

REFLECTIONS ON PRACTICE

**COURSE DESIGN TO CONNECT THEORY TO
REAL-WORLD CASES:
TEACHING POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY IN ASIA**

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ABSTRACT

Students often have difficulty connecting theoretical and text-based scholarship to the real world. When teaching in Asia, this disconnection is exacerbated by the European/American focus of many canonical texts, whereas students' own experiences are primarily Asian. However, in my discipline of political philosophy, this problem receives little recognition nor is it comprehensively addressed. In this paper, I propose that the problem must be taken seriously, and I share my own experiences with a novel pedagogical strategy which might offer a possible path forward. Recent scholarship has championed an active learning approach, where students engage in their own research, and deliver outward-facing products that have a meaning and purpose beyond the confines of the student-professor relationship. In this spirit, I have put into practice a strategy of course design, where active learning is used to overcome students' disconnection with the course content. In particular, as a major component of course assessment, students are required to write an 'opinion piece', which is then showcased on a public website. The opinion piece must address a real-world issue which the student himself or herself selects and deems important; furthermore, it must build on the theoretical tools of the course and be written in a style which makes it accessible to a wider audience. I discuss the implementation of this strategy in two political philosophy courses, including strategies to avoid 'dumbing down' and 'diluting' the process of critical thinking. While no formal analysis of impact of the strategy on learning outcomes has been conducted, an anonymous pedagogical survey has yielded an overwhelmingly positive response for students' self-reported perceptions of the curricular innovations.

Keywords: Asian classroom, course design, practical application, online writing, student engagement, decolonising knowledge

Political philosophy can be doubly abstract for students in Asian universities. First, some of the classic works of the field are deliberately removed from the messiness of ‘real life’, for the sake of conceptual clarity. Second, the implicit ‘reality’ to which the classic works refer are either North American or European. This double abstraction poses a challenge for student engagement and understanding, yet this challenge receives little recognition nor is it comprehensively addressed. In this paper, I situate this problem within the broader pedagogical literature, propose a possible pedagogical strategy for addressing the problem, and offer survey feedback which provides evidence of the strategy’s success. In particular, the strategy revolves around an ‘opinion piece’ assessment, where students are required to apply course theories to real-world cases of their own choosing and these pieces are then published on a showcase website. However, contrary to some contemporary uncritical enthusiasm for ‘applied’ and web-based pedagogy, I argue that such pedagogy is no panacea; in fact, careful management is required to ensure that the intended course learning outcomes are fulfilled.

PEDAGOGICAL PROBLEMS

It is widely acknowledged that students may find learning philosophical and theoretical analysis to be abstract and unengaging; they may have difficulty engaging with highly conceptual distinctions, which appear less interesting than more concrete problems and debates in the real world (Weidenfeld & Fernandez, 2017; Aoudjit, 2012). This challenge of engaging with abstractness is exacerbated in non-American and non-European learning environments, because both the theories themselves and the examples with which they are illustrated tend to be Western and as such, they are often perceived to be remote from the real-world scenarios familiar to the students (Canagarajah, 1993; Thaman, 2009).

Many theoretical and text-based disciplines need to negotiate with this double abstractness, but the need is especially sharp in political philosophy. Some of the most important theoretical contributions to the discipline rely upon highly stylised and unreal thought experiments (canonically, Rawls, 1971). These thought experiments are supposed to have real-world significance, but students often fail to see the link. In addition, political philosophy still speaks as though American and European models are universal, and as if societies beyond their limits can only be understood in terms of their deviance from the Western norm. Mills (2015) excoriates political philosophy for its narrow focus on the white, North American/European experience, and for its wilful exclusion of anything beyond these limits as unworthy of philosophical attention.

The double abstractness of political philosophy can dampen student engagement in Asian institutions, and this in turn impairs the depth and quality of students' learning. Furthermore, this pedagogical problem perpetuates the parochialism of the discipline: when Asian perspectives and experiences are sidelined, the discipline of political philosophy misses an opportunity to challenge itself in order to make sense of the world beyond its canonical examples and case studies (Biswas & Deylami, 2017). Finally, it is also a loss to society. Local Asian contexts (in the case of my teaching, Singapore) sometimes lack a well-developed conceptual vocabulary for discussing questions of political justice (Teo, 2018; George, 2017); however, if the concepts of political philosophy remain so intellectually and spatially abstract from Asia, then this lack would persist.

How then do educators of political philosophy overcome these difficulties? While some effort can be made to assign less parochially Western texts, there are only a limited number of non-American and non-European readings which are available within the contemporary philosophical genre. Indeed, a recently assembled comprehensive reading list of scholarly work on Singapore lacked normative philosophical explorations, instead it overwhelmingly comprised positive social scientific methodologies (Academia SG, n.d.). A deeper solution might lie in careful course design. Fung (2017) has championed a 'connected learning' approach to higher education, which differentiates various dimensions of connectedness. Fung (2017) asserts that foundationally, there needs to be a connection between learning and research such that students themselves are drawn into the process of active knowledge creation (pp. 20-38). Another critical dimension of connection is between the student's work and the outside world: Fung (2017) champions pedagogical design that includes 'outward-facing' assessments, where the purpose is for students to communicate their ideas to real reading audiences, beyond the professor assigning a grade (pp. 101-117). It is hoped that cultivating such educational connections would improve both student engagement and the quality and depth of their learning.

In this framework, an obvious expedient presents itself to address the problem of abstraction faced by theoretical text-based disciplines: it requires students to apply the theories to real world cases that are important to them, and write up their conclusions for a public audience. Contemporary web publishing affords a cheap and easy technological platform for this to occur. Such technologically-enhanced pedagogy has met with enthusiasm in the literature (Wankel & Blessinger, 2012).

However, technology is no panacea. Certainly, there is potential for new technology to facilitate student engagement and the connection between theory and practice, for instance in reading or writing blog posts on current topics

(Allen, 2016). However, at the same time there is evidence which suggests that blog posts decrease critical thinking and impede serious explanation of ideas (Ellison & Wu, 2008; Hansen, 2016). There are three apparent mechanisms behind such negative outcomes. First, students perceive and approach blogging as a ‘merely opinionated’ (as opposed to reasoned) genre of writing; consequently they may not push themselves to careful analytical thinking. Second, students may invest a low amount of time in such exercises, for example not going through the process of multiple drafting that they might do for a standard scholarly paper. Third, one much-celebrated aspect of blogging, its social connection to a community of readers and respondents, can have a dark side, which may lead to a situation where students limit themselves from pursuing controversial or difficult lines of argument to avoid the risk of social exposure or opprobrium.

Any strategy to use real-world cases to enliven course material for students must not ‘dumb down’ the theoretical content of the course, and it must not have perverse effects on student learning.

THE EQUALITY & DEMOCRACY PROJECT

In this section, I lay out a possible strategy to address these challenges, which I pursued in my teaching at Yale-NUS College, Singapore. The two courses—“Contemporary Egalitarianism” and “Democratic Theory”—are both undergraduate courses in political philosophy. My objective in crafting and delivering these courses on two core topics of political philosophy is to make these topics engaging and relevant to students based in Singapore. I wanted to validate and build on the local knowledge and perspectives of those in the classroom, so they could experience the coursework as authentic and meaningful, rather than alien and abstract. The courses included some Asian readings where available (for instance, Teo, 2018; Chua, 1995). However, the inclusion of these readings has not been sufficient to address the challenges of abstraction for two reasons: the disciplinarily-appropriate Asian offerings were limited, and some of the core conceptual tools of the discipline are inherently and intentionally remote from everyday experience.

The key innovation in my teaching has been to make the primary outcome of the courses an ‘opinion piece’. For this ‘opinion piece’, students select a real-world political problem that matters to them, and it is their task to develop a philosophical analysis of that case. The piece must fulfil two requirements: it must be accessible to a sophisticated but non-specialist audience, and it must make use of theoretical models from the course. The opinion pieces are then displayed to the public (and in particular, to their peers, and to past and

future course cohorts) on a custom-designed website *Equality&Democracy* (<https://equalitydemocracy.commons.yale-nus.edu.sg>), funded through a Yale-NUS College Teaching Innovation Grant.

Intrinsically, the public ‘opinion piece’ compels students to overcome both dimensions of abstraction of the course materials. They cannot talk merely in theoretical terms; they must apply the concepts to a real example. Also, while they were not required to choose specifically Asian examples, 56% of my students chose to do so¹. However, the challenge is how to make students’ online engagement meaningful and not merely produce opinionated, quick and lightweight posts like how most online writing tend to be. In short, they need to avoid the three mechanisms outlined above that may dampen critical and analytical thinking in online writing. Other elements of the course must also be systematically reverse-engineered to support the intended learning outcomes of the course.

The first problem is that students may take the online assignment as permission to not engage in careful conceptual and analytical thinking. To address this, I held a mid-term exam, forcing students to achieve conceptual rigour before they were even permitted to start considering how to apply those concepts to selected cases. Next, I worked with students to establish the desired genre of writing which would connect this rigorous conceptual understanding to cases. Far from it being a free ticket to express ‘mere opinion’, the process of drafting the opinion piece involved developing a serious reasoned argument; throughout the course, we read, practiced, and critiqued examples of the desired genre. We read the professional philosophers’ own attempts to apply conceptual frames to practice, and I provided current affairs cases relevant to each week’s philosophical materials for students to work through during group discussions in class. We also read and evaluated opinion pieces from previous cohorts on *Equality&Democracy*.

The second problem is that students may presume online writing to be a quick process, not requiring the extended reflection and multiple drafting of a normal scholarly paper. This was addressed by positioning the ‘opinion piece’ as a significant piece of project work with a correspondingly high proportion of the course grade (30%), and a correspondingly large amount of class and consultation time devoted to developing projects. The seminar sequence was structured to support slow and careful development. In addition to reading exemplars and participating in the classroom activities mentioned above, students had to make advance commitment to a topic as a course requirement, and present draft arguments for peer and professor response well in advance of the final deadline.

The third problem is that critical thinking and conceptual exploration may potentially be cut short because students may become anxious about responses from the community of readers. Community is ambivalent with respect to student learning: it can strengthen it, but equally it can threaten it. I sought to mitigate the threat and enhance the community. On the one hand, to mitigate the hostile responses, the byline for all articles would only display the students' initials, which in effect made their identities anonymous to outsiders. Comments were moderated prior to being published on the website, so students need not worry about trolls attacking their work². On the other hand, to harness the positive possibilities of community, I took care to cultivate a respectful and supportive classroom environment where the default mode of inquiry was collaborative rather than confrontational, and where differences of perspective were valued so long as arguments were put forward with seriousness. The course philosophical readings were selected with view providing a range of irreducibly different perspectives on the political questions at hand; they provided a toolbox of frameworks for students to articulate and discuss their disagreements with one another. Respectful engagement was modelled in classes considering and reflecting upon the previous cohorts' pieces on *Equality&Democracy*. In addition, regular group work on specific contemporary cases laid the ground for peer feedback on and the workshopping of opinion piece drafts towards the end of the semester. In sum, through the various collaborative classroom activities, students were able to support their peers in the semester-long process of bringing each individual project to fruition.

SURVEY OUTCOMES

In this section, I will discuss the design and outcome of a survey which was administered to gauge students' subjective experience of the pedagogical innovations in the *Equality&Democracy* project. The survey was designed to assess the impact of the novel pedagogy on students' own experience of their (1) depth of understanding of the course content, (2) application of this understanding to local Asian contexts, (3) intellectual engagement, and (4) community of learning.

Students who had completed either of the courses were invited to provide anonymous responses to a questionnaire. From 42 eligible students, the survey was sent to the 37 students for whom it was possible to obtain a valid current email address; 14 anonymous responses were then received by my research assistant. Figure 1 illustrates the quantitative results of the survey.

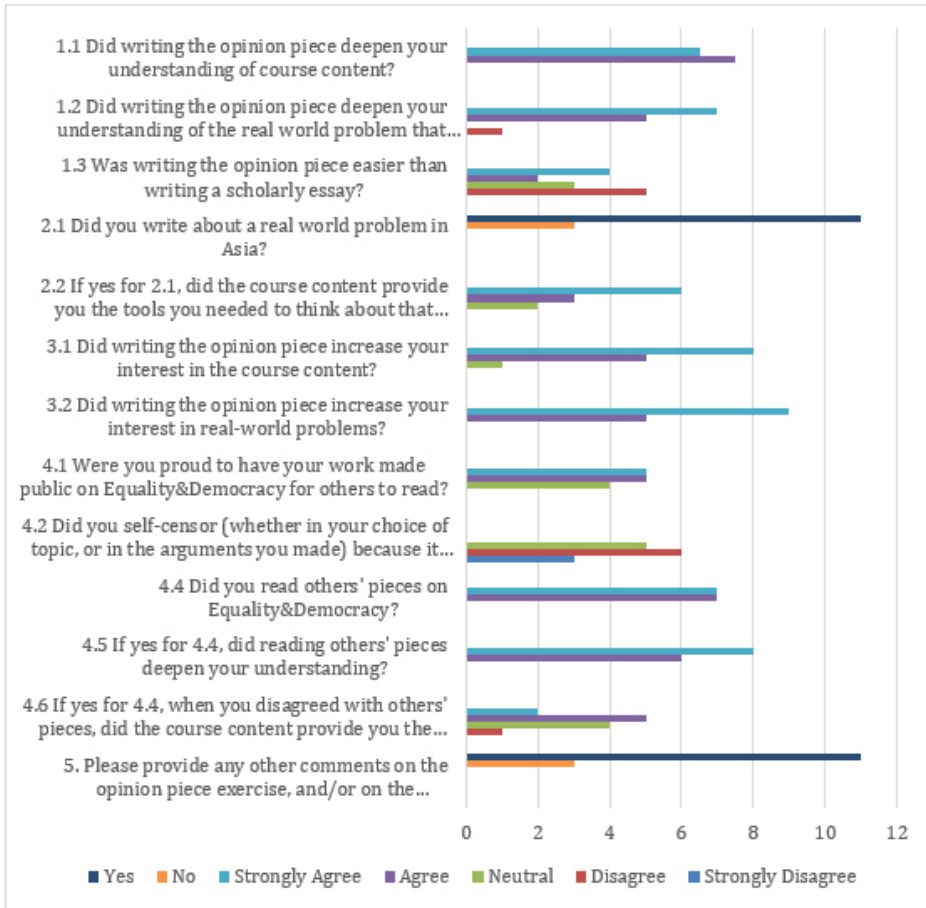


Figure 1. Quantitative survey results.

The full survey results are provided in the Appendix, in Table 1 (quantitative) and Table 2 (qualitative).

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Students who responded to the survey assessed the *Equality&Democracy* project in overwhelmingly positive terms. While there may be some respondent bias (perhaps only students enthusiastic about the project took the time to respond to the survey), it is striking that there was very little criticism of the strategy. Students singled out the effects on their understanding and engagement for particular comment. As one student remarked,

“I really appreciate being forced to apply what I learnt into a real-life scenario. It makes the content covered in the seminar more relatable.”

Or again, another student:

“I enjoyed writing the opinion piece because it engaged me to think about philosophy in a real world context and made me aware of the relevance of philosophical debates in understanding different ways of living.”

These comments are backed up by positive quantitative responses, with 100% of respondents indicating that they “Agree” or “Strongly Agree” that the opinion piece exercise deepened their understanding of course content. In addition, 93% of respondents indicated that they “Agree” or “Strongly Agree” that the opinion piece increased their interest in course content.

Students also took on the task of supporting one another to develop their individual projects seriously, and maintained warm collegial relations despite sometimes encountering deep differences in their respective political views. However, the diversity of perspectives came to be valued in its own right. As one student pointed out,

“I am really happy to be able to read the work that my friends have done. Seeing how they have used the same things I’ve read and spun it according to their personalities and interests has been a thrill for me.”

Students also took a strong interest in their peers’ work, not only from their own cohort but also the work by previous cohorts: 100% of respondents indicated that they read other pieces published on the *Equality&Democracy* website.

The intention of the course design was to improve pedagogical outcomes by overcoming not merely the challenge of philosophical abstraction, but also Western parochialism found within the canonical readings. To the extent that the majority of students wrote about Asia for the opinion piece exercise, Western parochialism was overcome within this context. However, I note two reservations. First, the survey design did not allow me to parse how much of the positive pedagogical experience of my course design was explained simply by the general focus on real-world application, and how much of it was explained by the attention to Asian contexts³. Second, we cannot conclude that we had overcome Western parochialism in the course syllabus, because the Asian focus was developed primarily in case studies and applications, and not in the core readings themselves. One student complained about this feature of the course, suggesting that the core course readings to relate more directly to Asian realities:

“[After] this course I realized that I didn’t care about the West and never will again. We cannot teach democracy in a Western vacuum while the largest democratic institutions exist outside of it. We need to study the Indian parliament, the Indonesian *pancasila*.”

By its very design, a survey of student subjective experience is only a limited tool for assessing the success of the pedagogical strategy; notably, it does not analyse the objective quality of the student output. However, students’ work arising from the *Equality&Democracy* project have received recognition elsewhere: one student submitted her piece for the Undergraduate Public Philosophy Award by the Blog of the American Philosophical Association, and received an Honourable Mention in that competition (APA Communications, 2019).

CONCLUSION

Highly theoretical and text-based disciplines do not always speak naturally to students, and this is especially the case for students in Asia. However, thoughtful pedagogical design can draw students in to engage with such content. While careful scaffolding is required to ensure the intellectual robustness of an ‘opinion piece’ online writing exercise, the payoff of attempting to connect theoretical content with students’ lived experiences would be students gaining a deepened understanding and interest in the course materials.

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

The ethical aspects of this research were reviewed and approved by the NUS Institutional Review Board (NUS-IRB), under its Social, Behavioural, and Educational Research category (ref: S-18-276E).

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ENDNOTES

1. Why did the students not all choose Asian examples? First, Asian students may not necessarily consider their “Asian-ness: the most salient feature of their identity. For instance, one Asian student chose to write on a US-originated case, because for her, the lived experience she wished to address lay at the intersection between race and gender, and a US case happened to speak most directly to her concerns. Second, a significant minority of students taking my courses are not citizens of Asian countries.
2. Comments were not automatically displayed on the website, but had to be manually checked and released. The criterion for release was the ‘community standards’ borrowed from the website *The Conversation* (<https://theconversation.com/au/community-standards>). In practice, there were very few comments, but see for instance the comment at <https://equalitydemocracy.commons.yale-nus.edu.sg/2017/12/07/the-special-assistance-plan-singapores-own-bumiputera-policy/>.
3. All students were invited to respond to the survey; and within the survey, only questions 2.1 and 2.2 specifically separated out respondents who wrote about Asia.

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APPENDIX. [SURVEY RESPONSES](#)

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Sandra Leonie Field teaches political philosophy at Yale-NUS College. Her research investigates conceptions of political power and their implications for democratic theory; she approaches these themes through engagement with texts in the history of philosophy, especially Hobbes and Spinoza. She is the author of *Potentia: Hobbes and Spinoza on Power and Popular Politics* (Oxford University Press, 2020). Sandra is a committed teacher who strives to connect philosophy and theory to students' lived experiences. Student writing from her classes is showcased at <http://equalitydemocracy.commons.yale-nus.edu.sg>.