

Clove room
1.10-1.35pm

Applying political philosophy to real-world cases

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Political philosophy can be doubly abstract for Singaporean students. First, some of the classic works in the field are often 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 British contexts. There is a lack of Singapore or Asian-specific contexts. In my undergraduate teaching at Yale-NUS College, I am developing a strategy to overcome this double abstraction. In brief, my students are required to apply the theories to real-world cases for their final assessment; and then each cohort of students has their work published on a showcase website.

In this presentation, I will lay out (a) the pedagogical problem; (b) the details of my strategy and its rationale; (c) preliminary and tentative outcomes of the strategy. First, the pedagogical problem. It is widely recognised that philosophical and theoretical analysis can be experienced by students as abstract and unengaging; students 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). Furthermore, this problem of engagement is exacerbated in non-American, non-European learning environments, because both the theories themselves and the examples which they illustrate are remote from the real-world scenarios familiar to the students (Canagarajah, 1993; Thaman, 2009). Finally, while there is some potential for new technology to facilitate student engagement and connection of theory and practice, for instance, in reading or writing blog postings (Allen, 2016), technology is no panacea: there is some evidence that blog postings decrease critical thinking and serious exploration of ideas (Ellison & Wu, 2008; Hansen, 2016).

Second, the details of my strategy and its rationale. My strategy to address this problem has two dimensions. First, in two of my courses, I have structured the class final assessment to require students to write 'opinion pieces' that apply the theories to real-world cases, with many choosing local Singaporean cases that are relevant and important to them. Second, I have commissioned a website to disseminate this work amongst students to the larger college community.

The rationale for this strategy is as follows. Each student cohort will be forced to take the task of applying theory to practice seriously, both because the opinion piece exercise is worth a significant part of their grade and because they know the result will be public. But beyond this, by establishing a public and ongoing repository of student opinion-pieces, students will be able to build upon and respond to their peers' analyses, deepening their engagement over time. This should enable them to tackle the philosophical theories in a more authentic manner. It should also allow them to develop diverse frames of analysis for the same local context. At the same time, I outline how the website hopes to avoid the difficulties sometimes associated with student blogs: the dampening of critical thinking should be reduced by the semi-anonymity of postings (identified by initials only), and by the focus on producing a major piece of writing, not on quick responses.

Third, I report on preliminary and tentative outcomes of the strategy. The project is still underway, with the website only just published, and the third cohort of students doing the 'opinion piece' exercise. A retrospective student pedagogical survey is planned for January 2019. Nonetheless, two preliminary outcomes can be reported: the impact on my teaching practice forcing me to negotiate how to relate core bodies of disciplinary knowledge (which are often American-originated theoretical frames) with local contexts; and informally observed trends in student participation in the courses.

Keywords

practical application; student engagement; peer engagement; Asian focus; decolonising knowledge

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