

Active Learning in Political Theory?:
Incorporating civic engagement in political theory curricula

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(Note: This presentation is based on research currently in progress. The completed project will not be available until June, 2007. The attached presentation materials include the abstract, outline, and PowerPoint presentation that will be used for the APSA Teaching and Learning Conference – February 9-11, Charlotte, NC.)

Experiential learning opportunities such as internships and service learning are valuable for teaching students the relevance of political science courses to their future careers and to their lives as citizens. Courses in political theory, however, present unique challenges for convincing students of this relevance. As instructors in political theory we teach the history of political thought with the aspiration of convincing students that these ideas can influence their own critical thinking and engagement in politics. But how can we better design our curriculum to meet this goal?

This presentation begins with the argument that it is useful to incorporate concrete student experiences and active learning techniques into political theory classes. The relevance of the ideas and methodology of political theory can be better demonstrated when students are able to relate their theoretical learning in the classroom to experiences outside of it. The presentation will explore several possibilities for such integration of experiential learning in political theory courses, including a discussion of interning and externing programs that might correlate with issues in political theory, a consideration of the ways in which experiential learning can compliment a political theory curriculum, and a survey of classroom activities that involve theoretical and practical considerations of citizenship. Contextually the presentation will consider applications in a wide range of political theory courses, including 'Introduction to Political Theory,' 'Classical Political Thought,' 'Modern Political Thought,' 'Feminist Theory,' and 'American Political Thought.'

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Presentation outline

- I. Why experiential learning in political theory?
 - a. Why it is good for theory
 - b. Why it is good for experiential learning
- II. Internship programs and political theory
 - a. Government
 1. History
 2. Education
 3. Military
 4. Law
 - b. Non-profit
 1. Public administration
 2. Nursing
 3. Union
 - c. For-profit
 1. Technology
 2. Other business
- III. Theoretical concepts and their application in experiential learning
 - a. Power
 - b. The State
 - c. Freedom
 - d. Equality
 - e. Justice
 - f. Democracy
 - g. Multiculturalism
 - h. Citizenship
- IV. Courses and internships
 - a. 'Introduction to Political Theory'
 - b. Historical courses
 1. Unique challenge
 2. 'Classical Political Thought'
 3. 'Modern Political Thought'
 - c. Topical courses
 1. 'Feminist Theory'
 2. 'Democratic theory'
 3. 'The Politics of Inequality'
 4. 'American Political Thought'
- V. The classroom connection
 - a. The internship as political theory
 - b. Research projects
 - c. Class discussions

Active Learning in Political Theory?

Incorporating civic engagement in political theory curricula

Why experiential learning in political theory?

- It is good for theory
 - Practical context
 - Relevant examples
- It is good for experiential learning
 - Broad view of commitments and motivations
 - Critical thinking and political reflections

Current Internship Programs

- Government
 - History
 - Education
 - Military
 - Law
- Non-profit
 - Public Administration
 - Nursing
 - Union
- For-profit
 - Technology
 - Other businesses

Theoretical Concepts and Experiential Learning

- Power
 - Authority vs. Power
 - Power operates, evolves
 - How is power gained / lost?
- The state
 - 'Legitimacy'
 - Regulation and its sources
- Freedom
 - Importance of definitions
 - Examples of different conceptions
- Equality
 - The concept of fairness and its applications
 - Asking questions about equality in the workplace

Theoretical Concepts and Experiential Learning

- Justice
 - Complexity of relationship between political and social obligations
 - Professions in social justice
- Democracy
 - Political participation
 - Workplace democracy
- Multiculturalism
 - Diversity and interpersonal practices
 - Institutional analysis
- Citizenship
 - A private and a public self?
 - Identifying ethical commitments and political responsibilities

Theory Courses and Internships

- Introduction to Political Theory
- Historical Courses
 - Unique challenge
 - Classical political Thought
 - Modern Political Thought
- Topical Courses
 - Feminist Theory
 - Democratic Theory
 - The Politics of Inequality
 - American Political Thought

The Classroom Connection

- The Internship as political theory
- Research projects
 - Case studies
 - Critical histories
 - Theoretical analysis of institutions and actors
- Class discussions
 - Discussion based on this presentation
 - Activity – Theory – Classroom
 - Experience-based dilemmas
 - Understanding the theoretical roots of solutions