The Political Is Personal: Using Political Life Narratives to Engage Students

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ABSTRACT To involve students in the process of grounding abstract concepts in their own concrete life experiences, I began working with a type of reflective exercise that I call the "political life story," in which students create and share narratives around the political phenomena that have shaped their own lives. Building on the experiences of other political scientists who have used active-versus-passive learning to disentangle conceptual ambiguity—as well as similar best practices of student-centered pedagogy that are well established in the discipline—I offer these reflections in the spirit of deepening the conversation about methods of reflective group learning with diverse students in both classroom and online contexts. My observations reinforce the consistent finding in the wider pedagogical literature that diverse classrooms provide a conducive environment for deep learning when particular emphasis is placed on the lived experiences of students.

In political science courses, students encounter concepts that they may erroneously perceive as wholly separate from their everyday life. To involve students in the process of grounding abstract concepts in their own concrete life experiences, I began working with a type of reflective exercise that I call the "political life story," in which students create and share narratives around the political phenomena that have shaped their own life. I build on the experiences of other political scientists who have used active-versus-passive learning to disentangle conceptual ambiguity as well as similar best practices of student-centered pedagogy that are well established in the discipline (Bates and Jenkins 2007; Gormley-Heenan and McCartan 2009; McCarthy and Anderson 2000; Shingles, Becerra, and Pencek 2006). I then offer these reflections in the spirit of deepening the conversation about methods of reflective group learning with diverse students in both classroom and online contexts. My observations reinforce the consistent finding in the wider pedagogical literature that diverse classrooms provide a conducive environment for deep learning when particular emphasis is placed on the lived experiences of students and linking their life world (Montgomery 2001; van Oord and Corn 2013). This article examines the mechanics and results of the exercises that I piloted in both lower- and upper-division courses in the spring of 2014.

The cultural diversity of students across institutions of higher education is increasing; at the same time, online and hybrid learning formats are placing new challenges on the classroom as a learning space. These trends decentralize learning and prompt new thinking about how to strengthen student ties to the subject matter and to one another to create more resilient and flexible learning communities. Methods of reintegrating classrooms most frequently involve more structured forms of sharing on the part of students; storytelling is one of these forms. The political life story is an exercise patterned on the practices of political science, similar to what C. Wright Mills called the "sociological imagination" for the field of sociology—that is, a set of intellectual practices for cultivating an awareness of the social world (Mills 1959). Essentially, this exercise offers students something similar to Mills's concept for the political world: a political imagination for seeing the political dimensions of everyday life.

Students often perceive political science as a contained body of knowledge dealing with distant campaigns and elections the issues of which do not touch their lives, rather than a growing and changing *discipline* and a way to engage the social world around them. This misperception is exacerbated at institutions that have a diverse student body and a less diverse faculty, where even the most lively and dynamic course material cannot always bridge the chasms in lived experience. I am familiar with faculty attempts to elucidate this distinction and move students from the former to the latter way of thinking. However, I am unconvinced that even the most persuasive exposition can accomplish this task for most students. Those who are used to a more culturally homogeneous classroom may find that the most favored techniques for capturing student interest are not achieving the same success as the demographics of their students change over time. Although I think it is never too late to change course, this dynamic can be difficult to adjust mid-semester. If students decide that they cannot

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form a connection with the material, they often tend to distance themselves further from what happens in the classroom.

Conversations about this conundrum with colleagues sparked a new avenue of inquiry into democratic pedagogy that helped me refine my original idea into one that is more feasible for the classroom. As the year progressed, I did further research on political biography with an eye toward developing more interactive exercises for my students.

Students more readily absorb concepts embedded in a story than in a list or other disembodied format. Most recently, research has focused on the value of storytelling for discipline-specific learning. As Alterio and McDrury (2013) observed, "Educators from a range of disciplines are embracing a reflective outlook and encouraging students to learn about themselves and their areas of study through reflective practices." The form of storytelling that I use in my courses most frequently is biographical narrative. Presenting a few key events from a person's life engages the social brain: it draws on empathy, memory, and critical thinking; and it engages the visual cortex, which integrates processes of imagination and problem solving. I am a comparativist, so I often use vignettes to frame an implicit comparison and then ask students to draw conclusions. For example, in my upper-division seminar, we watch the poor-quality, grainy video of Asmaa Mahfouz filmed when she was a 25-year-old participant in the April 6th Youth Movement, which called Egyptians to Tahrir Square for the first of many protests that would culminate in the resignation of Hosni Mubarak in February 2011. We peruse the photographs of her marching with New Yorkers in October of that year and discuss global responses to the Occupy Wall Street movement then and now. Students vary not only in their cultural backgrounds but also in their awareness of current events and exposure to the news media. Our discussions of Egypt's youth movements bring these differences to the forefront and allow us to trace their origins in lived experiences. Students seem to immediately grasp the story of Mahfouz, and they often mention her in their papers and exams. This makes it easy to move into a discussion about Egypt in 1952 and of deeper questions about the role of youth movements in regime change.

The general framework of the political-life-story exercise is as follows: A guest speaker shares a few stories and images from his or her own life that carry political themes emphasized in the course material. The guest then helps students to brainstorm about what they might include in their own life narrative. The students are given the opportunity to craft a more careful and thorough version of their narrative and then present it to the class. The instructor schedules student presentations throughout the semester, helping students to develop ideas along the way. In each presentation, students are free to ask questions; the instructor orchestrates their questions into a broader discussion about the course themes. I chose to make the assignment optional—with the small incentive of decreasing the point value of their midterm exam—to allow a few exemplary and detailed stories to play a more prominent role in the course. However, I understand why other instructors might require the exercise for all students. Student presentations are staggered throughout the semester to provide sufficient class time for reflection and to use each story in class discussion from week to week. The presentations become gradually more complex and nuanced as students draw distinctions and position themselves among the other political life stories. I was pleasantly surprised with the high degree of learning that students demonstrated in this exercise and in the way that they integrated it so well with the other forms of learning used in the course.

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The political life story is different than traditional political biography. Whereas biographies portray politicians and other well-known political figures, everyone can reflect on how their own life is shaped by political forces. At best, those who see themselves as having a political career are a small minority; virtually no one in an introductory course has had the opportunity to develop in this direction, leaving most students without a defined relationship to politics. However, there is no special distinction or credential and no major accomplishment required to tell a life story. I introduce the exercise with the claim that "the political is personal." Politics is not something happening far away; it is close to home—as close as it gets. Whether we speak of access to health care or military intervention, students have a personal reason to engage with the topic. The notion of political as personal is similar to the saying, "Even if you are not interested in politics, politics is interested in you." Once I point this out, most students understand that they simultaneously affect and are affected by the world around them and that much of what the world has in store for them is political.

To introduce the concept of the political as personal, I sought a guest speaker who could capture the interest and imagination of my students. I contacted a former student, Leyla Sahal, who is a Somali immigrant, teacher, and mother of two young children. I chose Sahal for her articulate, artful way of speaking about her life, as well as her enthusiasm for and fluency in the language of political science. I teach at a small liberal arts college in which many of the faculty members are of Scandinavian Lutheran heritage; more than half of the student body hails from traditionally underrepresented groups, including first-generation college students from refugee communities. For this exercise, guest speakers stand in the front of the classroom and look more like the students themselves. By "looking like" the students, I mean more than visual resemblance, although visual recognition may be part of it. Shared cultural identities and life experiences—whether being a first-generation student, an immigrant, a Muslim, or a person who has experienced poverty—can be helpful for this exercise. Sahal happens to encompass all of these attributes. She responded to my e-mail with a definite yes; she was excited about the project and had several ideas for it. We met a few times to refine our vision of the exercise, and she sent me an outline of her political life story. It was a true collaboration across our many

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differences as well as a professional-development opportunity for both of us.

"My interest in politics began when I was growing up as a first-generation immigrant. My mother did not speak English, so I translated for her and helped her fill out the forms we needed to access services." Leyla sent me her thoughts in outline form as we developed the classroom exercise. She quickly composed a presentation that wove together political themes and personal events of her life. She first presented in the introductory course and then a few weeks later in the upper-division seminar. We adjusted the content of her presentation to incorporate material from each course, but the main themes were similar. She traced her life as a Somali refugee in parallel with political developments across the wider society, including the formation of the Somali diaspora; the rise of Islamophobia and racial profiling after September 11, 2001; and the expansion of social-welfare policy in Minnesota. She spoke of her life as a married woman, a parent, and a teacher in neighborhoods where her clothing provokes near-constant inquiry (she wears a hijab), and she explained how she navigates discrimination and anti-immigrant sentiment in her daily life. The presentation was well received in both courses, with questions afterward that led to the most vibrant discussions of the semester. The exercise eventually evolved to other students' experiences, as they answered one another's questions and offered their own thoughts on what Sahal had said.

In my upper-division course, I ask students to submit brief written comments after every class session; there were so many extensive comments and questions for Sahal that I had to relay them to her at a later date. One student said, "Leyla really opened my eyes to some things and made me see how they could apply to my life. Thank you for bringing her." In my lower-division course, half of the class chose to do the optional assignment and 85% chose to use the information from the exercises in their final exams and/or final projects, which were variously constructed to involve open-ended reflection on a semester's worth of learning. I prefer these metrics to specific assessment activities in measuring the effectiveness of the exercise because I can gauge my students' ability to draw on and apply the knowledge they gained from it. Students who chose the optional assignment were mostly from historically underrepresented groups, which reversed the trend I had observed in these assignments in the past. Themes of their work included, among others, the ethnic conflict and irredentism in Somalia; the Affordable Care Act and changing patterns of health-care access in immigrant communities; and the history and current outlook of the Ogaden Liberation Movement in Southern Ethiopia. These topics were not far afield of what we had been discussing in class, but they would have never arisen without student input. I was particularly pleased with the discussion of irredentism in the introductory course because my default lesson plan on the former Yugoslavia had not hit the mark. The student who presented on the situation in Somalia focused on the Isli community of Somali refugees in Kenya and their responses to the Westgate Mall attack in Nairobi in September 2014. This led to a discussion of irredentist nationalism much richer than what I had previously achieved in the classroom.

As a self-selecting group, those who chose to do the assignment were relatively savvy in crafting their presentation. Most had an idea of what might work best, were passionate about their chosen topic, and required relatively little assistance—no more than three short e-mails per student or a 5-minute consultation after class sufficed in all but one case. There were the inevitable glitches, of course, in which students' facts were inaccurate or they conflated two or more concepts during the course of their presentation. I kept my interventions brief and to the point, redirecting to the speaker and focusing my efforts on facilitating discussion. It was important to let the students be the experts on their own experience. As one student explained, "If you are not from Kenya, you might not understand the significance of what is happening there right now, but the new policies toward immigrants are changing everything for my family." She continued by describing how her family can no longer travel freely from one part of the country to another, and she offered her own analysis as to why Somali immigrants have more difficulty finding work in Kenya. This story resonated with members of the class who hail from immigrant and refugee communities in the United States; even a small change in policy can affect newcomers in lasting ways.

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In retrospect, I see the limitations of this exercise for nurturing students' capabilities in the discipline. My students did not transform into budding political scientists as a result of this exercise. Although they were able to more deeply grasp political concepts, they are not yet ready to attend conferences or present posters. The exercise requires more time than my average in-class activity, and I needed to abbreviate my lesson plans for those sessions in which I had scheduled student presentations. Therefore, this exercise was not ideal for courses in which a mastery of semantic knowledge is the main goal.

I also noticed that the exercise achieved my goals more fully in the upper-division course than in the introductory section, in which students had comparatively little knowledge to draw on for the assignment. However, all things considered, I found that the exercise worked well—albeit differently—in both sections. Although my students are by no means well versed in the field, this exercise provided an opportunity for application beyond what I have been able to achieve in the past. They are engaged and interested in political science as useful and relevant for their own life. I recommend it for any discussion-based course in which instructors strive for more engagement from students and who can set aside the requisite time to make this exercise a success.

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I am preparing the introductory course for hybrid delivery in 2016 and I am exchanging ideas with others who teach political science in these formats. Although the literature on hybrid-course development is not yet sufficiently robust to indicate discipline-specific best practices, we know that online and hybrid courses are introducing new factors that can affect learning in all fields. Instructors are finding that exercises that promote reflective learning comprise one way to address the challenges posed in online learning environments (Guthrie and McCracken 2010). As the chemistry of a classroom affects students' ability to learn, so is the feel of virtual environments a determinant of course success. Guthrie and McCracken found that reflective exercises combat the isolation that students may experience when there is more screen time and less face time. The exercises allow them to express their unique process as their understanding of the course material evolves. For these reasons as well as those stated previously, I am interested in adding more reflective assignments as I convert the course to a hybrid format.

Diverse classrooms offer ideal settings for students to engage political phenomena more directly and personally to discover for themselves what defines the political. The process of reflecting on one's own life in terms of the political events that shape it allows a student to combine concepts in ways that are personally meaningful, moving from the notion of political science as an area of semantic knowledge to the concept of political science as a discipline. Although it is inevitable that the rise of hybrid learning and the changing demographics of higher education are presenting pedagogical challenges, by no means should these challenges leave us without options as we review our syllabi for the next semester. Instructors can and do engage in reflective practice as we craft our syllabi. For many of us, reflective exercises are an extension of the type of work we do for ourselves before a course begins. To ask students to begin a reflective practice in the discipline is to integrate the work we do with their life world. It is a way for students to use the course framework to connect past, present, and future; to shape their own understanding of the material; and to bring their full self into the coursework.

The political life story recognizes that students are underutilized resources for demonstrating the relevance of the material that we teach. It is the students, after all, who are grappling most directly with the effects of globalization in higher education. They are facing the increasing weight of student debt, and the mixed results of experiments in education as colleges and universities strive to reinvent their role in the face of these challenges. To paraphrase my students' concluding comments that emerged from our discussions, globalization certainly can introduce a centrifugal force of distraction, moving learners away from one another and widening the gaps in experience that will pull apart our classrooms. However, it also can create more reasons and ways to hear one another's stories and perspectives as we recognize in each other the sources of insight for the challenges that we must face together. ■

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