SYMPOSIUM

Practical Theory: Teaching Political and Economic Citizenship

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How can philosophical instruction inform practical analysis and decision making among college students in a way that demonstrably benefits them as individual members of our polity and economy? I pose this question because each year, I introduce classic political theory to first- and second-year college students who simultaneously confront a fiscal crisis in the American state and profound financial challenges as individuals, and I want to ensure that the concepts and analytical strategies we study as theory can meet their most pressing practical needs during the first decade that they are out of college.

This issue became central to my teaching when I reluctantly concluded that my students were not making more than superficial connections between the ideas that we investigated on the one hand and the nation's fiscal policy or their personal financial circumstances on the other hand. This was the case even after they had studied with me for a whole semester, during which we surveyed a wide range of applied political theory. Students revealed the discontinuity between theory and practice in their essays and in our one-to-one advising sessions. Although they became good at abstract analysis in making connections between classic theory and the large issues of history, my students avoided practical applications of theory to important matters of contemporary public policy and their personal lives.

This essay describes and critiques some of the ways that I responded to this instructional problem by recasting a lower-level course in theory so that students could use classic political theory to assess the meanings and tasks of political and economic citizenship. Because this article shows how a course with clear limitations evolved into a successful forum for blending theory and practice, some of its sources, strategies, and conclusions should be applicable to other courses that are intended to link theory and practice. Additionally, the approach to course revision shows how matters of current public policy and personal interest can be integrated successfully into a course that emphasizes political thought.

THE ORIGINAL CURRICULUM AS A CONCEPTUAL EXPLORATION

The original curriculum pursued a key objective that is best expressed as a proposition: students who are beginning their college studies should learn how to apply and assess classic methods and theories of ethics and politics in their own lives. Since those methods and theories have had a powerful influence on the development of our civilization, they can have a corresponding influence on the development of individuals.

To this end, the original curriculum required that students read classic authors who help them develop a clear understanding of ways that conscience and power intersect at four levels of political activity: international politics, national politics, group politics, *and* individual political behavior. We read primary sources and scholarly works by 17 different authors, but I emphasized the insights and alternative conceptions of political activity that we find in the work of Plato and Aristotle, Hobbes and Locke, Calvin and Machiavelli, and Thoreau. In truth, I wanted my students to take politics in each of these contexts as analytically and personally as Thoreau or Calvin or Aristotle or (better still) Socrates.

The economic collapse of 2008 and 2009 prompted a thorough reconsideration of my teaching. Our country faced a fiscal crisis that few experts anticipated (Krugman 2009), and our fellow citizens and students faced personal economic challenges that most did not understand (Lusardi 2009). It was bad enough to observe that prominent experts were wrong, but it was both galling and disheartening to learn that my students did not demonstrate, either in their conversation or their work, that they would be able to make good lives using their political science training. I have no impact on the effectiveness of public scholars, but in my teaching, I should have a discernible impact on the political and practical efficacy of my students.

THE REVISED CURRICULUM AS A BLEND OF CONCEPTUAL EXPLORATION AND FINANCIAL ANALYSIS

In the expectation that civic and economic engagement might depend on the presence of very personal challenges to students, the revised curriculum paired a new proposition with the original: at the beginning of their college studies, students should learn how to study and interpret the parallel problems of national finance and personal finance. The new proposition grew out of two complementary hunches. First, the student who has learned to see the practical limits of his or her financial alternatives may be able to see how practical limitations in the national budget produce both ethical and political constraints on the uses to which we can put our government. The hard choices of ethics and politics may become meaningful and even useful when we consider how we choose among alternatives during individual and group budgeting. In short, students might take national politics personally if they could see themselves in the political decision making. Second, the analysis of public finance is most intelligible when it is directly contrasted with the analysis of personal finance. Students might find it useful to study revenues, expenditures, and debts at the national level when they match their macroanalysis with the microanalysis of revenues, expenditures, and debts at the personal level. In crude terms, the

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student who cannot understand the trade-offs involved in amortizing $35,000 in personal debt will not be able to understand the trade-offs involved in servicing and paying down the $10,618,718,703,374 national debt that we confronted on January 22, 2009, when the spring semester began (U.S. Treasury, Bureau of the Public Debt 2009).

Sources of Theory and Data

Our reading assignments added up to approximately one hundred pages of dense philosophical analysis, five hundred pages of highly readable text on national and personal finance, and one hundred pages of data-displays.[1] Thus, readings consisted of:

- A very abbreviated list of chapter-readings from five classic writers in political theory (Plato, Aristotle, Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Locke)
- Data and analysis from the U.S. government and think tanks (Congressional Budget Office 2009; Draut 2008; Public Agenda 2009; Tax Foundation 2009)
- A pair of popular guides to national and personal finance that students read in their entirety (Bittle and Johnson 2008; Draut 2007)
- A national budget workbook published by a public interest organization (Concord Coalition 2009)
- A personal budget worksheet published by a software manufacturer (Microsoft 2009)

This combination of theoretical writing and data departed very substantially from the curriculum that I had offered when the original course was still close to its origins as a survey of classic theory, augmented by exercises and assignments that connected theory to practice at the international, national, group, and personal levels of analysis. When revising the course, I expected that a relatively narrow theoretical focus on national and personal decisions involving financial resources would help students develop some expertise in applying philosophical ideas and arguments to problems that link the individual to the national polity and commonwealth. I further hoped that expertise would lead to efficacy.

Strategies for Teaching and Learning

Our writing and budgeting assignments alternated between philosophical assessments of concepts in theory and financial balance sheets for both the nation and each student in the course. Our key assignments consisted of:

- A conceptual autobiography, in which individual students described and evaluated the relative importance of the political and economic concepts that have had the greatest impact on their development as individual citizens
- A personal budget-making exercise, in which individual students learned the issues and values, both conceptual and monetary, that are at stake when setting out a $30,000 to $60,000 prospective family budget for 2017 (approximately five years after they expect to graduate)
- A national budget-making exercise, in which small groups of students learned the issues and values, both conceptual and monetary, that are at stake when setting out a $3.5 trillion U.S. federal budget for 2009
- An analytical essay, in which individual students philosophically assessed the desirable and compromise objectives that they could define for both the nation and their personal lives.

Students might find it useful to study revenues, expenditures, and debts at the national level when they match their macroanalysis with the microanalysis of revenues, expenditures, and debts at the personal level. In crude terms, the student who cannot understand the trade-offs involved in amortizing $35,000 in personal debt will not be able to understand the trade-offs involved in servicing and paying down the $10,618,718,703,374 national debt that we confronted on January 22, 2009, when the spring semester began.

To increase the sophistication of student analysis, the course included a pretest and posttest of mathematical skills that had been developed by the college's mathematics department (Keene State College Mathematics Center 2005). The test assessed six skills: fractions and ratios, decimals, percents, order of operations, solving equations, and linear functions. The college provided self-guided tutorials and mathematics tutors so that students who were initially unsuccessful when using a given skill set would be able to complete all six sections successfully by the end of the semester. Given the large amount of calculation that students would do for the course, there were clear advantages in developing skills prior to their use in the course.

Under our school's four-credit course regime, we had ample time in class meetings to develop both our collective (lecture-based) and individual (small-group-based) understanding of the material. Classes met for 1 hour and 45 minutes, twice each week.

We used our first class meeting each week to consider concepts, questions, and propositions from classic theory, and to explore applications from practices in our time. For example, we followed Plato in asking what the purpose of public law is,

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Aristotle in asking how the ultimate goals of individuals relate to the ultimate goals of the state, and Locke in asking what we should expect of government if it should provide individuals with the best opportunity to maximize their potential as human beings. These Tuesday meetings treated theoretical contributions chronologically (from Plato through Locke) and cumulatively (examining ways that subsequent theory adapts previous theory). Throughout, we emphasized insights in classic theory that link or contrast the development of human potential at the individual and state levels of analysis. The conceptual autobiography drew upon the work of our "theoretical Tuesdays."

We used our second class meeting each week to develop practical applications for our broad concepts and propositions by examining data and practices that bear on public and personal budgets. Our Thursday explorations proceeded both prospectively (to 2017) and retrospectively (to the 1930s) to let us make connections between the practicalities of public and personal finance and the theory-derived insights that emerge when we think critically about public and personal "policy." The national budget-making exercise and the personal budget-making exercise drew upon the work of our "practical Thursdays."

To establish an historical context for our analysis, we reviewed the experience of Western governments that have pursued the prosperity of all citizens by providing income security to the aged and medical care to the aged and poor and, more broadly, managing the economy through public spending and public debt. In the United States, these efforts have produced the Social Security program, the Medicare and Medicaid programs, and extensive borrowing that accumulates in the national debt. Given their concurrent instruction in political theory, students readily grasped the Lockean logic of national finance (whereby a commonwealth expands upon the freedom that people have in nature by making them more prosperous than they would be without cooperation) and they learned firsthand just how difficult it is to match expenditures with resources at the national level (because we cannot ignore the Hobbesian logic of stressing security over freedom and prosperity). We used two methods to develop this understanding.

First, in simulations of legislative decision making, students learned how difficult it is to pursue simultaneously even a few different definitions of prosperity, using data published by the Congressional Budget Office (2009) and exercises and data published by Public Agenda (2009), the Concord Coalition (2008), and Bittle and Johnson (2008). We broke into small groups, and, over a period of successive Thursdays, we made many of the same choices and trade-offs that Congress and the president make when establishing priorities among spending objectives under different assumptions of resources and revenues.

By the end of the national budgeting process, each student had a copy of the abbreviated national budget published by the Concord Coalition that represented the consensus of the small group in which the student had worked and deliberated. Judged qualitatively, student budgets were remarkable for their highly "liberal" (perhaps even Lockean) emphasis on spending that would enable some parts of the polity to prosper when subsidized by all of the polity; they were simultaneously remarkable for their relative inability to make significant reductions in the federal deficit.

Second, in simulations of family budgeting, students deepened their understanding of income, expenditure, investment, health care, and borrowing over time. Using background data published by Draut (2007; 2008), the Tax Foundation (2009), and a budget template published by Microsoft (2009), they created family budgets for the families that they expect to have five years beyond college, using data from 2009 to perform their calculations. In this exercise, students consulted parents and families for most of the data that they entered into their budgets, but they augmented family consultations with Internet resources about incomes earned in their prospective fields of work and government sources for tax data. Significantly, parents told students to tell me that the applied and personal aspects of the course were welcome additions to the college experience.

By the end of the personal budgeting process, each student had developed a table of projected income and expenses and a pair of sheets that specified the impacts that governments at some level have on certain elements of their prospective budgets. Again, judged qualitatively, the individual budgets were remarkable for their realism: 18- and 19-year-olds were looking seven years into their future and identifying the rates at which they would be earning, spending, and contributing to the task of financing the public interest. My students' personal budgets balanced, sometimes because they made optimistic estimates, but more frequently because they incorporated hard choices.

To sharpen our understanding of policy options, we explored an alternative to the modern welfare state that might offer prosperity, or at least security, in a form that would be acceptable to class members. Thus, in classroom discussions and individual student writing, we asked whether or not a Hobbesian conception of governance would free people to care for themselves, all the while they are being protected from each other by a police force and protected from foreign threats by a national armed force. The value of this exercise lies in its explicit treatment of publicly pursued prosperity in dichotomous terms. By considering the absence of a governmental commitment in relation to the current presence of a governmental commitment, students were able to see the extent to which modern debates on public welfare are matters of degree, because they lie on a continuum of interventionist policy alternatives. However, a future iteration of the course should connect the Hobbesian analysis of self-reliant economic activity to an array of specific proposals that American "fiscal conservatives" offer in place of the apparatus that has developed under "fiscal liberals."

THE STUDENTS' PHILOSOPHICAL AND PRACTICAL CONCLUSIONS

At the end of the course, we reconsidered some of the philosophical concerns that we had investigated during the first half of the course. Because I had hoped that students would develop individual political philosophies that would serve them

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after the course was completed, we returned to three questions that I expected to prompt the integration of classic thought with modern fiscal analysis.

First, what is the purpose of government? Students knew from Plato that the goal of public rule might be construed as harmonious work in the interest of the commonwealth, accomplished by people who develop their special capacities (Plato 1901, 2, 369a–372a). However, once they had thoroughly investigated fiscal constraints on personal and national priorities, remarkably few students accepted Plato's compound proposition. Instead of applying their special capacities to the needs of the group, they were more determined to assert the primacy of individual needs than they were at the beginning of the course. When confronted with a choice between individualism and collectivism, students effectively assessed the philosophical pros and cons of individualism and collectivism. But they came down on the side of individualism, because they could not make a case that favored group needs over individual needs that was demonstrably superior to the case that favored individual needs over group needs. My students could not speak honestly or authoritatively for the collective when it was explicitly differentiated from the individual, but they could speak honestly and authoritatively for themselves.

Second, how do the ultimate goals of individual life relate to the ultimate goals of collective political life? Students knew that Aristotle, in his works on self-governance and community governance, tells us that both sets of goals converge in the maximization of human potential (Aristotle 1908, 1, 1094a–1095a; Aristotle 1885, 1, 1252a). Since Aristotle's aggregation of individual and collective goals suggests to many students that collective benefits might derive from individualistic activities, even as individual benefits derive from a well-developed state, many students were prepared to serve the collectivity so long as they could also serve individual goals. The students who seriously reconsidered Aristotle were able to make *both* financial and philosophical connections between social welfare and private life. Unfortunately, most students made *either* financial or philosophical connections between social welfare and private life—a problem addressed in the final section of this article. Although their calculations generally seemed less idealistic (as would be the case in pursuing a conception of "The Good") than materialistic (as is the case in pursuing a quid pro quo), students clearly related the aggregate success of a society in promoting group welfare to the individual prospects of citizens seeking to maximize their individual potential. When students did not need to think of their goals as distinct from the aggregate goals of the collective, they were not reluctant to speak for the needs of the state and the individual.

Third, what should we expect of government if it is to provide individuals with the best opportunity to maximize their potential as human beings? Students had spent a good deal of time contemplating Locke's answer to this question in *The Second Treatise of Government*, in which he asserts the primacy of security, freedom, and prosperity as individual rights upon which government should not infringe (Locke 1688, VII, 87). Assuming that rights translate into goals, students readily grasped the trade-offs that often arise among Lockean goals, as when social expenditures on "guns" compete with social expenditures on "butter." They just as readily grasped the way that certain goals might advance the cause of other goals, as when prosperity permits people to enlarge their enjoyment of freedom. However, students were no more effective than lawmakers in establishing how trade-offs among policy objectives should be decided at the national level of analysis. Most overspent when they established national priorities, and they knew very well why they overspent: they could not make collective decisions that impaired the prospects of valued goals. In contrast with their performance as "lawmakers," students were very effective in establishing priorities in personal finance. With very few exceptions, students demonstrated in prospective budget after prospective budget that they knew how to keep expected financial resources in line with expected investments in their future prosperity. Students do not plan to overspend on an individual level, because they expect to "do without" as individuals in ways that they do not expect to "do without" as a commonwealth.

THE INSTRUCTOR'S PEDAGOGICAL CONCLUSIONS

The effectiveness of a theory course that emphasizes the interplay of ethics and politics was substantially improved by systematically integrating fiscal choices at the personal and national levels of analysis. Despite my lack of controlled testing and outside assessment, I believe that the strategy and findings reported here are sufficiently thought-provoking to warrant presenting them to the larger political science community for its consideration.

First, the concepts, propositions, and questions posed in classic philosophical literature on politics are easily illustrated and examined within the context of personal and national finance. Because politics is an enterprise that makes collective choices that generally require trade-offs and reluctant agreements, financial choices of both a personal and public nature provide an excellent framework for weighing the values that underlie the dollars at issue. Students readily traverse the intellectual terrain between philosophy and finance when they can see themselves occupying that terrain. Indeed, in their conceptual autobiographies, students made clear connections between the ideas of philosophy and the issues that they have been raised to consider during the first two decades of their lives. Philosophy is as recognizable as a bank balance and a budget to young students precisely because each focuses on trade-offs among desirable objectives.

Second, in open-ended student evaluations drafted at the end of the semester, students repeatedly declared that the course provided them with the means to think analytically about their futures, both as public citizens and private citizens who participate in a national political economy over which they have little control. They believe, and their contingent budgeting demonstrates, that they are equipped with the analytical skills necessary to respond as individuals to changes, both adverse and favorable, in the national political and economic environment. At a minimum, the recast course enhanced students' perceptions of their political and economic efficacy. They believe that they will be able to make good lives using some of their political science training.

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Third, despite the foregoing observations, I was disappointed by the low degree of philosophical and financial synthesis that I observed in student work at the end of the course. I had not taught them how to integrate abstract theory and financial analysis in ways that contribute to a personal political philosophy. In the final analytical essay (which asked students to formulate philosophical assessments of desirable and compromise objectives for themselves and the nation), students generally confined themselves to financial analysis that was juxtaposed with philosophical phrases. In this assignment, student performance was almost uniformly excellent in confronting the financial dimensions of national and personal life during the next decade, but it was also disappointing inasmuch as half of the students neglected to include explicit philosophical argument. Fine accomplishments on the conceptual autobiography and the national and personal budgets had prompted me to hope that almost everybody would write essays that effectively blended narrative and analysis that would be both policy oriented and philosophical. That said, I did receive essays that would greatly please any policy analyst and every parent: they thoughtfully assessed the interdependence of national circumstances and choices on the one hand and personal objectives and alternatives on the other hand. When writing about the future in contingent terms, almost all students were explicit about the assumptions that they were making when they planned a "realistic," desirable future for the United States and themselves; additionally, almost all students were able to scale back on national and personal objectives in the event that life might not proceed as planned.

Student accomplishments in this course show that young members of our society can successfully confront the management of their national and personal lives by knowing what the issues are, by assessing why they value certain goals as opposed to others, and by learning to use specific skills that give them some control over their private and public lives. The solution to the fiscal crises of our state and our individual lives is thus likely to be a joint product of specific factual knowledge, particular philosophical values, and special skills that are applied to the governance of our public and private lives. In essence, the solution is *citizenship*, which Aristotle defines as participation in politics (1985, 3, 1275a22–11275b13). In the course of working with students in these two political science classrooms, both my students and I learned to develop and refine this concept into two key points. First, citizenship is governance. Second, just as a person is a citizen of his own life to the extent that he governs or manages his individual life, a person is a citizen in his or her community to the extent that he or she governs or manages the collective life. ■

NOTES

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1. With the exception of two inexpensive paperback books on personal and national budgeting, all reading assignments drew upon works and documents published on the Internet. Because the cost of course readings was very low, most students strongly endorsed the substitution of Internet resources for conventionally published texts, but many (invariably high-performing) students requested that a reader be recommended that contained all of the required classic texts.

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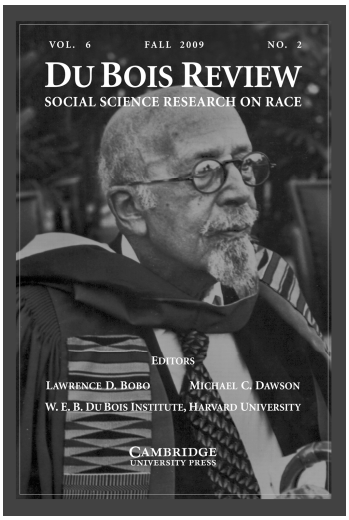
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