The APSA Teaching & Learning Conference: Two Perspectives

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It was no coincidence that the conference was not termed the APSA Conference on Teaching, but rather than the APSA Conference on Teaching & *Learning*. The difference is non-trivial, and in fact importantly reflects what made this conference so successful.

While I did some teaching at the conference during my presentation, I spent the majority of the conference learning. I was able to learn from junior and senior faculty, as well as from leaders in higher education more generally. I was able to gain insight into how instructors at a range of different kinds of institutions handle a multitude of different pedagogical challenges. The "tracked" nature of the conference facilitated learning between participants: by spending the majority of the conference with the same small group, we were able to quickly move past introductions and let the real learning between participants begin.

In addition to learning between participants, the substantive focus of the conference was not on teaching but on assisting students in the learning process. My track in particular ("Pedagogy and Technology") focused on using technological innovations to help students learn better. We discussed how judicious use of tools such as PowerPoint, message boards, and email discussion lists could potentially help students learn better, as well as how technology, if improperly used, can turn the classroom focus toward the technology itself, and thus away from student learning. My track repeatedly emphasized the goal of improving student learning, even as we discussed a variety of innovative pedagogical techniques, including experiential learning, learning communities, and multiple learning styles.

I cannot overstate the value of this conference to new instructors, junior faculty, and especially graduate students. As a graduate student, I received *de facto* teacher training, made contacts with other instructors whose pedagogical techniques I would like to implement, and learned about innovations in pedagogy that I would not have known about otherwise (there is frequently less cross-institutional fertilization of such ideas than there is with research advancements). Moreover, I learned about teaching in the profession more generally, especially information about the role of teaching in the job search, tenure review, and publishing in the teaching field. I also learned about teaching resources available through APSA.

Famous scholar V. O. Key developed a paradigm for understanding political parties in which the nature of parties was divided into three major areas: "party-in-the-electorate," "party-in-government," and "party-as-organization." In the same spirit, the conference enabled me to learn about "learning-in-the-political-science-classroom," "learning-in-the-political-science-profession," and "learning-in-higher-education." I am deeply grateful to APSA for the opportunity to attend.

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When I arrived in Washington, D.C. to attend the first APSA Conference on Teaching and Learning, I did not know what to expect. Although I have been a regular participant in the APSA Annual Meeting and attended many workshops on teaching and curricular development, this didn't seem to be the same. All of my contacts with the program committee and APSA had seemed more informal, specific, and intense. They had clear expectations of this small group of 40. Unlike the Annual Meeting, we would not be presenting our research for 15 minutes, answering questions from the audience, responding to the discussants' comments, and then spend the remainder of the conference as a passive observer. At the plenary session the expectations were made more explicit. We would spend more time in our groups of 10 or 15 throughout the weekend—but we would still only have approximately 15 minutes to formally present our work. Our curiosity was palpable, how would a group of academics spend the remainder of our time?

In the weeks leading to the conference we had heard from our moderators, using a listserv and discussion group to virtually interact. But we were not required to submit our presentation in advance, although some colleagues had already posted their presentation on the discussion group. In the working groups' initial meeting we spent time talking about ourselves, our areas of specialization, our institutions, ourselves. Topics that academics generally have no difficulty addressing—in great detail. But this initial session set the tone. The conference was not a series of monologues, but conversations. In my workgroup, at least, we interrupted each other continuously but cordially, frequently the only way that academics are able to have conversations. It did not feel so much that we gave presentations, but that we led conversations about our prepared topics. Unlike the Annual Meeting, we weren't demonstrating our research and seeking feedback, we were discussing how our projects (which varied greatly) were designed, implemented, evaluated, and changed. We all wanted to know how these various pedagogical approaches could be adapted to other situations and institutions and in what way they could be better tested and improved. It seemed more collaborative.

Most of workshops on teaching, assessment, and curriculum design I have attended over the years have been multi-disciplinary or directed by faculty in the humanities. At times, I have found them frustrating and irrelevant because they often quickly deteriorate into the anecdotal level or to concrete "teaching tips." It was exciting to talk about these same topics—innovative pedagogy and technology, service learning and civic engagement, departmental and classroom assessment, diversity and global issues—but with people sharing the same disciplinary perspective. We recognized overlap between all the sessions. As academics, almost all of us assess the success of our classroom the same as we evaluate the quality of our research—so assessment

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