

Not so unprecedented: COVID and exclusion in political science teaching

by Kyong Mazzaro

Back in March 2020, I was teaching an intro to politics course at Brooklyn College. Since late February, students had approached me with questions about the pandemic. Was it safe to come to campus? What measures would CUNY take? Would classes be online for the rest of the semester? I did not have the answers (and would not until a few months later).

Feeling like things were falling apart, my first reaction was to grab onto the syllabus. We would continue to discuss Plato, Hobbes, the classics. I did a survey to understand students' technology needs. A few days later, the course moved online. I shuffled around assignments and reorganized our timeline. Everything was set. Yet, carrying on studying political science's canon in the middle of a pandemic felt absurd.

CUNY students were particularly vulnerable to the effects of COVID-19. Some had lost their jobs and feared not being able to provide for their families or make rent. Others had preexisting conditions or lived with extended family who did. And on top of it all, many were fearful about the ramifications of their legal status. Would they be able to get medical attention without fear? Would there be changes in immigration policies? Would international students be able to go back home without jeopardizing their chances of graduating?

One evening, I opened up to my students. I was fearful too. I confessed that I did not know exactly how to proceed. But that we would do our best to make the course fit our reality, not the other way around. Every evening before lecture, we took a few minutes to check-in. I invited people who did not feel comfortable opening up in class to contact me in private. I reframed discussions so that, instead of only focusing on inner disciplinary debates, we talked about how research spoke (or not) to our experience.

Despite the pitfalls of teaching online, the class discussions were the best I've ever had. Students were engaging with the readings as producers, not consumers of knowledge. They spoke from their experiences as first-gen students, black and brown persons, immigrants, women, queer people, front-line workers, and grassroots activists –perspectives that are largely missing in a discipline that is white and male-dominated.

Exposing long-standing inequalities

One of the most common adjectives used to describe the pandemic is "[unprecedented](#)." The notion that it has been an extraordinary event that disproportionately hurts the vulnerable has created some spaces for conversations about racism and inequality. Especially at the peak of the crisis, calls for compassion and inclusion became more present in institutional narratives. When

classes went online, department heads called on instructors to be understanding and to consider the unparalleled challenges our students faced –to be more human.

These pleas to support our students prompted me to rethink my teaching. But, paradoxically, they also made me recognize that the challenges faced by first generation students, BIPOC, LGBTQ+, and undocumented students during COVID were not at all unprecedented. Yes, the pandemic has been catastrophic, traumatic, and triggering. Yet, racism, discrimination, and unequal access to opportunities were already taking a toll on students' mental and physical health. This (one would think obvious) realization gave me a lot to reflect on.

Shifting my focus away from the canon and to my students' experience also made me think about my own experience in political science. As a Venezuelan expat and first gen student, I came to the painful realization that my own vulnerabilities are generally not acknowledged in the discipline. I have worked hard to meet standards that were not built for nor by people like me. In that sense, the support and validation I've received from close colleagues and mentors at CUNY are an anomaly. The discipline itself never meets me where I am, it's always the other way around.

What's more, political science's general lack of empathy is so normalized that I've caught myself buying into it without even noticing. Before I decided to redo my syllabus in March, I too did not make speaking to my students' experience a priority. I was teaching the way I learned—studying the canon to find a place in it. After all, we are told that fitting in the literature and publishing prolifically are a must if we want to find a place in this ever-shrinking job market. Even if [pedigree is more important than scholarly productivity in faculty hiring](#). In this game, learning the conventions and buying into measures of prestige is key. Bringing new perspectives or considering how our identities can be assets or obstacles, not so much.

How can we make our teaching more inclusive?

In the US, around [75% of political science tenured faculty are men and 80% are white](#). This [lack of diversity](#) has long been acknowledged and condemned. We know that political science's homogeneity helps to [support a system of white privilege, maintains racialized ways of seeing the world, and narrows the scope of our work](#).

As a response, departments have attempted—[largely unsuccessfully](#)—to recruit more diverse faculty and students. We are more intentional about assigning work by women and BIPOC, and research on social justice is gaining new momentum. Still, the responsibility of making classrooms more inclusive is often [offloaded to faculty of color](#). Moreover, talks about how political science pedagogy perpetuates exclusion in the discipline are limited. This is unsurprising given that [very few programs prepare students for teaching](#) and offering pedagogy courses does not predict better [placement rates](#).

Still questions about pedagogy and inclusion are more important than ever. What do we do in the classroom that prevents non-white and underrepresented students from using their experience to generate knowledge? What could we do differently? Teaching during COVID, taught me that three small actions can have a big impact.

1. Take the power out of conventions

It did not take me long when I first went to grad school in the US to understand how important it is to [know and follow convention](#) to survive in political science (and it doesn't matter if you are qual, quant, or in the middle). "Insiders" tend to see people who are not well versed in certain theories, operationalizations, and protocols as incompetent, not just unaware (and things as small as your choice of word processor can have an impact). Almost always, this presumption of incompetence is also tied to [gender, class, and race](#).

Students who look different and are less aware of the discipline's conventions are [left with few options](#). They can work harder to learn the rules and level up (being and feeling always at a disadvantage). Or they can try to brave it on their own or go to a different institution. They may be lucky enough to find a supportive network of students and faculty. But, given the demographics, it is more likely that they will continue to feel isolated.

I find that, although I am not able to completely free my students from the tentacles of convention, talking about their [exclusionary origins](#) goes a long way. Why let students from diverse backgrounds who struggle with navigating convention question their self-worth? Buying into the notion that knowing and following convention is a sign of competency is gatekeeping at its finest.

By talking about conventions as yet another mechanism of exclusion, we can help students who are not familiar with them to stop questioning their self-worth and students who know them to recognize their privilege. It is in a classroom where conventions have no power that students are in a better position to learn, grow out of, and work to dismantle them.

2. Stop and call out language gatekeeping

English is not everyone's first language. Academic writing is not an innate skill. In political science (and, for that matter, any science), there is no reason why someone who struggles with language is not or cannot become a scholar. Yet, snarky comments about grammar and style seem to be largely acceptable in academic settings. I am not talking about remarks meant to help students improve their skills, but about critiques that use language as an excuse to invalidate the substance of a piece.

When we teach that the standards around academic writing have [political and economic origins](#) and stop mystifying the writing process, we are telling our students that they can claim space. I find that [showing our own shitty first drafts](#) and talking about how we, multilingual scholars, have a privileged perspective can be transformational. People can improve their writing. Papers can be edited. But the damage caused by our failure to convey to students that, regardless of the wording, what they have to say matters is harder to fix.

3. Show HOW there can be no rigor without diversity

Politics concern us all. But white men dominate the study of politics. How has this been problematic in your domain of expertise? What blind spots does this generate? How would canonical theories look like had they included perspectives from the margins? In what ways does research about the excluded involve (or not) the excluded? In theories and research designs, are assumptions concerning our own students' communities and identities accurate? These are questions about scientific rigor that pertain to both quantitative and qualitative research. Yet, they are often relegated to specialized courses or considered to fall outside of the scope of methodological debates.

Courses do not need to be on the politics of knowledge production for us to talk about it. Acknowledging that our failure as a discipline to include others makes our research less rigorous is paramount for scientific progress. But more importantly, it shifts the narrative. Instead of telling our students that if they do not look, speak, and think the language of the discipline they cannot produce knowledge, we show them that in their unique perspectives there is a world of possibility.

No diversity without inclusion

Yes, material support, mentorship, and guidance are key for the recruitment and retention of diverse students and faculty. Yes, learning the "rules of academia" can help students navigate higher education and succeed. But teaching during COVID made me realize that asking students to buy into rules without questioning their exclusionary underpinnings is just another way of upholding white privilege. And changing the syllabus, giving paper extensions, and making more interactive online courses is not enough to undo that kind of violence.

Acknowledging the racist and exclusionary foundation of academic conventions is certainly not enough to dismantle oppressive structures. Students will continue to be evaluated against disciplinary metrics that reward those who conform. But by calling exclusion by its name, we spare our students the paralysis of self-doubt, which is gatekeepers' favorite tool to keep us out.