Avoiding, and Learning From, Mistakes Made by Junior Scholars Teaching Political Methodology

Clayton Webb and Soren Jordan

2022

This is the final version as it appears for the citation:

Webb, Clayton and Soren Jordan. 2022. "Avoiding, and Learning From, Mistakes Made by Junior Scholars Teaching Political Methodology." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 55 (1): 236-241. DOI: 10.1017/S1049096521001189

The page numbers here are consistent with the published version. Corresponding author: Clayton Webb (webb767@ku.edu).

Political methodology courses are among the most difficult political science courses to teach, and young faculty, who have the least amount of teaching experience, are often asked to teach them.¹ Resources abound for prospective instructors. Oxford University Press (Box-Steffensmeier, Brady, and Collier, 2008) and Sage (Curini and Franzese, 2020) curated extensive handbooks on political methodology; a number of articles have been written to introduce the key features of the subfield and describe its history (King, 1990; Beck, 2000; Roberts, 2018); and there are a number of popular textbooks that can be used for graduate (e.g. Bailey, 2015) and undergraduate courses (e.g. Kellstedt and Whitten, 2018). While these resources offer useful insights into the history and substance of political methodology, they do not offer much in the way of best practices for the delivery of the material.

We drew on the political methodology community to generate a list of dos and don'ts for new faculty tasked with teaching courses in political methodology. In the Fall of 2020, we conducted a survey of the membership of the American Political Science Association Political Methodology section. We asked participants to rate their early performance as purveyors of political methods, to reflect on the balance of material contained in their previous and current syllabi, and respond to questions about the biggest mistakes they made as young faculty and the best advice they have for new faculty today.

The Survey

The survey included a battery of demographic questions, a series of questions about course design, and a handful of open-ended questions. There were two solicitations. We sent the first solicitation email inviting people to participate on September 1, 2020 and sent a follow up email on September 7, 2020. Of the 579 members we contacted, 109 people completed the survey. Some of the sample demographics are summarized in Figure 1.

Given our goal, experience is paramount. We coded respondents as belonging to one of five categories based on their reported ranks. The distribution is depicted in the first vertical bar in Figure 1. The sample is surprisingly well-balanced across academic rank. A majority of the participants in the survey were among those we would classify as ideal subjects: 66 % identified as associate faculty or equivalent (22.02 %), full faculty or equivalent (22.02 %), or endowed faculty or equivalent (11.01 %). Non-tenured tenure-track faculty accounted for 21.10 % of the sample and non-tenure track faculty and graduate students accounted for 23.85 %.

The remaining bars in Figure 1 highlight other features of the sample. Respondents were 77.98 % male and 77.90 % non-Hispanic white or euro-American. This is slightly less diverse than the general APSA membership (62.40 % male and 75.25 % non-Hispanic white or euro-American), but this is to be expected (not accepted) as political methodology is one of the least diverse APSA sections (APSA, 2020). A majority of respondents (75.23 %) teach at institutions in the United States, and a majority reported having taught graduate (54.72 %) and undergraduate (59.43 %) courses. While the sample is not as diverse as we might like, it does reflect the current demographic balance of the subfield and the participants do have the requisite experience to provide valuable feedback.

We asked a series of questions about course design. Speaking from experience, young faculty often try to cover too much material. Survey respondents reported similar mistakes. Less than 10 % of respondents felt they needed to cover more material. We asked participants to reflect on what content had been over-or-under emphasized - data analysis, measurement, programming, statistics, theory, and writing - in an effort to provide guidance on how a syllabus

should be balanced.

Responses to our composition questions are depicted in Figures 2 and 3. There are six panels in each figure, one for each of the topics. The Y-axis depicts the percentage of respondents that chose each of the response options, ranging from *Too much* to *The Correct* to *Too little* emphasis placed on a topic. For each bar, we can interpret the largest shaded area as the response that was chosen by the preponderance of respondents. These responses are broken down by rank, which is depicted on the X-axis of each plot. The final bar in each plot shows the distribution of responses across all ranks.

Figure 2 shows the results for the graduate methods content questions. A troubling pattern stands out almost immediately: there are almost no shades of light gray in any of the columns across all of the panels. One observes a similar pattern in Figure 3. This means that, despite reporting that they tried to cover too much material in their early methods courses, most respondents felt that they needed to emphasize more of everything. While this may reveal something interesting about the psyche of methods faculty, it doesn't offer much in the way of guidance on course design. They don't tell us what to cut. As a result, this first section of the survey

is somewhat of a disappointment.

Our second strategy was to solicit advice the old-fashioned way: by asking. We asked respondents two pairs of open ended questions: (1) what were the biggest mistakes they made as junior faculty teaching methods to graduate and undergraduate students? and (2) what advice would they give new faculty tasked with teaching graduate and undergraduate students. The next section describes the responses and out-lines the lists of best practices derived from these responses.

Figure 1: Sample Demographics

Figure 2: Balance in Graduate Methods Courses

The Wisdom

We sorted the responses into themes and divided responses into categories based on the content of the responses.² From these lists, we were able to identify which pieces of advice were most common. We have divided the content into mistakes to avoid and advice to apply.

Mistakes to Avoid

Unrealistic Expectations: The most common mistake reported was that young faculty set their expectations too high. They build lectures and assignments assuming their students will have backgrounds in mathematics that they do not, they expect students to understand basic programming concepts for languages they have never seen, and they assume that students will naturally adopt the study habits that helped them succeed in their own programs. By the time these young faculty realize their errors, it's too late. This mistake is related to the other common blunder reported by our participants.

Too Much Material: Often as a consequence of their lofty expectations of their students, young methods faculty have a penchant for being overly ambitious with their course design. Young faculty often try to fit everything they know into their introductory course.

This causes them to assign too much reading as they try to cover too many topics and spend a lot of time developing complex problem sets that require too much effort to produce on the front end, cause students too become frustrated and fatigued, and require too much grading on the back end. As part of this process, one participant noted that they included topics on their early syllabi that they

were not prepared to teach before the semester because they felt the topics should be on the syllabus. This caused them to spend too much time preparing a lecture that, ultimately, was not of the same quality as those covering topics for which they were more prepared. Young faculty not only need to set reasonable expectations for their students; they need to set reasonable expectations for themselves.

Figure 3: Balance for Undergraduate Methods Courses

Advice to Apply

This section discusses the value of asking for advice from colleagues, not neglecting other responsibilities, and borrowing materials from senior faculty members.

Get advice from your colleagues: This was the most common piece of advice shared by respondents for young methods faculty. One cannot set reasonable expectations if they do not know what type of students they have. The best thing one can do to prepare to teach methods in a new department is ask the advice of the people that have taught in that department before. While our natural inclination is to use what worked for us, it is a good idea to run those ideas by your colleagues. For obvious reasons, senior faculty will have a better sense of graduate student capabilities and the needs of the graduate students than someone coming from another department. At best, you will have the information you need to develop the best course to meet the needs of your students and your colleagues may be able to provide you with previous syllabi, problems sets, and other teaching materials you can use to reduce the burden on yourself. At worst, you will blunt some of the criticism likely to come your way from senior colleagues if they know that you tried to take their perspectives into account when you designed the course.

Don't forget your other responsibilities: Young faculty have been tasked with teaching methods courses, but they should not spend all of their time working on your methods courses. Most faculties at Universities that have graduate methods programs have a 40-40-20 contract - 40 % teaching, 40 % research, and 20 % service - or something similar. Teaching a graduate methods course is a lot of work, particularly in the first handful of years where new instructors are compiling their materials. If they are not careful, they may find themselves in a situation where they are spending almost all of their time preparing to teach and none on research. This must be avoided. Young methods faculty will not achieve tenure for having the best regression slides. They need to ensure that they are balancing their teaching responsibilities with research and service.

Borrow materials from others: A new instructor is not the first person to teach a research methods course. If it can be avoided, there is no need to "re-invent the wheel." Senior faculty in your department and/or faculty from the department they are coming from may be willing to share their syllabi and materials with you if asked. If data examples, slides, and other resources can be borrowed from people with more experience, this will reduce time spent on course preparation. If senior faculty ask for something in return, it may create an opportunity to collaborate on developing teaching materials. As with any other economic enterprise, pooling efforts and resources produces higher levels of output and utility.

Conclusion

Political methodology is one of the most dynamic subfields in political science. Given this, it is not surprising that newly-minted junior faculty are often the people tasked with teaching research methods. Unfortunately, these are the people with the least teaching experience.

This article distills some of the collective wisdom of the discipline to guide young faculty as they begin the work of building their new courses. They should set realistic expectations for their students and try not to cover too much material. Soliciting advice and resources from senior colleagues can help to balance teaching with work and life while they work to improve the delivery of their material. More than anything else, we urge young faculty to remember why they are teaching these courses. The utility of a methods

course is not only teaching students the tools they need to conduct their own research projects; it also prepares them for other substantive classes. Young faculty need to prepare their students for future research, but they also are teaching them how to be educated consumers of political science.

The key to avoiding mistakes is listening to other people in the department. The first priority should always be the needs of students. A young faculty member's new colleagues will have a better sense of what those needs are than they will. They should borrow what they can, develop new material when they must, and try to find ways to improve their methods courses every year. One does not expect the first draft of a manuscript to be flawless, so there is no reason to expect that the first methods course will be perfect. Young faculty are unlikely to ever meet these lofty standards, but if they remain attentive to the input of their students and their colleagues, they can get closer each semester.

Notes

¹McConaughy (2008, 14) explains why methods courses are so difficult to teach in comparison to other courses: "A methods course requires hundreds of hours of work carefully choreographing lectures, preparing slides, writing handouts, and giving assignments. In contrast, a discussion course on your substantive area of interest probably may require very little preparation. This difference in workload could hardly be more stark."

²As with any survey, there was a considerable amount of attrition between the closed-response questions and the open-response questions: 38 of 109 responded to the question about undergraduate teaching mistakes, 43 of 109 offered undergraduate advice, 32 of 109 responded to the question about graduate teaching mistakes, and 33 of 109 offered graduate advice. The length of the responses ranged from two words to 358 words. The average length was 36 words. Given this relatively small set of text, we opted to qualitatively code the categories of advice.

References

- APSA. 2020. "APSA Membership - All Membership Demographic Profile."
URL: <https://www.apsanet.org/RESOURCES/Data-on-the-Profession/Dashboard/Membership>
- Bailey, Michael A. 2015. *Real Stats: Using Econometrics for Political Science and Public Policy*. First edition ed. Oxford University Press.
- Beck, Nathaniel L. 2000. "Political methodology: a welcoming discipline." *Journal of the American Statistical Association* 95 (450): 651–654.
- Box-Steffensmeier, Janet M, Henry E Brady, and David Collier. 2008. *The Oxford handbook of political methodology*. Vol. 10 Oxford Handbooks of Political.
- Curini, Luigi, and Robert Franzese. 2020. *The SAGE Handbook of Research Methods in Political Science and International Relations*. Sage.
- Kellstedt, Paul M, and Guy D Whitten. 2018. *The Fundamentals of Political Science Research*. Third edition ed. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- King, Gary. 1990. "On political methodology." *Political Analysis* 2: 1–29.
- McConaughy, Corrine. 2008. "Introducing the Advice to Junior Faculty Column: Advice from Gary King." *The Political Methodologist* 16 (1): 12–15.
- Roberts, Margaret E. 2018. "What is political methodology?" *PS, Political Science & Politics* 51 (3): 597–601.