Teaching Qualitative Methods in Undergraduate Education

Introduction: Teaching Qualitative Methods in Undergraduate Education

Shamira Gelbman, *Political Science, Wabash College, United States*
Sebastian Karcher, *Political Science, Syracuse University, Syracuse, United States*

ABSTRACT This article introduces a symposium on teaching qualitative research methods to undergraduate students. Qualitative methods have an important role in both the discipline and the professional development of students but do not occupy a commensurate space in research pedagogy. This is due in part to the lack of resources for effectively teaching qualitative methods—a lack this symposium seeks to address. We identify four common themes in the four symposium contributions: (1) the importance of including the ethical and epistemological foundations of qualitative work; (2) the possibilities of teaching qualitative methods across the entire research cycle; (3) the importance of carefully structuring and designing active and experiential learning in research pedagogy; and (4) the unique opportunities of moving beyond the classroom in teaching qualitative research.

Political science prides itself on disciplinary pluralism, including the variety of normative, interpretive, and empirical approaches that scholars use to conduct research (Box-Steffensmeier 2022; Levine and McCourt 2018; Smith 2020). However, this commitment to methodological diversity is not always apparent in the political science curriculum. In a recent analysis of methods course offerings in top graduate programs, Emmons and Moravcsik (2020, 259) find that "qualitative methods courses are severely underprovided" relative to the prevalence of qualitative research that is conducted in the discipline—and the situation is likely more dire for undergraduate students. It has been 17 years since Turner and Thies's (2009) survey of scope and methods courses; if their findings prevail, instruction in qualitative research remains far less common than quantitative methods training in undergraduate political science programs.

There also is a dearth of guidance for instructors who seek to incorporate qualitative methods instruction in their undergraduate teaching, whether as standalone qualitative methods courses, qualitative modules in general scope and methods courses, or within substantive topics courses. As Elman, Kapiszewski, and Kirilova (2015, 41) note, both the need and the best practices for quantitative methods instruction in the undergraduate curriculum are relatively well established; in contrast, dedicated qualitative methods coursework "is a new approach." There are relatively few publications devoted to assessing or establishing best practices for teaching qualitative methods—or even just for providing qualitative research project and course-design ideas.

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Nevertheless, there is good reason to prioritize qualitative methods training for undergraduate political science students. Bernstein and Allen (2013) suggest that introducing students to qualitative methods as a first step can make subsequent quantitative methods instruction less daunting. Because "qualitative analysis is a more natural way of communicating for most students," they contend, engaging undergraduates in qualitative hypothesis generation and testing early in their methodology coursework can "increase their buy-in and improve their initial sense of efficacy" as new researchers (Bernstein and Allen 2013, 4). Moreover, they argue that prioritizing qualitative methods instruction can "bring students closer to their data," pushing them to "understand how…predicted relationships look 'in the real world' as opposed to in a disembodied dataset" (Bernstein and Allen 2013, 3–4). In turn, students will become more proficient at generating well-grounded hypotheses and interpreting the results of their statistical analysis.

Neither is qualitative methods instruction merely an instrumental means for helping undergraduates become better at quantitative research. Facility with qualitative methods per se can serve students well in various professional settings, both within academe and in the government and private sectors. Moreover, just as quantitative literacy is understood to be an important civic competency, qualitative literacy and discernment also are essential in a society where "qualitative researchers have testified before Congress, helped governments set policy, advised local practitioners, contributed to the public discourse, and shaped how corporate and nonprofit boards invest and spend their resources" (Small and Calarco 2022, 2).

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DIVERSE LESSONS, SHARED THEMES

With this background, the authors (with Colin Elman) convened an American Political Science Association (APSA) Teaching and Learning Symposium on teaching qualitative methods to undergraduate students in 2023. The contributions to this symposium are the results of the discussion and collaboration at that event. Our goal was to convene instructors of qualitative methods from different traditions within qualitative research and different institutional backgrounds who were teaching qualitative approaches to different components of the research cycle. The four contributions to this symposium exemplify this goal—but they are far from exhaustive of the wide range of creative approaches to teaching qualitative methods that were represented among the larger symposium's 13 participants, as well as the profession. With appropriate caution about generalizing from a small N, we offer the common themes that we discerned.

Qualitative Methods Instruction Should Include Epistemology and Ethics

Epistemology and ethics typically are not at the foreground of methods instruction in political science. Yet, they are at the core of much of qualitative methods, and successfully socializing undergraduate students into qualitative research requires exposing them to these views. In her contribution, Weitzel makes this most explicit by introducing interpretivist epistemologies—and the notion that there are multiple "correct" interpretations of a given observation—using a classroom debate on Wittgenstein's duck–rabbit optical illusion. We found a similar theme, albeit less explicit, in Golesorkhi's work. Rooted in community-engaged research, her teaching design emphasizes key topics in qualitative methods such as collaborative relationships with participants (i.e., the emphasis on "learning with" the community as well as the debriefing included in the design) as well as reflexive practices involved in the curriculum. These examples demonstrate the philosophical foundations of qualitative research can be introduced in engaging ways in the undergraduate curriculum. This is an especially worthwhile endeavor where students otherwise are likely to be introduced mostly to positivist approaches and epistemologies.

Teaching Qualitative Methods Can Span the Research Cycle

The contributions to the symposium encompass various stages of the research cycle: from its epistemological foundations (Weitzel) to research design (Golesorkhi) and data collection (Dos Santos, McGuire, and She; Kotsovilis and Valant). Other contributors to the original symposium as well as the methods literature focus on data analysis (Becker 2020; Jacobs, Kapiszewski, and Karcher 2022). It is not surprising that qualitative research methods apply in all stages of the research cycle—that all of these stages can be taught at the undergraduate level will, we hope, encourage instructors.

Structuring Active Learning

The effectiveness of active and experiential learning strategies for student learning is widely accepted (Archer and Miller 2011; Oros 2007). However, active learning is not as widely used as the recognition of its effectiveness would suggest: Archer and Miller (2011, 431) find active learning listed on only about 15% of the syllabi they reviewed. Even when it is used, not all active learning is created equal; the careful design of learning activities ensures their success, and designing and testing the activities can be daunting. (For a general framework for designing student experiences, see Rosen 2024, ch. 5.) We believe that the contributions to this symposium will

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increase the use of active learning in the undergraduate methods curriculum. Each contributor or group of contributors incorporates advice on structuring the activities. Weitzel suggests not only the initial prompt but also provides specific advice on steering classroom discussion toward the learning goals of her session on interpretive epistemology. Kotsovilis and Valant carefully sequence the introduction of archival materials using the *Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy*. Dos Santos, McGuire, and She develop a rubric for effective interviews to scaffold the experiential learning process for students. Finally, Golesorkhi carefully considers the sequencing of learning about methods and applying it experientially within her course design. We believe that both the larger themes and the individual activities and materials provided will prove useful for instructors of qualitative methods.

Out of the Classrooms!

Fieldwork is an essential part of qualitative methods. The contributions to this symposium demonstrate that effective qualitative methods instruction often occurs beyond the classroom. Golesorkhi designs her entire course around engagement with the community. Kotsovilis and Valant take students from the classroom into the library and archives. Dos Santos, McGuire, and She's interview methods encourage students to engage with participants outside of the university. Qualitative methods instruction thus emphasizes the *social* in social science. As our contributors report, students are frequently enthusiastic for opportunities to engage beyond the classroom. It is important to note that such engagement works best—for both students and community members—if it is embedded in methods instructions. Symposium contributors describe how explicit methods instruction can (and should) scaffold and improve these activities. The qualitative methods that students learn in the process—including designing and conducting interviews and critically understanding archival materials—also are broadly applicable professional skills that develop their critical citizenship.

CONCLUSION

The contributions to this symposium highlight the possibilities for teaching qualitative methods in (and outside of) the undergraduate classroom. They demonstrate that complex issues (e.g., epistemology) can be taught engagingly and at an appropriate level. They show how instructors can animate seemingly tedious research tasks (e.g., archival research) with effective instruction. They also show that teaching rigorous methods (e.g., the careful design of interviews) is not only possible but necessary for designing effective projects beyond the classroom. Finally, they demonstrate that teaching qualitative methods is possible and suitable for undergraduate instruction at a wide range of institutions.

We hope that the contributions to this symposium will find their way directly into other political science classrooms. More than that, however, we hope that the positive experience of the instructors and their students inspire others—individual instructors and entire departments—to include, expand, and improve qualitative methods instruction in their curriculum. Doing so will serve both our discipline and our students well.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research. ■

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SYMPOSIUM CONTRIBUTORS

Shamira Gelbman *is professor of political science at Wabash College. She can be reached at gelbmans@wabash.edu.*

Sebastian Karcher *is research associate professor of political science and the director of the Qualitative Data Repository at Syracuse University. He can be reached at skarcher@syr.edu.*

Pedro A. G. dos Santos *is professor of comparative politics and international relations at the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University. He can be reached at pdossantoo01@csbsju.edu.*

Lara-Zuzan Golesorkhi *is associate professor of political science and global affairs at the University of Portland. She can be reached at golesork@up.edu.*

Spyridon Kotsovilis *is assistant professor of political science at the University of Toronto Mississauga. He can be reached at spyridon.kotsovilis@utoronto.ca.*

Mary P. McGuire *is associate professor of political science at the State University of New York at Cortland. She can be reached at Mary.McGuire@cortland.edu.*

Xiaoye She *is associate professor of political science at California State University San Marcos. She can be reached at xshe@csusm.edu.*

Meaghan Valant *is assessment and liaison librarian at the University of Toronto Mississauga. She can be reached at meaghan.valant@utoronto.ca.*

Michelle D. Weitzel *is assistant professor of international relations and political science at the Geneva Graduate Institute. She can be reached at michelle.weitzel@graduateinstitute.ch.*

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