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TLHE Project
A Training Module for Learning Essay-Writing Skills in Political Theory

Abstract:

This TLHE project develops a training module for learning essay-writing skills in political theory. Students in political science with little prior experience in political theory often struggle with the particular format and structure of the political theory essay, and this model is intended as a tool for students to help them acquire the requisite knowledge of the form and structure and turn that knowledge into the particular skill-set that one must master in order to write a first rate essay in political theory. The module consists of (1) a guidance note on how to write an essay in political theory and (2) a so-called "argument-building carousel", which mobilizes and combines active-learning and collaborative pedagogy with OBL tools to train essay-writing skills in a fun and cooperative classroom setting. The first part of the project consists of the guidance note. The second part of the project consists of a sketch of the argument-building carousel. Finally, the third part of the project offers a theoretically and empirically motivated account of how students might be expected to benefit from the implantation of the training module in practice, before accounting for the recent actual implementation and testing of the training module in a master's level course on democratic theory, and the results of student evaluations of the training module are presented and analyzed.

Introduction:

Students in political theory often struggle with a crucial part of the discipline: namely, writing a political theory essay. This is, of course, especially true for students participating in introductory political theory courses, who have had no prior experience with the discipline, but in my own teaching experience, such difficulties are not uncommon even amongst students in advanced political theory courses. Writing an essay in political theory is also likely to be particularly challenging for political science students, since the standards of essay writing in the subfield of political theory are quite unlike the standards of essay writing in the empirical branches of political science. In my own teaching, I have consistently experienced a demand from students for guidance in writing a political theory essay, which I have often found difficult to honor to a satisfactory extent because of time constraints. This remains a source of frustration for both teacher and students, and one might fear that it leaves the student in a position, where much time is spent worrying about the requirements of the essay without ultimately learning the writing skills and knowledge of format and structure that would enable the student to devote their full focus to developing and defending a compelling argument.

The purpose of this TLHE project is to develop a training module for writing a political theory essay. The module will consist of two components: (1) a guidance note on how to write a political theory essay, subject to ongoing revision, and (2) an "argument-building carousel", which mobilizes peer review, active learning pedagogy and online and blended learning (OBL) in order to actively train political theory essay writing skills within a cooperative setting in the classroom. By integrating these two elements, the project seeks to strengthen students' knowledge of the formal and substantive requirements of the political theory essay and actively train the skills necessary for writing one.

Parts (1) and (2) of this project present each of the two components of the essay-writing training module: the guidance note on how to write a political theory essay, and the argument-building carousel for the classroom. Part (3) offers, firstly, a theoretically and empirically grounded account of what one might expect from the implementation of the training module, and secondly, an account of the results of a recent implementation of the training module in a master's class in political theory.

(1) A Guidance Note on How to Write a Political Theory Essay[1]

The overall purpose of the political theory essay is to demonstrate your ability to understand, explicate and critically evaluate theoretical arguments in the relevant literature in political theory and, above all, to develop a coherent and clearly stated argument of your own.[2] The political theory essay can be distinguished in terms of its formal properties and its substantive content. This guidance note will first address the substantive content of a political theory essay at a relatively high level of abstraction, before addressing the formal requirements.

(a) The Content of the Political Theory Essay:

(i) The first order of business in writing a political theory essay is identifying an overall theme for your essay. Naturally, this will depend on the thematic focus of the particular course that the essay is written for. If the course is on the classics of modern political theory, you might pick a theme such as, say, Hobbes's justification of absolute political authority, Locke's view on

[1] Since this guidance note is written for distribution amongst students of political theory, it is directly
[2] The guidance note draws loosely on the essays in Marc Stears and David Leopold (eds.), *Political Theory: Methods and Approaches* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) and Anne Marie Smith's "Guidelines for Writing a Political Theory Essay", available at https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/0481/16a0c368821ab2c6a45a30ee00185c35238c.pdf (accessed October 15, 2018).

toleration, or Marx's view of justice as an inherently ideological category. If the course is on democracy and populism, you might address the different ways in which populism is conceptualized in the contemporary literature, or the available accounts of the recent surge of populism across the West. Crucially, the theme has to admit of a puzzle – or rather, *you* have to be puzzled by something about that theme.

In contrast to a political science essay, the relevant puzzle for a political theory essay is rarely of an empirical nature; it almost always begins with a *normative* puzzle. That is to say, the issue is not some apparent incoherence in the data or the seemingly inexplicable foreign policy stance of a world power. Rather, the issue is that something is *just not right* with Hobbes's justification of absolute political authority. Is Locke's celebrated view on toleration really as tolerant as he claims? Can it really be true that the concept of justice is purely ideological? If that were the case, what grounds could Marx possibly have for so forcefully condemning the capitalist mode of production? Doesn't Jason Stanley's suggestion that contemporary populist movements are actually just fascism in a new guise have difficulty accounting for the fairly consistent claim of these movements to represent the "true" democratic will? Crucially, such "puzzling" presupposes that you have gained a sufficient understanding of the arguments in the relevant literature, or you might end up puzzling over something that Hobbes, Locke, Marx or Stanley have never actually argued. Ultimately, your puzzle should be specified into a determinate research question that you are going to address in the essay.

(ii) Once you've picked and familiarized yourself with a theme and puzzled over it, you will need to start getting a sense of a specific claim that you might want to advance in your essay. This claim might be, for example, that Hobbes's justification of absolute political authority is

self-defeating; that Locke's view on toleration is not permissive enough, since it excludes atheists from the scope of toleration; that Marx's view of justice as inherently ideological mistakes a particular ideological conception of justice for the very concept of justice as such; or that populism is in fact a democratic revolt against a political system that has become unresponsive to the people's demands. Don't worry, you might change your mind about what claim to advance as you start developing your argument, and you might even go back and forth between opposite views on the matter until you have made up your mind. Indeed, you *should* strive to keep an open mind and follow the argument where it leads, as the classic Socratic injunction goes. The point here is not to decide on a claim early on that you doggedly stick to, when you begin writing the essay; rather, the point is simply to get a sense of the direction you're going in, even if you might end up at a different destination than you expected once you start developing your argument.

(iii) Once you have begun identifying a claim, you will be able to start thinking about what would have to be the case for the claim to be true – or, put differently, what you will have to do to *justify* your claim. In a more technical language, political theorists (and philosophers more generally) will describe this as clarifying the *necessary* and *sufficient conditions* for the claim to be justified. To say that a condition is necessary means that the claim cannot be true unless that condition is also true (if condition X is false, then claim Y is also always false). To say that a condition is sufficient means that no further conditions will have to be established for the claim to be true (if condition Z is true, then claim Y is also always true). For example, at the most basic level, it is a necessary condition for the truth of the claim that Locke's argument for toleration unjustifiably excludes atheists that Locke actually makes such an argument. On the

other hand, if it can be established that atheists have a justified claim to toleration, then that condition is sufficient for establishing the truth of the claim that Locke's view of toleration is false. Reflecting on such necessary and sufficient conditions is important, because they will help you develop your *argument*.

(iv) The argument is the centerpiece of your essay. Anyone can blurt out an outrageous claim, but if you can also support your outrageous claim with a compelling argument, then you are well on your way to having an excellent political theory essay. What is important to think about here is that you want to reach a certain conclusion (your claim), and that in order to reach this conclusion, you will need to establish and justify certain premises that warrant the inference to your claim. Those premises are the necessary and sufficient conditions that will need to be satisfied for your claim to be justified. Each of those premises will have to be supported with compelling reasons[3], and the more compelling those reasons, the more compelling the premises – and the more compelling the premises, the more compelling the conclusion. Moreover, the inference from premises to conclusion will of course have to be logically sound. For example, you will have to employ concepts in a consistent manner – more on this below.

So, an argument (if X and Y, then Z) might take the following form:

> *If it is true that:*
>
> (a) Locke's view on toleration holds that toleration should not be extended to atheists,

[3] The philosopher T.M. Scanlon defines a "reason" simply as "a consideration that counts in favor something". Cf. *What We Owe to Each Other* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1998)

and

(b) atheists have a justified claim to toleration,

then it follows that:

(c) Locke's view on toleration is false.

To defend this argument, you will first need to show that Locke actually holds the view that toleration should not be extended to atheists. This is ultimately an interpretive task: you will need to show that this argument can be found in Locke's writing and lay out his argument in a clear and truthful manner. Of course, any text is open to multiple interpretations, but think of your task here as that of convincing the reader that your interpretation has a claim to be taken seriously. Secondly, you will need to show that atheists have a justified claim to toleration. This is a first order normative claim: you will need to show that it would be unjust to deny toleration to atheists. This might be done in a number of ways. For example, you might appeal to a widely accepted principle of toleration and show that Locke's exclusion of atheists violates that principle. Alternatively, you might try to clarify our "intuitions" (as some philosophers will say) about the moral claims that atheists can justifiably make by appealing to real world cases or hypothetical thought experiments that show why implementing Locke's view on toleration have or would lead to intuitively impermissible outcomes. Finally, you might try to show that Locke's views are *internally inconsistent*; that the reasons he offers in defense of his view of toleration would actually compel him to include atheists within the scope of toleration.

(v) Throughout the essay, always define the concepts you are working with as clearly as possible. Political theorists often indulge in the clarification of concepts to an extent that might

seem excessive or even ridiculous to the outside eye. However, this obsession with conceptual clarity follows from the central concern with the argument. If you fail to define central concepts in clear and explicit terms, you run the risk of supporting your argument on an equivocation or slippage of meaning, which renders your argument vulnerable to objections and problems of inconsistency. Clarity and rigor can be thought of as theoretical virtues analogous to the virtues of transparency and reproducibility in the empirical sciences: if you have conducted an experiment and it supports your hypothesis, other scientists should ideally be able to repeat the experiment and reach the same conclusion. In much the same way, the clearer, more rigorous and consistent your argument and concepts are stated and used, the better other political theorists will be able to reconstruct and comprehend the argument in their own minds and identify any potential mistakes or equivocations that your argument might rest on.

(vi) Finally, you will need to think about confronting actual or possible objections and counter-arguments to your argument – that is, counter-arguments that other political theorists have actually made, or which could be inferred from their arguments, or hypothetical objections that someone, who would disagree with your argument, might want to make. You should think of this part of the essay as the final chance to convince a skeptical reader that your argument is correct. The skeptical reader might be thinking, "but what about this objection", as they are reading your essay, and, ideally, you would confront and refute precisely that objection before the skeptical reader even got a chance to make it. This also means that the objections and counter-arguments you choose to confront cannot be mere straw men, mustered only to make your argument *appear* more compelling than it actually is. If the objection is one that no one in

their right mind would ever make, then don't bother confronting it. Indeed, showing that your argument is more compelling than a seriously stupid counter-argument does nothing more than showing that your argument is slightly less stupid. The more forceful the objections, and the more compelling your refutation of that counter-argument, the stronger your argument.

(b) The Structure of a Political Theory Essay

(vii) Political science essays are often structured in sections on method, theory, empirical data, analysis, and conclusions. This is almost never how you would want to structure an essay in political theory. In political theory, the point of the essay is not to offer an analysis of empirical data, but rather the development of a theoretical argument. This will rarely require an elaborate discussion of the methods employed, and in the typical case, you simply do not have any empirical data to present and analyze. This is not to say that a political theory essay cannot include real world cases or problems (or hypothetical thought experiments, as discussed above); but it does mean that the primary subject matter that you are dealing with is *theory* and the structure of your essay will need to be fitted to the way in which you want to work with the theoretical material.

Truth be told, there is no *one* right way to structure a political theory essay. For example, if you are writing an essay on a theme in the history of political thought, you will want to foreground the exposition of the arguments made by the "historical" political theorists in question. Often in such an essay, if your claim is of an interpretive nature – e.g. a claim about the *right way* to understand Locke's argument for toleration – then much of the essay will be spent demonstrating the plausibility of your interpretation through careful textual analysis. If your essay is first and foremost concerned with advancing a normative claim and you rely

mostly on contemporary theory, then more of the essay will be spent justifying the premises and finding other ways to support the argument such as confronting objections, as discussed above. However, both kinds of essay might have a structure in which the theme, puzzle and research question is presented first, which then goes on to present the claim or the interpretation that the essay defends, moving on to defend that claim or interpretation through one or more arguments, before, finally, confronting counter-arguments and alternative interpretations. Importantly, an essay focused on some theme in the history of political thought would often *also* include a normative evaluation of whether the argument offered by the historical political theorist is correct.

My own view is that how formally you want to state your argument and how you want to structure your essay is ultimately a matter of stylistic taste. In the so-called "analytic" tradition of political theory, which is traditionally more prevalent in Anglophone philosophy, arguments are sometimes stated formally at the beginning of the essay and each subsequent section devoted to shoring up each of the premises required to establish the conclusion, before confronting counter-arguments in the final section. In the so-called "continental" tradition of political theory, which is traditionally more prevalent in Germany and France, the structure might be less formal and the argument might be gradually developed in a more "dialectical" fashion through critical engagement with the work of other political theorists – but this does not mean that the argument is excused from meeting the criteria set out above, as any serious "continental" political theorists knows. If you are unsure about what style to pursue, then just opt for whatever style seems to you the simplest, or the one that comes most naturally to you – this really is not something you should spend too much time thinking about.

(2) "The argument-building carousel"

Assuming that students have familiarized themselves with the guidance note on how to write a political theory essay, this section sets out a method to train the skills necessary for writing an essay with their peers in the classroom. These skills will be trained in a so-called "argument-building carousel", the nature of which I will explain below. The purpose of the argument-building carousel is, as its name suggests, for students to familiarize themselves with and collaboratively train the process of building an argument, including choosing theme and puzzle, identifying a claim and the necessary and sufficient conditions for justifying that claim, clarifying its central concepts and stating the argument formally, and confronting possible objections and counter-arguments.

In his article "Using Active-Learning Pedagogy to Develop Essay-Writing Skills in Introductory Political Theory Tutorials", Michael P. A. Murphy develops a collaborative teaching method that he calls the "thesis-building carousel".[45] Murphy develops the thesis-building carousel for the context of "active learning classrooms" – a special classroom outfitted with whiteboards on all four walls, which enables students to freely move around between them. The argument-building carousel that I propose below is only loosely based on Murphy's thesis-building carousel, seeking to model its general structure rather its precise form, since Murphy's version presupposes access to facilities unavailable at most institutions of higher learning. For example, for the purposes of this training module, I have chosen not to presuppose the availability of active-learning classrooms – since these are not presently

[4] Michael P. A. Murphy (2017) "Using Active-Learning Pedagogy to Develop Essay-Writing Skills in Introductory Political Theory Tutorials", *Journal of Political Science Education* (13:3), 346-354.
[5] Note that I have opted for calling the teaching method an "argument-building carousel" rather than a "thesis-building carousel", since I want to emphasize that the carousel trains not just the skill of developing a thesis or claim, but also, centrally, the skill of developing an argument in defense of that thesis or claim.

available at the University of Copenhagen – but rather to couple the carousel model with the online tool "Padlet", where users can access a shared wall through their laptops or smartphones and submit their answers within four different columns, each devoted to a specific station/task, wherefore each, at the end, forms a distinct, collaboratively developed argument.[6]

The class will be divided into four groups, who will move clock-wise between the different stations. The carousel will move three times, taking each group to three different stations in the process. Moreover, in each round of the carousel, a specific task is assigned, such that each group performs a new task at each new station, while they all perform the same task at the same time. However, the crucial point is that the group will leave their answer to the task behind them in Padlet at each station, such that this answer will provide the basis for the next task that the following group will perform. The introduction of Padlet has the added value of combining the carousel with an OBL tool, which actually saves one station in the carousel compared to Murphy's version. Murphy's includes four stations, where the fourth and last station confronts the group with the task of writing up the argument and presenting it to the class. Since students have already submitted their answers within the relevant columns in Padlet while performing the task at each station, by the end of the third station, the collaboratively developed arguments will be visible in Padlet (projected onto a large screen in the class room) for the whole class to see and discuss.

In this way, each group will perform the following tasks:

[6] www.padlet.com

Station 1: Pick a thematic focus, puzzle over the theme and formulate a claim based on the syllabus and classes (20 minutes)

Station 2: Develop an argument based on the claim, consisting of two or three (or more) premises and a conclusion (25 minutes)

Station 3: Develop a counter-argument and a response to the counter-argument (15 minutes) [7]

After each group has completed the task at Station 3 of the carousel, they will each give a short presentation of and receive feedback on the argument that each group has ended up with. Moreover, in a more general discussion, each group will reflect upon and evaluate the challenges encountered at the different stages in the carousel and receive feedback from both their peers and their teacher. The teacher should emphasize that the point of the exercise is not to develop as compelling an argument as possible but rather for students to familiarize themselves with and acquire the skills necessary for writing a political theory essay. In particular, the discussion will focus on formal questions, such as whether the claim is sufficiently clear, whether the premises actually support the conclusions, etc.

(3) Testing and evaluating the essay-writing training module

(a) Theoretically and empirically grounded expectations

While the guidance note offers a traditional textual introduction to the knowledge required for writing a political theory essay, the argument-building carousel rests on and mobilizes so-called active learning and collaborative pedagogy to train students' skills in performing this task.

[7] Note that these tasks do not correspond to the tasks that Murphy assigns to each station in his thesis-building carousel.

"Active learning" is defined in the literature as any method of instruction that "requires students to do meaningful learning activities and think about what they are doing", while collaborative learning is defined as "any instructional method in which students work together in small groups toward a common goal".[8] The underlying idea is to engage students actively in the learning process, thus enabling them to mobilize and enact their knowledge in a collaborative setting, rather than passively receive knowledge in a lecture.

The combination of the guidance note with the argument-building carousel means that students do not start the exercise from rock bottom; rather, they have already been introduced to the core concepts and tasks in their pre-class preparations, and the argument-building carousel is deliberately designed so as to put these concepts and tasks into practice in a collaborative training exercise. The guidance note is intended as a general resource for the students, which they can consult both before and after class. However, the guidance note is likely to be an insufficient resource by itself, since it does not require any engagement of the skills that students will need to master for actually writing a political theory essay, but only introduces knowledge at a theoretical level. In terms of British philosopher Gilbert Ryle's distinction "between knowing that something is the case and knowing how to do thing",[9] the knowledge that students can gain from the guidance note is a matter of *knowing that*, whereas the knowledge they will need for writing a political theory essay is also going to be a matter of *knowing how*.

Active learning is likely to prove particularly valuable in a context where students are not only expected to learn a certain body of knowledge, but also acquire a particular skill-

[8] Michael Prince, "Does Active Learning Work? A Review of the Research", *Journal of Engineering Sciences* (93/3), 2004, 223-231, p. 223.
[9] Gilbert Ryle, "Knowing How and Knowing That: The Presidential Address" *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, New Series* (46), 1945-1946, pp. 1-16

set.[10] Moreover, collaborative learning enhances the interactive dimension of active learning: collaborating on the performance of each task, students will work together and get a chance to benefit from continuous review and feedback on each other's ideas both within and between peer groups and from the teacher. Thus, students will collaborate in applying the knowledge that they have been introduced to in the guidance note and thus, hopefully, transforming this knowledge into the requisite skill-set.

It is not difficult to find empirical research, which gives reason to expect that students might benefit from the argument-building carousel. A number of meta-studies have consistently shown that active and collaborative learning "improved learning outcomes relative to individual work across the board", in particular that it "enhances academic achievement, student attitudes, and student retention".[11] Unfortunately, I have not been able to find any empirical research, which specifically tests the effectiveness of a method closely resembling Murphy's thesis-building carousel for students' ability to acquire essay-writing skills. In the study that most closely resembles the use of teaching techniques included in the argument-building carousel, Linton et al find significant improvements in learning outcomes when active learning is combined with in-class writing, and they thus recommend a strategy that conjoins individual writing and peer discussion. Because of time constraints, the component of individual essay writing is not included in the training module that I propose, but these results of Linton et al suggest that it might be fruitful to attempt such a combination in the future. However, Linton et al also find highly varied results between different instructors with different degrees of experience, which they take to imply that the teacher must her- or himself have

[10] Matthew Johnson, "Communicating Politics: Using Active Learning to Demonstrate the Value of the Discipline." *British Journal of Educational Studies* (64/3), 2016, 315–335.
[11] Prince, "Does Active Learning Work? A Review of the Research"

received training in and mastered active learning techniques for active learning pedagogy to be effective.[12] This suggests that the teacher must prepare carefully when deploying teaching techniques such as the argument-building carousel, in order to be able to effective curate the class.

(b) Testing the argument-building carousel in practice

The argument-building carousel was introduced and tested in a 2x45 minutes master's level class on democratic theory amongst 14 students pursuing a specialization degree in political theory, but with a small minority of those students having much previous experience with political theory or with essay writing in political theory in particular. The guidance note was circulated among the students one week prior to the class and only a few had failed to do the reading. After the carousel had been tested, questionnaires were distributed among the students for the explicit purpose of evaluating both the guidance note and the exercise.[13] Students were asked the following four questions:

1. How useful did you find the note, "How to Write a Political Theory Essay
2. How much better equipped at writing a political theory essay do you feel after having read the note?
3. How useful did you find the class exercise, "the argument-building carousel"?

[12] Debra L. Linton, Wiline M. Pangle, Kevin H. Wyatt, Karli N. Powell, and Rachel E. Sherwood, "Identifying Key Features of Effective Active Learning: The Effects of Writing and Peer Discussion", *CBE—Life Sciences Education* (13), Fall 2014, 469–477.
[13] The questionnare is appended to this project.

4. How much better equipped at writing a political theory essay do you feel after having participated in the argument-building carousel?

Students were asked to rank their answers on a scale of 5, with 1 meaning "note useful at all" or "not better equipped at all" and 5 meaning "highly useful" or "much better equipped". Two students had not read the guidance note before class and so didn't respond to the first two questions (amounting to 12 responses in total), whereas one student neglected to respond to the latter two questions (amounting to 13 responses in total) – perhaps because they weren't attentive when I explained that the questionnaire had a back page.

The results were encouraging, if not superlative. All student responses were located within the range of 2-5, so none found the guidance note and the exercise completely useless or unhelpful. The average response to question 1 was 4; the average response to question 2 was 3,6; the average response to question 3 was 3,8; and the average response to question 4 was 3,2. In general, students thus found the guidance note slightly more useful than the argument-building carousel, and they felt slightly better equipped at writing a political theory essay from having read the guidance note than from having participated in the argument-building carousel. The questionnaires did not include any questions on the value of the guidance note and the carousel in conjunction, which is an unfortunate mistake on my part, since the latter is supposed to put the knowledge offered by the former into practice. However, it seems reasonable to conclude that even if neither the guidance note nor the argument-building carousel were blockbusting successes with the students, students nonetheless reported above-average positive answers to questions concerning their usefulness and their sense of

being better equipped at writing a political theory essay after having participated in the training module.

Students were also asked whether there were any specific things about the guidance note and the exercise that they particularly liked or disliked, and here their responses were again mostly positive, emphasizing different aspects as more helpful than others. Several students responded that they liked the "practical guide"-nature of the guidance note, specifically the combination of general advice plus examples. Two students reported that they felt the level was too low and more suitable for an undergraduate course, which seems consistent with the number students who have substantial prior experience in political theory. Concerning the argument-building carousel, several students reported that they liked the "active" dimension: that it was helpful to engage in "teamwork" and "discuss arguments with fellow students" under "time pressure", that they "were forced to try to build arguments that [they] did not make [themselves]", "fun engaging in small groups", the "constantly shifting mind set", and so on.[14] Three students reported that they felt they had too much time at some of the stations, which suggests that the time allotment for each station in the carousel should be readjusted. However, several students also reported (in a positive tone) feeling warm and slightly stressed-out during the carousel, so this might be a question of finding the right balance.

I must register a general worry here that evaluation by questionnaires might not be the right form of evaluating whether students actually benefitted from the guidance note and the argument-building carousel. Ideally, one would have a significantly larger sample and include a control group, to test whether the students exposed to the guidance note and the

[14] The resulting Padlet wall with the four arguments is appended to this project.

carousel show greater mastery of the skills required for writing a political theory essay than the group not exposed to the component parts of the training module. However, this was not possible for both practical reasons (the modest size of the class) and time constraints.

Conclusion

In this TLHE project, I have developed an essay-writing training module for students to gain knowledge of the form and structure and acquire the skills necessary to write an essay in political theory. The training module consists of a guidance note on how to write a political theory essay and a so-called "argument-building carousel", which mobilizes active learning and collaborative pedagogy to enable students to train the skills necessary for writing a political theory essay in a traditional classroom setting. Furthermore, in the third part of the project, I have motivated the training module based on existing theoretical and empirical research and accounted for testing of the training module in actual classroom setting. The results suggest that there is room for improvement, but above-average positive responses to questions about the usefulness of the guidance note and the training module, and about how much better equipped at writing a political theory essay students feel after having participated in the training module, also suggest that there is a reasonably solid foundation to build upon here, and that both elements should be further developed and improved in the future.

Evaluation

How useful did you find the note "How to Write a Political Theory Essay"?

1	2	3	4	5
Not useful at all				Highly useful

Are there specific things about the note that you particularly liked?

Are there specific things about the note that you particularly disliked?

How much better equipped at writing a political theory essay do you feel after having read the note?

1	2	3	4	5
Not better equipped at all				Much better equipped

How useful did you find the class exercise, "the argument-building carousel"?

1	2	3	4	5
Not useful at all				Highly useful

Are there specific things about the exercise that you particularly liked?

Are there specific things about the exercise that you particularly disliked?

How much better equipped at writing a political theory essay do you feel after having participated in the argument-building carousel?

1	2	3	4	5
Not better equipped at all				Much better equipped

The argument-building carousel

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Argument 1

Claim

Toleration is hurtful to democracy and poses a serious democratic challenge.

Argument

1. We need to reconceptualize toleration because current conceptions no longer help us understand how we can accommodate a great range of identities and combinations of identities.

2. If society itself is not tolerant towards its minorities, those minorities are not likely to participate in the democratic process and this could lead to unrest, which is a challenge for democracy.

3. Therefore, the current conception of toleration poses a threat to the functioning of democracies so the conception should be revisited.

Counter argument

If society itself is not tolerant towards its minorities, those minorities are not likely to participate in the democratic process and this could lead to unrest, which is a challenge for democracy."

Response: If tolerance is too extensive in society, democracy will get a hollow phenomenon. Overstreched democratic inclusiveness will kill the constructive democratic debate.

Response: The focus only on tolerance distracts us from the actual problems in society.

Argument 2

Claim

Considering Donald Trump anything but a fascist is unproductive to our understanding and current development of theory concerning populism.

Would the rise of Donald Trump be considered the rise of fascism?

Counterargument

1. Counter-argument: If A has features of B, A isn't necessarily B. So Trump's presidency having features of fascism does not make him a fascist.
2. Response: Calling Trump a fascist rather than a populist allows us to conceptualize populism as having positive effects for democracy, while fascism is reserved for people who are a threat to democracy.
2.1. Calling Trump a fascist is legitimate because he is on the path to fascism.

Argument

1. Donald Trumps precidency has features of fascism.
2. By excluding fascism in the debate on populism as a threat for democracy, we overlook a set of serious contemporary challenges for democracy.

Argument 3

Claim

Modern ways of thinking about democracy are inherently connected with capitalism and that produces a problem for rethinking democracy.

Argument

1. We need to rethink democracy.

2. Modern ways of thinking about democracy are connected with capitalism.

3. Democracy is exclusively thought about by political, intellectual and economic elites.

4. Rethinking democracy must be a popular collective enterprise.

5. Normal people need time, civic education and supportive institutions in order to undertake this enterprise.

6. Capitalism, with its exploitative structures, prevents people from having the time, civic education and publicly supported institutions needed.

7. The thinking of democracy needs to be separated from capitalism in order to solve the problem.

Possible counter-argument: The above could end in populism; how do we avoid defending populism?
- Our answer to rethinking democracy is not to simply give the people the power - but to qualify them to be active democratic citizens. That is not populism.

Possible counter-argument:

Argument 4

Claim

We cannot understand democracy today without taking into account neoliberalism.

Argument

1. We live in a time of neoliberalism
2. Democracy is a historical contingent term - so in order to understand democracy, we must understand the time we are living in (neoliberalism)
3. Therefore we must understand neoliberalism to understand democracy

The two premises (1+2) must be true in order for the claim (3) to be true. The essay would therefore had to elaborate on why the premises are true.

Counterargument

1. Democracy existed long before neoliberalism existed, so in order to understand democracy you don't necessarily need to understand neoliberalism. Neoliberalism is not necessarily going to be the dominant concept forever, so democracy can evolve past neoliberalism.

2. Democracy can evolve separately from dominant institutions, as historically they have, since democracy is run by the people, not just those in power. In focusing on only understanding dominant institutions, we do not understand ways in which the electorate wants to question and or fight power.

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