24

Notes on Teaching Concept Analysis

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Social scientists employ concepts almost intuitively. But being more deliberate and self-conscious about the use and analysis of concepts can accelerate and improve the practice. It follows that we should teach conceptualization and concept analysis at various levels of education.[1] I sketch a set of classroom exercises and thought experiments that hook students on concepts, improve their research, and enliven the classroom.

EXERCISES IN CONCEPTUAL TRAINING

Reconceptualization of Your Favorite Concept

A standard practice in concept analysis is something that Giovanni Sartori (2009) sometimes called reconceptualization. The reconceptualization exercise involves immersing oneself in the various meanings of a term employed by scholars and distilling a set of both defining and elective (accidental) attributes. An important complement to this definitional step is a back and forth between the abstract and the observable world, in which one sharpens the connotation (intension) of the concept at the same time one explores its denotation (extension). Importantly, denotation requires examples which bring refreshing clarity. Finally, a good reconceptualization should pay attention to the semantic field, the network of related concepts that represent narrower or broader variants of the target concept or that share some attribute, whether elective or definitional. This disambiguation of related terms is helpful since we do not know what something is until we know what it is not. The flood of terms in this paragraph is no accident. The approach to concepts in the style

[1] See also Jennifer Bussell's excellent take on teaching concepts in Chapter 23.

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of Sartori and David Collier involves learning new concepts about concepts, an approach that appropriately reinforces and exemplifies the mission.

Some version of the reconceptualization exercise is evident in many journal articles, books, and dissertations. I would suggest that every PhD dissertation should have at least a few pages of reconceptualization. Good examples are not hard to find. The back half of Sartori's 1984 book includes a set of such analyses that he commissioned from his band of concept enthusiasts. Such reconceptualizations help readers retain ideas. But they can also have lasting and formative influences on scholarship for years, unlike some more ephemeral work. One example is Kurt Weyland's (2001) reconceptualization of populism, which has served to shape debates during at least two eras of populist emergence.

"What Is That a Case of?"

David Collier popularized this line, and it has the surprising power to push researchers beyond their cases to the categories that contain them. Many of us come to our studies enraptured by some concrete political phenomenon. Perhaps it is some historic event, some scandalous leader, or some meaty policy arena. For me, like so many who lived through the third wave of democracy, it was the cascade of democratic transitions in southern Europe, Latin America, and then Eastern Europe in the 1980s and 1990s. All of these events seemed to be interdependent, the process of some kind of bandwagoning. Fascinated by these connections, I combed through the debates of constitutional assemblies of the era, and their references to other countries and constitutions. What were these references "a case of"? Why, a case of ostensive rhetoric, I ultimately determined, coining that term for the argument-by-pointing of the delegates. It seemed presumptuous of me to invent the term, but then again, none existed, and an idea requires a word if we are to expect others to file it away cognitively. I note that Sartori warns against excessive neologisms, being something of a conservationist of language, but selective term invention is one of the joys of working with concepts, as I describe in more detail later.

So, to this day, a self-conscious mantra of "what is that a case of?" serves to launch many scholars past concrete cases and into the conceptual realm. It might well be a professor's first step towards kick-starting conceptual thinking among students.

Taxonomy Construction

Categorizing cases can soon lead to taxonomy construction. If one is categorizing some event, one might as well peel back the onion and categorize other like events, and connect concepts that are related. After all, every object of study – whether it is animals, mental disorders, films, or pizza – needs a catalog of its kinds. One needs to represent knowledge to accumulate knowledge.

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And, just like performing CPR, it is better to do something badly than nothing at all. Linnaeus et al. (1758) may have created an excellent, resonant taxonomy of natural organisms – he described it himself as "masterful." Yet ordinary mortals should also take up the taxonomy task. With my coauthors on the Comparative Constitutions Project, I have taken such a process to its logical, and time-consuming, end. Our objective has been to record the content of historical constitutions. But, of course, if one is to say what is in constitutions, one needs a large set of relevant concepts of what "what" is. Our "survey instrument" allows a reader to code some 650 aspects of constitutions. It is a taxonomy, of sorts, of constitutional provisions. We have condensed this list to a more general set of 330 topics, which form the "taxonomy" that is on Constitute, our indexed repository of constitutions (online at constituteproject.org). We have tagged excerpts from these constitutions so that users (most frequently, constitution drafters) can retrieve model text on any given topic. One does not need to go to these ends, though one might imagine a dissertation project doing so. A simpler version of this process can and should happen every day.

One way to facilitate taxonomy construction is to take common phenomena and build a quick, workable taxonomy. Topics could be music, film, wine, or political science subjects. If the class meets prior to lunch, developing a taxonomy of restaurants is especially motivating. In five to ten minutes, hungry students usually have a decent working taxonomy. What is interesting, of course, is that students will choose different methods of categorization. Some take a hierarchical (branch, stem, and leaf) approach while others a faceted (leaf only) one, which allows students to think about variation in the structure of their concepts. Their approaches will also inevitably privilege different dimensions (cuisine, cost, vibe, ingredient restrictions), much in the same way Linnaeus would have privileged different attributes in Systema Naturae than did other biologists. That variation in taxonomies reminds us that there is not just one way to categorize the world. Surely, not every biologist thinks it was a good idea to group blue whales and cows in the same category as mammals, simply because both have mammary glands. Furthermore, the inevitable argument about the defining attributes of a category and the placement of particular entities in that category reminds us of the critical back-and-forth nature of the exercise between the abstract and the concrete. In sum, the exercise is enlightening and generalizable to many phenomena.

Taxonomy construction can also be empowering intellectually. Building or studying the categorization of some domain – whether political regimes or films – leads to a sense of command over items in that domain. Formal taxonomies represent knowledge in a field, after all, and if one understands where things go, one can speak more intelligently of them in a way that is readily appreciated by the listener. One of the virtues of graduate school field exams, for example, is that students usually develop a set of categories for kinds of research, an organizational sense that often equates to expertise. Further,

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like any good conceptual exercise, the taxonomy process stimulates interest in the phenomenon itself. Suffice it to say that the lunch after the restaurant taxonomy exercise may well taste that much better.

The satisfaction that comes with the systematization of ideas will be recognizable to most. Just as our intellectual lives are besieged by a torrent of ideas and theories and facts, our ordinary lives are constantly threatened by material clutter. Whether it is the garage, closet, desk, or photos, the possibilities for organization are endless. In my garage sits a large box with a motley collection of screws just waiting for one of my kids to typologize and organize them, or at least so I threaten. Odds and ends belong to types, which can be put in boxes (or thrown out). The ultimate result is an oddly satisfying orderly world in which things are in their place. So too with conceptualization.

Students need not look far for intellectual clutter. It may be surprising how many domains of inquiry lack even the most rudimentary taxonomy. The political world is filled with such opportunities. Recall the list of topics by which my colleagues and I index constitutional provisions. On Constitute, our indexed repository of constitutions, one could retrieve all of the provisions related to, say, the "environment" or "campaign financing." Yet that is where the fun begins, at least for my students. Categories beget subcategories: What are the different ways that constitutions treat the environment or campaign finance? Furthermore, even if my coauthors and I have our own categorization scheme, ours is just one approach. Students can pick most areas of constitutional design and refine, revise, and enrich the taxonomy, just as biologists have done with the Linnaean approach over time. Students may well be one of the first to describe some interesting variation in environmental clauses. And, like any good conceptual exercise, this taxonomy and its illustrative elements would make for a useful publication or report.

"There are Two Kinds of People in the World…"

Taxonomy construction can take a bit of time. A two-minute version of the taxonomy exercise is to ask students to compose binaries, by asking them to finish the sentence above. One can toss it out as an ice-breaker. A minute of thought and everyone has an answer, or two, which may well be completely different from the others. Nothing better exposes the irony of the "two kinds of people…" opening than twenty different endings to it. And, inevitably, the answers are entertaining and enlightening about what is important to the student. I still recall a student whose view of people was profoundly shaped by the herb cilantro. According to him, there were two kinds of people: those who like cilantro, and those who have a deep aversion to it. Of course, other answers probably cut more deeply into the human condition and psyche. Undoubtedly, most of us live in a nonbinary world, but it is still illuminating to see alternative answers to the question, whether one writes them on the

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chalkboard or commissions them in an online chat. And facilitators should be ready for the response that cuts to the heart of the exercise: "those who think there are two kinds of people, and those that do not."

"So, What Do You Work On?"

You are at a social gathering or maybe in the proverbial elevator, that time-limited space for conversation. Some well-meaning person expresses interest in your work, skips the small talk, and cuts right to the heart of your scholarly experience with some variation of this question: "So, what do you work on?"

That should be easy, right? One thing for students to think about is how they would categorize their research, even how they might better categorize the fields of political science. Surely, we can do better than "comparative politics," "American politics," and so on. Departments have, at times, tried to move beyond these categories, though without much success. Even suboptimal categorization can have something of a lock-in effect once scholars build their careers around it; again, scholarly conversation is the point of categorization, and once one has learned a language, learning another is not always easy.

Yet a student's research project should certainly be categorized somehow. What is their study a case of? If they were to classify their study as a particular genre, what would that be? And how is that related to other genres? They might categorize by topic, by theoretical approach, by method (statistical, case study, ethnography, formal theory), or some other dimension. Locating the work gives listeners some purchase on the project, and may even teach them something about the lay of the land.

Summarizing research for nonspecialists is not easy; too much detail loses the listener and overly abstract notions will be not be grounded enough. Those who stop someone to ask for directions need the big picture, with just enough detail. Answering the question with concepts and examples can be enlightening and clarifying, for speaker and listener.

The larger point of the exercise is that if we are to categorize anything, it may as well be the ideas in our discipline, and also how our own research project fits in that scheme. For young scholars about to stake their territory, conceptualization about their research may be particularly important.

Testing and the Internalization of Concepts

Spelling bees, and the contestants that drill and study for them incessantly, represent an intriguing subculture. In a tense tie-breaking round, a twelve year old won the 2024 Scripps Competition with the correct spelling of "abseil." I have come to suspect that learning so many arcane words may be more than just an intellectual feat; with each word, these spellers may have unlocked a set of ideas that they would not have otherwise learned. Would some targeted

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version of this practice be worthwhile at both the undergraduate and graduate levels? If concepts are cognitive tools that help to represent knowledge, why not equip students with such knowledge tools? In any given subject area, ideas emerge that, more often than not, can be represented by concepts.

Spelling, of course, is not the point, though helpful. For each idea (concept), one should be able to provide (1) an adequate definition, and (2) a concrete illustration. That one–two punch is, of course, already a central part of many exams in the social sciences. A typical exam format, in my experience, is one in which the examiner presupplies a list of concepts, which the student learns to define and illustrate. A student develops and internalizes answers to entries on this list and then, on exam day, provides the answers to some subset (or all) of those entries. The format also serves as a nice check on professors, since it pushes them to incorporate concepts explicitly in their teaching, lecture by lecture. Their list of concepts, then, represents the intellectual terrain covered in the course.

Students arguably appreciate this format. After all, the task is clear and defined. And they walk out of the exam with a clear set of ideas associated with a specific vocabulary, which allows them to communicate these ideas to others. At times, I have wondered whether the format erred on the side of the rote, mechanical learning characteristic of the spelling bee, but now I have come to see those elements as features as opposed to bugs. Part of the reason is that students crave and deserve some sort of architectural record of what they have learned. Ideas sometimes wash over us without sticking. Moreover, it is unclear sometimes what exactly the intellectual terrain and boundaries even are of a particular domain of knowledge.

The graduate field exam, as practiced in most US departments of political science, is no exception. Students are expected to learn as much as possible about the central ideas and contributions in the field and then demonstrate that knowledge in response to a set of essay questions. The game, of course, is for the student to deliver a canned answer on, say, transitions to democracy, while framing it around whatever clever hook the professor used to pose the question. Some may shudder at the thought of reading or writing such precooked essays. But as I mentioned earlier, one of the great benefits of the field exam is that students learn and internalize where to put things; that is, they develop and learn a set of categories of research. Even so, it is never clear whether students have read and learned the ideas that they were "supposed" to learn. How very civilized it would be if they were presented with a taxonomy of the field – a list of its important concepts (ideas) – and asked to identify them. Showing a command of this list might be only part of the exam; I am not suggesting that we forego entirely the rite of passage that is the canned essay. But it would be nice to know that students have some comprehensive knowledge of the core ideas in a field. At least I think so, which is why I recently convinced my colleagues in the Public Law field at the University of Texas to implement a version of this vocabulary test. For now, reviews have been positive.

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CONCLUSION

The exercises described here are road-tested, though adaptation to the particular audience is advised. The reviews suggest that students appreciate the basic objective and more than one student has since committed to "conceptualism." That is, they recognize the intellectual value and cognitive utility of concepts. Conceptual thought feels like core scholarly work, maybe even like one's prototypical view of science, in that concepts help to generalize knowledge yet stay closely grounded to cases. Concepts as shorthand are instantly communicable to others, and therefore accumulative in ways we hope science would be. And working with concepts is strangely intellectually satisfying, in part because the world and its many observables become more comprehensible. Yet more than anything, concepts render life's events and experiences easier to remember. How frustrating it is to forget ideas in a course, book, or film just one week later, much less thirty years. In a world in which too much can seem quite ephemeral, an idea that sticks around is priceless.

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