

We Need an Inventory of What We Are Teaching

Theory-of-Change Symposium

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Chris Honeyman is concerned about slow “takeup” of multiple large-scale efforts, over the past 15 years, to find more diverse sources of wisdom in our field, and make them easier to access and use in teaching and in practice. If your perception is the same as Chris’s, would an effort to compile a cross-section of syllabi and compare them to what *could* now be taught be possible? Would it help? Chris is managing partner of Convenor Conflict Management.

Some Projects Producing Knowledge About Dispute Resolution

My perspective is a little peculiar for this group, as I rarely teach, and never in typical courses. However, I’ve been involved for decades in efforts to enlarge the intellectual basis of teaching in the field. Several of these come to mind in the current context. For one, in 2003, more than 100 hand-picked scholars and practitioners met at Penn State University’s Dickinson law school for a weekend’s discussion of something which had troubled everyone involved. What we called “capitulation to the routine” resulted in a [full special issue of the Penn State Law Review](#) the following year, with 17 articles. Essentially, these identified threats to the field of negotiation and conflict management resulting from routinization, in both practice and teaching settings.

About the same time, in a separate initiative, Andrea Schneider and I started the [Canon of Negotiation Initiative](#), which has been active ever since and has by now produced three books, along with a special issue of the Marquette Law Review. Again, more than 100 highly selected scholars and practitioners – with some but far from total overlap with the Penn State project – have written for an effort which has sought throughout to identify forms of knowledge and expertise about negotiation which should be generally known, and widely applied, but which had been “siloe” in narrow streams of expertise.

And in a third iteration of the same general kind of effort to broaden our perceptions in the field, in 2007, Jim Coben, Giuseppe De Palo, and I started the [Rethinking Negotiation Teaching Initiative](#). Similarly to the other two projects, but on an even larger scale both geographically and in terms of output, we enlisted well over 100 prominent scholars and practitioners – again with some “repeat players” from the other two projects, but with many new participants too. That effort sought to broaden our understanding of how to teach negotiation and related subjects, to address (among other things) the fact that US culture imbued the field “from soup to nuts,” but was not necessarily that helpful as an organizing frame when working in other countries. The team as a whole produced four books and several special issues of journals over six years.

Along with the key scholars, and a few emblematic practitioners, who were repeat players across more than one of these efforts, there were enough new participants each time that in all, probably 200 or more people have been significant contributors in this array of projects. Those who wrote for these projects (or even better, co-authored at least one book chapter or article with people from a different field or culture or both) have included a number of rising stars in their specialties, and beyond that, a remarkable percentage have been truly distinguished in their careers. In other words, the participants were people who, in some sense, might reasonably be regarded as influential in our field.

What Are We Teaching – and What Should We Be Teaching?

But the extent to which their influence has been *felt* in the practical contents of new or revised courses since then, or the effectual use of all this new knowledge among practitioners is, I think, an open question. To what degree do we know whether any of this writing has had a real and widespread effect? I do know for a fact that certain courses, such as one being taught each year by Sharon Press at Mitchell Hamline, and another developed in the last year by Josh Stulberg at The Ohio State University's law school, are deeply influenced by these writings. Literally yesterday as this is being written, we learned of the newest such use, for 96 students at Columbia Law School. But is there any analysis out there of what shifts there may have been in the bulk of the courses being taught?

In some ways, the daunting array of roadblocks in "[The Biz](#)," which Jim Coben and I wrote as the 2013 Epilogue to the whole Rethinking Negotiation Teaching series, seems to be even more present today than we thought it was then. In particular, one element we observed – the rapidly growing percentage of courses taught by overworked and underpaid adjunct teachers, who even then were showing little enthusiasm for the astonishing range of new knowledge the project had developed – seems if anything to have gotten worse.

I could cite chapter and verse for the more optimistic propositions that I think still stand, to the effect of how the complexity of our field and its richness are growing. Personally, I think these factors should be recognized in a larger number of more subtle courses, particularly advanced-level courses, and those courses should be taught by the best teachers money can hire. But are we getting there? I'm advised that some at the recent Pepperdine meeting registered some related concerns, so I may not be alone in this.

But at the same time, I recall someone (Jim Coben again, I think) twenty-plus years ago compiling a list of courses taught around the field, at least in law schools, along with a cross-reference of the books each course relied on. I personally found that compilation inspiring when I was working to convince the Hewlett Foundation – along with, nontrivially, the then Hewlett Theory Centers – that a new effort was called for. The result became known as the [Theory to Practice](#) project. Perhaps there's a seed of an idea there that might be useful today.

What if a suitable panel of scholars mounted a modest effort to compare what is actually being taught today with what we now know *could* be taught effectively in negotiation, mediation and related courses? It seems to me the comparison may prove quite stark, and support arguments to the effect that we need to ramp up sophistication as well as resources devoted to teaching right across this field.

And such a panel might even suggest some more adventurous steps. For example, it should be standard that students of law, business, and government will learn negotiation side by side. They will, after all, be working side by side for the rest of their careers.