached to act as specialists, as well as among colleagues hearing about the Café for the first time. For these reasons and to help ourselves plan subsequent Café's, we have also asked specialists to evaluate each session. The response here, too, has been full of excitement. Among their comments was this note (all comments quoted with permission): "It was a great experience. I felt like I learned a lot about the kinds of problems people are experiencing in their interpretive projects, and I felt like I was really able to help a few people. It's one of the best things I've done at an academic conference."

Two specialists sounded related themes: It is "great for younger scholars (especially graduate students) who feel vulnerable" and "It seemed very important to graduate students in particular, who were very unsure and even fearful of using these methods. Providing support, references, [and] ideas [for developing their work] seems crucial to reassuring them that these methods are legitimate and supportive of their research ends."

One specialist sharing a table with another wrote: "I liked the fact that there were two of us. . . . This worked well because we played off each other, and each of us had different things to add to questions and the general discussion." Luckily, the other person felt the same!

Specialists report that participating in the Café keeps them in touch with areas of political science research other than their own: "It was great to hear about [the wide variety in] people's difficulties, their professional contexts for work, and also the international dimensions of these debates. A very interesting Indian academic came to speak about the hegemony of economists in his professional life, and I was able to direct him to others as well [at other tables] in the Café."

Managing the conversation among several visitors is a learned skill. One specialist described the format that he developed on the spot: "I started out

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doing a more standard Q&A. This proved to be too disjointed, so I moved to a more thematic approach—gathering related questions for a few minutes (including some discussion) and then presenting some thoughts and suggestions in response." A potential difficulty concerns the visitor who dominates the table, not letting others take a turn. And, as noted above, participants often feel awkward about leaving a table to visit another one. Specialists, who are experienced teachers, draw on the skills they use in managing seminars to facilitate interaction at the tables. We also ask them to try to be aware of and manage both verbal and physical comings and goings at their tables, including emphasizing to visitors that they are free to move around.

We need to work with specialists, also, concerning what to bring with them as handouts or supplementary materials, such as lists of favorite citations on the topic, tables or graphs that might illustrate their method, or even copies of their own articles and books to hand out or to show. Our colleagues tend to be reticent on this score, fearing that they will be seen as too self-promoting. While we do understand and sympathize with that feeling, we also see the encounter from the perspective of graduate students and others using such methods: having one's own published work or course syllabus on hand sends a powerful message to attendees, communicating that they can get research published in the discipline of political science using these various interpretive methods and that there are departments that offer courses in them.

Future Methods Café's

We are looking forward to organizing additional Methods Cafés at APSA and at the Western. Several visitors have suggested other topics they would like to see represented, and we hope to expand the offerings along these lines. We will continue to work on the logistical aspects—making it easier for visitors to circulate, ensuring that we get an accurate head count, and so forth—and on advertising and explaining, so that more people are aware of the Café and the resource that it is for the Association and the discipline. For "specialists" it brings multiple teaching moments along with opportunities to find out what's new and upcoming in a wide range of research areas; for visitors it provides multiple learning opportunities, supplementing departmental resources with face-to-face encounters with those doing different kinds of work. We are thankful for the enthusiastic participation of our outstanding specialists and for the support from the program planners and association directors and staff at both the Western and the American Political Science Associations for helping us make this happen. We look forward to seeing you at the next one!

Note

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