Teaching Portfolio

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1 Philosophy and Motivation

Political psychologists study people. We want to know how people think, act, and understand the social and political universe. It is this curiosity about human understanding of politics that fundamentally drives my experience as an educator. Just as great teachers cultivated my interests in politics, I see it as my responsibility to mentor others in developing an understanding for themselves of political questions and the happenings of politics. My research typically explores how people think and feel about politics and often grapples with meta-scientific questions about how researchers might come to know individuals' political cognitions, the causes of those beliefs and attitudes, and the implications thereof for politics more broadly. Teaching is a natural transition from this exploration of human psychology and behavior in which the objective is not for me to transmit information and formulate students' understanding but to guide them as they seek answers to their own political questions.

In teaching political science, it is my objective to leave students not only with a richer understanding of politics but also with conceptual and analytic tools they can apply to critically receive information about the broader social world. I believe it is vital to offer students something more than mere exposure to academic Political Science; what they are taught and what they learn from my courses must be applicable in their future lives regardless of their chosen careers. Toward this end, I see the encouragement of individual choice in topical exploration, the cultivation of useful methodological, analytic, and communication skillsets, and persistent return to everyday social and political examples as vital elements of undergraduate education.

Most important of all, however, I see the integration of pedagogy and research as a core means of actively engaging students in the analytic thinking and professional development that are critical to their future success. Formulating interesting, applied research questions, translating those questions into constructs, operational definitions, and analysis (be it qualitative or quantitative), and communicating findings aurally, visually, and in written form for diverse audiences are precisely the skills that differentiate well-qualified college graduates. To the extent that students additionally obtain nuanced understandings of complex political, social, and psychological phenomena as a result, research experience is doubly beneficial. Politics is, therefore, a means to motivate thinking and a context in which students can develop competence in these skill areas.

I see my role in these aspects of learning as simultaneously a benevolent critic with high expectations and as a resource with expertise on the political and methodological matters that students and I can explore together. I have taught students — through a heavy emphasis on interactive sections, use of office hours, and extensive written feedback — to never be satisfied with simple answers to simple questions. My goal in previous courses — as it will be in future courses — is to push students to generate provocative research topics and then drive them to look beyond "mono-causal" answers to those questions. By emphasizing written feedback to written work, I believe students simultaneously learn to wrestle with the substance of complex ideas and the often more difficult task of translating those complexities into concise, comprehensible expressions of ideas.

2 Teaching Experience

At Aarhus, I have served as instructor on three seminars, all of which have been designed to advance my general approach to teaching as outlined above. Here, I briefly list all of my relevant teaching experience and, in the next section, I provide additional details on the design of some specific courses.

- Instructor, Experimentation and Causal Inference
  - Master seminar, Aarhus, Spring 2014
  - Responsibilities: Course design, lectures, student advising, and grading
  - Exam: Home assignment

- Co-Instructor, Quantitative Political Analysis
  - Master and PhD seminar, Aarhus, Spring 2014
  - Responsibilities: Course design, lectures, weekly tutorial sessions, and student advising
  - Exam: Seven-day home assignment and short assignments

- Instructor, Does Public Opinion Matter?
  - Master seminar, Aarhus, Fall 2013
  - Responsibilities: Course design, instruction, and grading
  - Exam: Seven-day home assignment

- Teaching Assistant, Statistical Research Methods
  - Bachelor lecture, Northwestern, Spring 2012
  - Responsibilities: Weekly tutorial sessions, grading, and occasional lecturing
  - Exam: Written home assignments and two-hour written exam

- Teaching Assistant, Methods of Political Inference
  - Bachelor lecture, Northwestern, Spring 2011
  - Responsibilities: Weekly tutorial sessions and grading
  - Exam: Home assignments

- Teaching Assistant, Political Psychology of Mass Behavior
  - Bachelor lecture, Minnesota, Spring 2007
  - Responsibilities: Student consulting and grading
  - Exam: Two-hour written exam

Aside from my classroom-based experiences, I have informally advised numerous junior doctoral students on coursework, methodological skills, masters theses, and early dissertation development. I have also informally offered guidance on statistical topics and the R statistical programming language through my PhD and postdoc tenures. More formally, I have taught a one-day faculty and PhD workshop on R at Aarhus in Fall 2014. I plan to continue these informal advising roles as well as being to supervisor masters thesis projects in the coming years.

3 Teaching Preparations

3.1 Examples of Course Design and Instruction

As examples of how my broad teaching philosophy translates into concrete didactic choices, I outline the design of two courses that I have taught (or will be teaching) at Aarhus University during the 2013–2014 academic year.

3.1.1 "Does Public Opinion Matter?"

The purpose of this course is to explore issues related to public opinion — what opinions are and how they are formed, how opinions shape citizens' political behavior, and how legislatures and other governmental institutions respond (or do not respond) to citizens' preferences. Students will leave the course with a thorough theoretical understanding of political opinions, their origins, and their possible effects through exposure to philosophical perspectives, contemporary case studies, and a broad set of empirical research. The course will challenge assumptions about what democracy is and how it works, but will also provide students with insight into how government — in legislative, judicial, and bureaucratic capacities — should work and what role public servants have in influencing and responding to the public's views. The intended learning outcomes for the course are as follows:

1. Explain what opinions are, how they are formed, and how they behave.
2. Apply knowledge of opinions and opinion measurement to the evaluation of survey public opinion research.
3. Explain different conceptualizations of political representation and their empirical implications.
4. Apply theories of representation to the evaluation of public processes and institutions.
5. Evaluate arguments about the proper role of public opinion in democracy and government.

Toward this end, students each week read a number of readings on a specific topic and two students write short essays that are used to catalyze in-class discussions of those readings. Learning activities throughout the course vary, but balance short lectures for the full group, small group discussions, full-group debates in structured and unstructured formats, and peer feedback on short essays in preparation for the exam. As an example, one week students read a short text and then were randomly assigned to write a short paper before class that either defended or challenged the text. Students then met during class in groups to agree upon their strongest and weakest arguments, using other theory and empirical material as evidence. Students then debated the text, allowing them to apply their theoretical knowledge to the specific case, as well as learn how to explain different theoretical perspectives. Students are assessed via a seven-day home assignment, for which these activities have well-prepared them.

3.1.2 "Quantitative Political Analysis"

The purpose of this course is to train students in the fundamentals of quantitative analysis of political phenomena, including theory development and testing, statistical theories and methods, and the effective use of appropriate statistical software. The course therefore uses published literature addressing real-world political questions to introduce, explain, and instruct about particular methodological strategies. The intended learning outcomes for the course are that students should be able to:

1. Frame politically relevant research questions
2. Deduce observable implications from political science theories
3. Design quantitative studies that provide answers politically relevant research questions
4. Describe statistical theories and apply those approaches in Stata
5. Apply the statistical methods to politically relevant research questions
6. Report and reflect on statistical results in written form in Danish and English

While the course takes a "seminar" format, it differs from the other described courses because it combines lectures and laboratory sessions. Each week a short lecture sets up the week's methodological approaches, after which students read relevant instructional material and applied examples of a method. Afterward, another interactive lecture reinforces concepts raised in the readings and clarifies students concerns. Finally, a laboratory-format session allows students to apply the methods they have learned each week to real-world political data. The laboratory sessions mimic the seven-day home examination, which asks students to apply knowledge from the course to describe relevant analytic approaches, apply those approaches to real data, and to analyze and reflect upon published results.

3.2 Pedagogical Training

I have been involved in the following formal pedagogical training:

- Educational IT – Go Online (Aarhus University, 2013)
- Teaching Training Programme for Assistant Professors and Postdocs (Aarhus University, 2013)
- New Teaching Assistant Conference (Northwestern University, 2010)

Aside from specific training in pedagogy, I see content area expertise as a fundamental aspect of my approach to teaching. Without personal mastery of subject matter, it is it difficult or impossible to effectively communicate that subject to students. As a result, I consider my graduate education, ongoing research, and broad reading of published literature and contemporary politics to be critical elements of my continuous improvement as an educator. I feel that substantial investments in my own learning contribute far more to my pedagogy than any formal training in teaching. I therefore regularly read numerous major journals in political science, social psychology, mass communications, and statistics.

This broad scholarly grazing reflects my similarly diverse graduate education self-designed to produce exposure to substantive knowledge and methodological approaches from an array of disciplines that might benefit my political science pedagogy. To name a few, I have taken substantive courses in social psychology and communications, as well as methodological courses in sociology, statistics, communications, and psychology that offered different pedagogical approaches, literature, and learning evaluation techniques to the topic of applied statistics. These formal experiences, in additional to supplemental summer training in political psychology (at Stanford University) and in causal inference (at two joint Northwestern University/University of Southern California) workshops, provide me with exposure to a diverse set of teaching strategies and content areas.

3.3 Future Pedagogical Activities

While the materials included in this portfolio reflect my past teaching experiences, I also aim to enhance my future pedagogical qualifications through teaching a broader set of topics and the use of diverse forms of instruction beyond the small-scale teaching I have already performed. In terms of topic areas, I hope to continue to teach methodological courses on quantitative and qualitative research (including introductory statistical methods, regression analysis, and research design), survey design and analysis, and experimental and quasi-experimental methods. I would also like to teach substantive courses on additional areas of public opinion research (including framing and selective exposure), political communication, American politics, and specific topics in political psychology (including social cognition and motivated reasoning). Another course I am to design and teach in the near future will examine philosophical questions surrounding causation, contemporary methods for drawing causal inferences, and political controversies that center on claims about causality. Though I feel seminar style is an ideal pedagogical format, I am also interested in pursuing online, blended, and large lecture teaching formats.

In the area of methodological coursework, I am also eager to design more extensive curricula in political analysis that reflect the current trend toward identification-oriented social science. Specifically, I would like to work collaboratively to develop a coherent and comprehensive methodological sequence for bachelor, master, and doctoral students that touches on quantitative, qualitative, and philosophical issues of causation. The utility of both general tools and substantive knowledge of causation in politics and policymaking are similarly valuable for their subsequent careers and roles as democratic citizens.

I have also begun working to develop teaching materials, including innovative instructional texts and assignments, aimed at learning statistical theory and practice through the R statistical language. A working draft of these materials is publicly available at `http://www.thomasleeper.com/Rcourse`. More broadly, I aim in all of my teaching to produce and disseminate teaching materials for use by others, under free and open-source licenses. Toward this end, all of my current and future courses are hosted on GitHub (e.g., `https://github.com/leeper/opinioncourse`), which allows other teachers and students to easily copy and modify my course materials for their own purposes.

4 Student Evaluations of Teaching

I report below quantitative and qualitative evaluations of my teaching assistant experiences from Northwestern University. Average evaluations on four questions are provided on a 1-6 scale.

4.1 Quantitative Student Evaluations

Criterion	Methods of Political Inference	Statistical Research Methods
TA was able to answer the students' questions adequately	5.56	5.71
TA was well prepared for each session	5.53	5.57
TA communicated ideas in a clear manner	5.31	5.57
TA showed strong interest in teaching the course	5.53	5.57

4.2 Selected Student Comments

- Thomas was the best TA I have ever had. No other TA has ever been so helpful, accessible, or responsive. He replied to emails quickly and with very long, detailed responses. He always extended office hours around exam/paper time. He was actually just the best TA ever. He also made discussions really interesting since he would implement activities or turn the material into an interesting conversation apart from just summarizing readings or lectures.
- Thomas is great! He's very willing to help answer our questions and quite funny. Thomas is laid back and helped us see how to apply Methods to the real world.
- Thomas is the PERFECT TA. Thomas likes and really, really understands PS methods. He is super prepared for section, makes jokes, brings in activities for us to do that relate to lectures, and grades with understanding. He is also just a really nice guy - you can talk to him about your papers and get help with questions, but you can also enjoy a good conversation with him in office hours. He cares about his students and teaches them a lot. It was a pleasure.
- Thomas is one of the most patient, helpful, and knowledgeable TAs I've had, and he was extremely helpful during all of the class assignments–as someone who struggled with the coding and stats in this class, Thomas did a great job trying to break it down for me and explain concepts in multiple ways–analogies, explanations, alternate questions, etc. Awesome TA! He also really connects well with his students; he knew my name by the second week and emphasized personal growth and learning over the quarter, which is extremely important in classes like this where the material is very dense and easier to grasp for students with stronger math backgrounds–not always common in poli sci students.