Teaching Research Methods Track Summary

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The Teaching Research Methods Track at the third annual APSA Teaching and Learning Conference included 26 participants from schools ranging from small colleges to major research universities. The program included presentations on the state of the undergraduate research methods field, information literacy, and a variety of teaching innovations, culminating in a large group discussion where we agreed upon a common set of strengths, opportunities, and challenges to teaching research methods, as well as a set of recommendations for a future Conference track.

State of the Research Methods Field

Our session kicked off with the preliminary results of a survey on the content of undergraduate methods courses in political science departments. The investigators found significant variety in the topics covered in the methods courses, although most courses focused more on "methods" than the scope of the discipline, and more on quantitative rather than qualitative methods. They also found that the methods course is typically the teaching responsibility of one or two faculty members, even in relatively large departments. These findings formed the backdrop for later debates among the participants about what the ideal form of the methods course—or a set of methods courses—might be.

Information Literacy

Two presentations focused on developing students' information literacy skills. Their approaches were tied to the standards of information literacy promulgated by the Association of College and Research Libraries and past research on students' progression in research and analytical skills. These papers emphasized the importance of developing student skills in locating relevant sources for research papers and of assessing whether the anticipated learning outcomes in these courses were met. As was the case for the research on the content of the methods course, these papers led to participant debate over whether these skills needed to be emphasized in the methods course or throughout departmental curricula.

Teaching Innovations

Not unlike presentations from previous years, many of the presentations focused on the problems inherent in teaching undergraduate research methods. Students lack basic knowledge of the research process and, more commonly, lack interest in research methods. The teaching innovation presentations focused on the various styles used to overcome these intrinsic problems.

A common theme was the importance of engaging student interest in research methods. Several suggestions were proposed, but the most common method used to engage students is to simply present them with behavioral phenomena they find interesting, and the more practical the material, the more engaged the students become. By using real-world examples that students can relate to through provocative readings and guest lecturers with policy implications, the presenters argue that student interest can be primed for further training.

Once the students are engaged the next step is to train students to understand what type of data they need and how they are going to analyze them. Teaching innovation presentations ranged from "Just Plain Data Analysis" (JPDA), the compilation and presentation of numerical evidence to support arguments at a very rudimentary level, to much more complex mathematical presentations directed at understanding formal modeling.

A discussion about what should be taught in an undergraduate research methods course brought the session full circle. There was general consensus about basic course content: an understanding of key political science indicators; where to find literature and supporting data; how to assess literature and the supporting data's academic quality; reliability and validity; the use of appropriate statistical measures; and data presentation skills. The group then discussed the best approaches for conveying the material, which varied greatly from faculty-lead, hands-on student-conducted research projects to online Internet-based hybrid-type courses to interactive techniques for teaching abstract concepts.

The importance of research methods as a required course was again discussed, a carry-over from last year's track. We agreed that research methods should be required and the students should be exposed to methods early in their academic careers so they will be better prepared to understand academic literature in upper-division courses. One solution is to integrate methods concepts across the curriculum using various lower-division courses to explicate the scientific method or particular methodologies. Integration of methods across political science courses may provide some remedy to the quality and quantity of methods training undergraduates receive.

Conclusion

By the close of the Conference, we agreed upon a common set of strengths, opportunities, and challenges to teaching undergraduate research methods, as well as a set of recommendations for a future Conference track. Our common goal is to provide undergraduate political science students with a strong fundamental understanding of the research methods used in our field and the skills to apply these methods outside of the classroom. Finally, we closed with two recommendations for next year's Conference. First, we would like to see more paper proposals based on formal assessment of teaching research methods. There are many opportunities for innovation reflected in the approaches presented during the Conference. What is lacking is systematic assessment of the competing course designs and teaching techniques. Second, we would like to see a roundtable with research methods textbook authors to discuss the motivations behind certain inclusions, exclusions, and approaches in their books.

Teaching with Technology I Track Summary

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Understanding the importance of using technological tools in teaching political science, the organizers of the APSA Teaching and Learning Conference dedicated two tracks to teaching with technology. Track I was moderated by Robert H. Trudeau of Providence College.

The first session focused on utilizing technology in the classroom. Antonio Rappa of the National University of Singapore demonstrated the usefulness of Integrated Virtual Learning Environment

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