SYMPOSIUM

Teaching What We Don't Know

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What would it mean for political scientists to teach what we don't know? Such is the provocative question with which philosopher Jacques Rancière's *Ignorant Schoolmaster* leaves his reader.[1] Through the fantastical story of Joseph Jacotot, a nineteenth century schoolteacher who teaches first French and then law to Flemish students (while being trained neither in law nor Flemish), Rancière opens a series of questions about the educational mission of the university, the teacher-student relationship, and the connection of education to democracy. Too often, I fear, we political scientists answer his driving question quickly, in one of two ways. Either we insist, a little anxiously, that undergraduate education and research reinforce one another—and risk the implication that teaching thus is not a "waste" of our time. Or we insist, a little glibly, that undergraduate education should radically risk not teaching students anything at all—if students learn nothing, they have only themselves to blame. The first response wrongly assumes that research only benefits teaching, rather than the other way around. And I would imagine that, following the financial crisis of 2008, few faculty would feel comfortable with the second response, or with adopting a teaching philosophy that defiantly refuses any claim to prepare students for working life. So I want to return to this question and puzzle it through more slowly: *What does it mean to teach our undergraduates what we don't know?* In the sections that follow, I tease out some answers along the three dimensions already mentioned: (1) those of the educational mission of the university, (2) the teacher-student relationship, and (3) the connection of education to democracy. I argue that replicating our research expertise in our undergraduate teaching simply replicates existing hierarchies; moving our teaching practices into our research, however, may upend these hierarchies in the classroom and in the knowledge we faculty produce.

UNIVERSITIES AND MISSION STATEMENTS

Most recently, universities have come under fire for insufficiently preparing students for the labor market. Sensationalist stories abound about the 10 most useful or useless majors; about the inability of students to perform basic job-related tasks; about the steps that businesses themselves are forced to take in order to train new employees themselves.[2] University administrators at research universities respond by advertising to the public that faculty bring research into the classroom so as to ensure that the knowledge being transmitted is "cutting-edge." Such pressures affect faculty even in the liberal arts. Rancière acknowledges this intuition when he writes that all "conscientious professors" know that mastery is not "about cramming students with knowledge and having them repeat it like parrots" but that a teacher should seek "to transmit his knowledge to his students so as to bring them… to his own level of expertise" (3). Seeming to make a contrast between applied and liberal arts curricula, Rancière makes an unexpected move. Counterintuitively, he describes that even in the liberal arts, this process is one of "enforced stultification" (7), not because the professor is "an aged obtuse master" but because of the effects of saying "I will find new ways to explain it to [the student], ways more rigorous in principle, more attractive in form—and I will verify that he has understood" (8). Rancière suggests we often confuse the assertion of expert authority with education. What would it mean to abandon the usual expert model of teaching, one that is present even in liberal arts curricula?

The desire to offer up explications—inspired by being "knowledgeable, enlightened, and of good faith" (7)—misses two crucial aspects of teaching that should pervade any research agenda. First, most research meanders through failure, boredom, and confusion before it accomplishes any kind of discovery. And second, good research is born out of ignorance rather than expertise. That is, researchers often achieve insight, eventually and painstakingly, by first suppressing what they think they know. For most academics, we are so steeped in the culture and practice of research that we do not stop to think about the crucial role that ignorance, blindspots, and our ability to trump these play in our own work. And certainly, much of our academic existence may be spent on more workmanlike projects in which we fill a gap, extend a claim, or transfer knowledge to new domains. But those projects we take to be ground-breaking even as they may be profoundly incomplete, wrong, or skewed according to conventional wisdom—think North and Thomas's *The Rise of the Western World*, Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, or Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*—become transformative because they refuse to begin with assumptions so common they are not even viewed as assumptions—they are not viewed at all. Ignorance of structuring assumptions—be it deliberate or unintentioned—makes it possible to set them aside and to investigate the world on new terms.

With this claim in mind, let us return to undergraduate teaching. While graduate research seminars may contrive a research environment, faculty in undergraduate teaching more often deliver packaged expertise. For many academics, teaching is often a question of reproducing our own training and education: revising old syllabi, retracing the steps of our own intellectual journey, or looking at how others have constructed the narrative of a course. Notable scholars have delivered notable lectures on fetish texts, ranging from Socrates' *Apology* to Kant's *What is Enlightenment?* to the *Communist Manifesto* or—in a case of life imitating art—Weber's own

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lectures on vocation. Although we may quibble about the details—whether to include Montaigne or Montesquieu in a course on early modern thought—some texts unavoidably must be taught. To the extent that we bring research into teaching, we think of the classroom as a stage to perform the accumulation of insight for the public, and we neglect to teach the *process* by which we decide what to include or leave out.

Again, *what would it mean to teach what we don't know*? To teach both with and against our training and its assumptions? One possibility might be to teach classic texts from perspectives absent from our training; to pair J.S. Mill's *On Liberty* against his tracts on imperialism, for example. Or one might adopt different starting points in order to alter the narrative of a course; think of the difference that arises from beginning a course on state-building with Bartolomeo de las Casas's account of the European conquest of American peoples—peoples who "lack souls"—rather than Machiavellian or Hobbesian claims that violence is simply a natural part of human society. One advantage to these changes is that they model for our undergraduates something of the "process" of research. They teach students to run toward, not away from, the uncertain, the unknown and the untried and then see what frictive possibilities might emerge through deliberate disorientation. Teaching what we don't know throws faculty as much as students off their game. Bereft of the "usual" narratives and twice-told tales we rely on to frame introductory courses in particular, we are forced to experiment, invent, and confront our own ignorance. We are also forced to confront the inadequacy of the usual paradigms as world politics throws their biases into glaring relief. Rather than waiting for the dust to settle around Thomas Piketty's *Capital*, or the politics of colonialism, we might teach those texts and the question marks that surround them. Like our students, we would likely find ourselves without enough time to prepare at the level of "expert"; we would serve less as experts passing on certainties than as models of curiosity and intellectual risk-taking. The pedagogical practices, as well as the content, of the classroom would need to change—and, as I suggest in the next section, changes in pedagogy might affect the knowledge we reproduce in our research.

EDUCATION AND CLASSROOM ASYMMETRIES

Teaching what we don't know would mean that, second, the dynamics and hierarchies that organize students and teachers in classrooms would alter. Such teaching would begin to undo the tendency to "break the world of intelligence into two, by installing the division between the groping animal and the learned little man, between common sense and science" (8). Rancière intimates that for all that intelligence and education are supposed to equalize, they often become a site to institutionalize inequality; he finds in Jacotot a radical means for upending usual classroom hierarchies, especially that between master and student. As we greet the first generations schooled entirely under No Child Left Behind and partially under the Common Core, we greet students schooled in privileging right answers, tightly defined learning contexts, and assessment tests. These students often do not recognize their dependency on teachers to make learning predictable and safe. Some universities have unusual diversity, with student knowledge including fluency in Mandarin, Arabic, and Farsi, and their attendant literary and philosophic traditions. Often, though, we see these differences not as competencies but as liabilities: as hurdles to good writing, to reading in a second language, to working within the "usual" paradigms of politics and political science. Worse, students over-attuned to teachers' expectations lose sight of their strengths. Both high school norms and postsecondary diversity encourage students to "devote [their] intelligence to the work of grieving: to understand that [they] don't understand unless [they are] explained to" (8). Quite inadvertently, we encourage students to respond to a hierarchy that dulls them to their own intellectual capacities. Students regret the intelligences that they have, rather than finding ways to leverage these into new skills and learning. However, when being taught by someone who likewise does not know with absolute certainty, students learn to model that posture as something other than incapacity: they learn to take themselves seriously, develop a process of inquiry, and move their claims into the world. If the teacher is not an expert, the student cannot be an ingénue.

With the usual classroom hierarchies softened, Rancière radicalizes his pedagogical claims. From the basis of a democratic claim that few would refuse—"all men have equal intelligence"—he claims, "Whoever teaches without emancipating stultifies. And whoever emancipates doesn't have to worry about what the emancipated person learns" (18). What makes this recognition of student curiosity more than a general reminder that learning calls for mutual respect? The first claim seems innocent: it defies teachers to presume the equal capacity of their students and to teach that intuition. The remaining sentences puzzle: they open up what counts as learning, and the scope of a teacher's responsibility for whether students learn anything or not. I struggle with these claims and how they mix intuitions about research with those about teaching. On the one hand, the presumption of equality is a presumption we accord to our colleagues. As we write journal articles and book manuscripts, we routinely acknowledge the presumed intelligence of our reader. We shy away from obvious straw-man arguments, strive to acknowledge counterarguments or disconfirming evidence, and institutionalize a critical review process both pre- and post-publication. Although at worst these are token

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professionalisms, at best they ensure that academic freedom maintains its critical bite.

On the other hand, adapting this critical process for the classroom is more difficult than it might seem. When I taught at the University of Chicago, my students refused to acknowledge the intelligence of their peers and constantly reviewed my facial expressions and body language for signs of approval or disapproval (one savvy group presented me with a list of "tells" at the end of the semester). They craved the certainty of hierarchy. At the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities my students routinely engage in some of the most critical, searching verbal discussions with their classmates that I have ever heard. Then, in written peer review, I have found myself obliged to mark down Minnesota students for *not* correcting problems identified by a peer—effectively forcing students to benefit from critique. Acknowledgement of others' equal intelligence cannot be stipulated and cannot undo hierarchies subtly in place. Acknowledgment also does not absolve teachers of responsibility. Rancière suggests a complicated responsibility for teachers who would emancipate: that we somehow police the boundary between emancipation and learning, and yet in a way that does not entrench classroom inequalities. How certain are we of the distinctions drawn between emancipation and mere learning—and does not our desire to offer emancipation only reaffirm our own status? Perhaps Rancière urges something other than a direct—dare one say, stultifying—application of his radical charge. At the very least, teaching what we don't know would oblige us to revisit the hierarchies and conventions that organize our presumptions of equality and fairness in the Academy, and their effects. Rather than embracing absolute authority ("because I'm the teacher, that's why!"), or asserting false equality ("we're all the same here!"), we might consider how to work within classroom inequalities and how to use these to compose a different view of the changing world about us.

Indeed, other experiments with Rancière's challenge have borne greater fruits. Whenever I teach Foucault, I now ask my students to post a question about the text to a public discussion board. For myself, this practice allows me to skirt the challenge of teaching texts that rage against discipline and didacticism. For my students, however, this exercise allows them to practice mobilizing their ignorance. Inevitably, their questions follow a format standard in academia but novel to undergraduates: the opening two sentences state the question's premise, then the question itself, followed by a few follow-up questions that press the stakes at hand. After we discuss the questions and possible ways to answer them, I ask students to take their question and turn it into a thesis statement. Invariably, they balk. Why, they ask, write a paper centered on what you don't know? This assignment taught me that the strange omissions in student writings resulted from their canny efforts to avoid their confusions, questions, and ambivalences. These were only liabilities, they thought, in assignments designed to demonstrate mastery. So we talk about what it means to explore ignorance, to finger the wound like a doubting Thomas, and seek what it might tell us. Some of the resulting papers are good, others are disasters. Some students consolidate their learning from this experience in their later papers, others revert to the usual rehash of class discussion. Unexpectedly, this exercise often teaches me in a way that has shaped my own research on occasion. My students inadvertently teach me what in the text "speaks" to a generation that is not mine and helps me to see new puzzles that my own education has resolved away.

Perhaps the question-as-thesis-statement experiment works where peer review fails because it is more unexpected, less institutionalized, and so viewed by students as possibly genuine. To the extent that peer review has become more widely implemented, students realize that its promise of equalizing students in the critical process is a false one. The students who benefit the most from it are those who have internalized something already, and so the peer review process becomes an opportunity to verify what they have learned by using that knowledge to critique another's work. If so, then peer review risks being only incidentally useful to the peer whose work is under review. Most students, however, realize at some level that they are being asked to mimic an authority they do not really have and so politely decline to join the charade. As Rancière notes, "Goodwill thus risks becoming an aggravating condition" to stultification (121)—often our ideals escape or exceed our practices. The push to institute new practices often undoes what initially made them successful by replicating a technique without regard for variations in context or persons. Inadvertently, it sneaks unquestioned authority and expertise back into the classroom but in the guise of pedagogical method rather than personality or expertise. Such methodism often defends itself through claims to democracy—by promising to level the playing field, to reach more people at less cost, to be equally available to all comers.[3] Rancière concludes that these efforts fall flat because "equality is not given nor is it claimed; it is practiced," (137). Rather than relying on pedagogical method, we need to exemplify our commitments through the texture, the exchanges, and the qualities of our engagements with students. When Rancière urges us to practice equality, we learn to grapple with the inequalities and variations that make each student or class different and that defy our efforts to institutionalize a generic set of "best practices." Backing away from methodism in the classroom might prompt reflection on how our familiarity with the usual research debates prevents us from identifying and challenging new patterns of power and inequality in domains that may be more politically urgent precisely because they *have not yet* settled into routine inquiry.

EDUCATION AND DEMOCRACY

The third dimension of teaching what you don't know bears on a broader range of democratic practices. Rancière's polemics hit home most forcefully when likening the site of education to the site of politics. Public primary education developed in the mid-nineteenth century—as the franchise extended—while the development of the American university system, and especially the land-grant institutions, was colored by the need to make education democratically available. Rancière sites his book in the nineteenth century for good reason. Nonetheless, Jacotot experiments during the period of the Restoration of the monarchy following the French Revolution. One wonders

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if this experiment—"let them teach themselves!"—found support because its ethos resonated just as much with radical equality as with a conservative disregard that masquerades as personal responsibility. Rancière's injunction, "Whoever emancipates doesn't have to worry about what the emancipated person learns" (18), risks becoming a conservative excuse to decline any pedagogical intervention for at-risk students. Although Rancière's radicalism marks those moments where democratic sensibilities falter and prejudices flourish, their polemical register demands something in addition to outrage. Hierarchy cannot be abolished by fiat. To say that these experiments in pedagogy equalize relations between students and teachers would be a cruel falsehood. The classroom is not a site of equality. It cannot be; one credentialed person assigns grades for everyone else. But it can be a site in which authority is performed differently, and where "I don't know" is an invitation to sort out confusions, evidence, criteria, and conclusions. Rancière's polemics should push teachers to confront *which* asymmetries we allow to organize classroom dynamics. In teaching and research both, what standards of evaluation camouflage the norms of dominant politics?

Beyond the individual classroom, teaching what you don't know also speaks to the democratic tensions involved in scaling up from ideal-typical individuals to larger collectives. In our own time, the education industry constantly searches for ways to reach more students at less cost, from online education to massive open online courses (MOOCs) to part-time degree programs. Alarmingly, many of these programs are being advocated under the banner of democracy and inclusion. MOOCs become another way to try to fulfill this democratic promise on the cheap and acknowledge that education is crucial to making political equality substantive. And yet, if we truly teach what we don't know, I think we commit ourselves to a more involved pedagogy; we commit ourselves to an educational mission that is expensive and labor-intensive. Most often when I read *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, I try to imagine how my public university students would respond to the challenge of learning French or law on their own and use these speculations as signals of where our educational system founders. Our students would need more diversity in teaching, more one-on-one instruction, and greater exposure to the world beyond (and, frankly, within) American borders, if they were to accomplish what Jacotot's students did. Jacotot presumes that such support could come from those people (just as unschooled) who are the community at large, and who are defined by a willingness to puzzle alongside others despite their own unfamiliarity with the material. Yet many of those associated with public universities—faculty, staff, or others—rarely have the time or resources for such engagement. The brilliance of Rancière's text is that it pushes us to ask: if we truly believe in the equal intelligence of all, then what would it take *as a society* to realize that capacity in a meaningful way? And why do American educators and citizens squirm and dodge in taking up that challenge? At their root, these questions strike at the heart of most political science research: the political promise of equality and the political realities of rule.

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I end on a note of provocative challenge: Teaching what we don't know might be political for another reason: it might politicize us as researchers. By and large, research in political science is driven by contributions to existing debates. Such a model makes us slow to respond to disconnects between newspaper headlines and disciplinary debates, even though our research domain—politics—is defined by change. Teaching what we don't know should infuse our research with a political charge that is more electric. Such teaching cultivates in students a sense of their own curiosity; their capacity as authors of a social text, writing in the face of the difficult and unknown; and their ability to serve as authorities in their own right. But undergraduate teaching should have the same effect on us faculty. Ideally, teaching what we don't know would free us to teach beyond the safety of our expertise, and would push us to write from our place in the world and not from the caution of established debates. If political science is ever-defined by power and its inequalities, then we need to be more conscious of our own role in reproducing power- and inequality-laden assumptions. We should heed our students when they try to teach these to us.

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NOTES

1. Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, trans. Kristin Ross (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991).
2. For a sampling, see: *The Employment Mismatch*, multi-story special report in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 4, 2013; Jenna Goudreau, "The Ten Worst College Majors," *Forbes*, October 11, 2012; David Segal, "What They Don't Teach Law Students: Lawyering," *The New York Times*, November 20, 2011, A1.
3. The language of methodism I borrow deliberately from Sheldon Wolin, "Political Theory as a Vocation," *The American Political Science Review* 63.4 (December 1969): 1062–82.

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