

Overcoming troublesome knowledge in threshold concepts learning: the case of theoretical reasoning in undergraduate political studies

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Abstract

This paper investigates the challenges posed by troublesome knowledge in undergraduate politics learning. Theoretical reasoning is taken as the chief example of troublesome threshold concept in politics, and the problem of crossing the 'liminal space' is discussed. The pedagogy of games is offered as a model for overcoming the learner's anxiety in crossing the threshold. A literature review on the pedagogy of games suggests that games make the liminal space less problematic. First, during a game the tacit rules of reasoning are uncovered and become the rules of the game itself. Second, the humorous environment reduces learners' anxiety in dealing with troublesome knowledge. Reflective analysis on two episodes in an undergraduate class corroborates the finding of the literature, and highlights one further element of game and playfulness that makes the rite of passage more pleasant and productive: games are also a gateway for social cohesion and reciprocal trust, increasing the intimacy among students through playful teasing and imagination. The paper concludes that teaching styles that encourage reciprocal approachability are most effective in helping learners to comprehend threshold concepts.

5 keywords: threshold concepts, liminal space, theoretical reasoning, games, active learning

Introduction

Philosophical enquiry is a central feature of political studies. To achieve command of the discipline of politics, learners must engage successfully with a series of threshold concepts that are often troublesome in that they appear alien or counter-intuitive (Meyer and Land, 2003: 419). Threshold concepts are troublesome because they are rarely made explicit by practitioners and because they involve the reconstruction of the learner's subjectivity. In this investigation of the challenges posed by troublesome knowledge in undergraduate

politics learning, I take the concept of theoretical reasoning as a method of acquisition of political knowledge as the central case of threshold concept in politics.

Theoretical reasoning is the method of acquiring knowledge based on the assessment and weighing of reasons for believing some assumptions or others. Threshold concepts and the example of theoretical reasoning are defined and introduced in Section 2. The issue of troublesome knowledge is raised, and examples of how theoretical reasoning might be troublesome are offered. As a threshold concept, theoretical reasoning constitutes a gate to the mastering of the discipline, and its comprehension demands that the learner crosses a threshold of understanding through what is generally referred as the ‘liminal space.’

The liminal space is defined in Section 3, and the pedagogy of games is offered as a model for overcoming the learner’s anxiety in crossing the threshold. Two elements of play as a learning process are suggested to be central to the understanding of threshold concepts: the comprehensiveness and unity of the experience of play, and the element of humour. A literature review on the pedagogy of games suggests that games make the liminal space less problematic to inhabit for learners. First, when playing a game, the tacit rules of reasoning are uncovered as they also become the rules of the game itself. Second, the humorous environment of games reduces the anxiety generated by the realization that our world view might be mistaken. These features of games and playful enquiry make it possible for the learner to be free to experiment, create, and apply new meaning and interpretations of events and rules in a non-serious but nevertheless intense environment.

In Section 4, I conduct reflective analysis on two playful activities carried out in an undergraduate class in political thought: a game representing the state of nature – a hypothetical situation representing human beings’ interaction before societies came into existence, and a discussion conducted with the Socratic method. The outcome of the analysis confirms the benefits of play as a learning activity conducive to the understanding and command of threshold concepts. Moreover, it suggests that teaching styles that encourage openness and reciprocal approachability in a safe environment are to be preferred, because they reduce the anxiety that students may feel approaching and experiencing the liminal space.

Theoretical Reasoning in Political Studies

Threshold Concepts

Threshold concepts in political studies are held by political scholars to be central to the achievement of deep understanding and command of their subject (Meyer and Land, 2005: 5). They allow for the learners’ acquisition of forms of thought and expression typical of the discipline, as well as distinctive of academic thinking. Threshold concepts are “akin to a portal, opening a new and previously inaccessible way of thinking about something” (Meyer and Land, 2005: 3): the comprehension of a threshold concept is thus a transformative

event in the learners' way to think about a discipline, or the way they experience particular phenomena in the discipline.

For example, in undergraduate political studies, learners are confronted with the concept of theoretical reasoning as a method to acquire knowledge. Theoretical reasoning is concerned with the question of what one ought to believe about certain facts and explanations. It relies on a deductive method based on the assessment and weighing of reasons for believing some assumptions or others, comparing the reasons for and against conclusions we might draw about how the world is, and striving for consistency between beliefs (Wallace 2014; Harman 2004: 47). Theoretical knowledge in politics is best understood in contrast to empirical knowledge, which relies on the inductive method of drawing conclusions from experience and experiments.

Theoretical reasoning in politics is employed, for example, when we ask whether morality is objective or not. Different answers to this question may lead us to re-evaluate our beliefs on whether a state can push for policies based on a specific world-view, or whether it should solely be concerned with the resolution of conflicts between its citizens' contrasting and equally valuable conceptions of justice. It may seem that these questions can be answered using an empirical method: do we observe consistency in people's belief of what is morally right? However, empirical analysis does not lead us to reliable conclusions on the nature of morality. This becomes clear once we consider that individuals may be mistaken about their own moral beliefs. The fact that people all over the world disagree on whether homosexual couples should be permitted to marry is not an evidence that there is no objective truth about how the state should treat homosexual couples. It is merely a proof of the fact that people disagree about our moral and political obligations towards them.

Theoretical reasoning is transformative because once learners understand this new line of reasoning they become able to ask new questions about rationality, coherency of world views, the nature of true statements about the world, and the limitation of human knowledge. Learners are confronted with a concept that demands a radical re-evaluation or distortion of "parts of their common-sense understanding about the world" (Booth 2006: 174). Theoretical reasoning is also an essential skill to effectively join the community of political thinkers. It represents a gate to the mastering of the discipline and it is often assumed by practitioners to be foundational to any kind of enquiry in the field of politics (Davies 2006: 71).

Theoretical Reasoning as Troublesome Knowledge

The challenges posed by threshold concepts such as theoretical reasoning are determined by the extent to which concepts constitute troublesome knowledge. Theoretical reasoning is troublesome knowledge for two reasons. First, because it is taken for granted by practitioners, it is rarely made explicit in debates and literature on politics (Booth 2006: 172). The idea of theoretical reasoning as opposed to empirical proof operates at a deep

level of understanding, often presupposed by empirical analysis as well. As we conduct empirical analysis on the level of participation to general elections, for example, we implicitly assume that high participation is desirable. The assumption that high participation in political elections is desirable, is a product of theoretical reasoning on the value of openness and publicity of political debate in liberal political thought. When undergraduate students face the task to evaluate general election data sets to understand the levels of political participation, they are encouraged to question the basic theoretical assumptions on the value of political participation. Nevertheless, the question of whether and to what extent political participation is desirable in liberal democracies falls outside the scope of the task of analysing data sets for the general elections, and it is often implied in the academic literature regarding data analysis. A second way in which theoretical reasoning is troublesome is that to acquire it the learner must personally reconsider the limits of empirical proof and of human knowledge, eventually undergoing a deep world view transformation. That most accomplishments in political studies – and, arguably, in every other field of human knowledge – are ultimately grounded on the shaky footing of constructive comparisons between beliefs and the quest for logical coherency, is a deeply troubling realization. To understand and appreciate the basic methodological fact that knowledge is a consequence of human construction and a fabrication of human mind, the students may need to “challenge and abandon intuitions and opinions they thought were infallible” (Booth 2006: 172). When learners become aware of the fact that, for example, economic policies that have direct effects on their lives are the result of a mix of empirical and theoretical analysis, and that the convenience of one economic policy over the other is established by approximation, they are confronted with the realization of the uncertainty that pervades political action, as well as all other human pursuits. This realization can be troublesome, affecting the way the learners interpret their role in society and define their professional ambitions (Williams 2004: 16).

Liminality and the Pedagogy of Games

Liminal Space

Because they are often implicitly understood by practitioners, threshold concepts often constitute rites of passage. The metaphor of the rite of passage is borrowed from anthropological studies, and indicates the ambiguity and disorientation that one experiences when engaging in rituals that chance one’s identity or social status (Thomassen, 2009: 6). The learner who successfully grasps the centrality and pervasiveness of theoretical reasoning in political knowledge, can move from the state of outsider or novice in political studies, to the state of insider and expert of the discipline. The gap that the learner must cross to acquire a sufficient level of familiarity with some aspects of the discipline may take months to traverse, and places the learner in a transitional intellectual state that is referred to as ‘liminality’ (Meyer and Land, 2005b: 22). The liminal space is the space learners inhabit while they cross the conceptual threshold and acquire new, fundamental, and

transformative knowledge. Broadly, the term also indicates the space of time within which a ritual of passage is performed (Turner, 1969: 15), through which the learner joins the community of practitioners and he or she begin to think like a political scientist.

Learners may find themselves inhabiting the liminal space for a protracted time (Meyer and Land, 2005b: 23). For this study, I wish to focus on two reasons why this may happen. The first reason is the extent to which the threshold concept is troublesome (Savin-Baden, 2005: 163). Theoretical reasoning is in fact challenging to grasp: it requires that learners engage with highly abstract calculations of values, as well as with critical analysis of their own beliefs, such as in the case about discrimination based on sexual orientation presented earlier. But theoretical reasoning is also challenging to accept, as it demystifies scientific knowledge and uncovers its limitations.

The second reason why learners linger in the liminal space is that inhabiting the liminal space involves repeatedly confronting the problem of limited understanding and the difficulty in taking control of the material (Meyer and Land, 2005b: 23). It is often the case that learners experience temporary regressions to earlier status, by reproducing empty knowledge of the threshold concept via mimicry, as the fear that mastering the concept is beyond grasp overtakes them (Meyer and Land, 2005b: 16, 24). The challenge represents a psychological hurdle that tests the learners' self-confidence and endurance, even to the point of affecting their motivation and ambitions. For these two reasons, the liminal space can be a very uncomfortable space to inhabit.

In what follows I explain how games and playful enquiry can help students overcome the first hurdle related to troublesome threshold concepts. In the fourth section, where I conduct reflective analysis on two episodes, I propose that games and playful enquiry can be effective at overcoming also the challenge generated by anxiety and emotional fatigue.

The Pedagogy of Games

The literature exhorts us to consider that play and games provide some of the most sophisticated methods to advance human knowledge, and that this is particularly true of philosophical education and conceptual shifts in understanding (Gadamer, 2004; D'Angour, 2013; Henricks, 2015). My aim is to argue that games and playful enquiry are also an effective way in which we can make the transition through the liminal space less difficult for learners. Recall the reasons why the familiarization with theoretical reasoning is troublesome: (1) the rules of reasoning are often implied and taken for granted in the literature on politics, and (2) the realization that human knowledge is uncertain and constructed requires a deep world view transformation that can be unsettling. The troublesomeness of theoretical reasoning is one cause for discomfort as the student crosses the liminal space. I argue that the literature offers reasons to believe that games and playful enquiry can in fact provide great help in mitigating these two hurdles in familiarizing with theoretical reasoning.

First, games allow learners to uncover the rules of theoretical reasoning by letting them experience how meaning is constructed from a range of facts, from beliefs about those facts, and from values (Kirby and Graham, 2016: 9). Games involve thinking about systems of rules and logic, as well as making causal connections between behaviour and consequences (Tierney et al., 2014). When playing a game, the tacit rules of reasoning are uncovered as they also become the rules of the game itself. Games and playful enquiry are thus a scenario within which learners can put in practice their skills in theoretical reasoning, as they engage in the critical evaluation of their own beliefs, values, and the rules that characterise the 'game' of reasoning. Games make the practice of theoretical reasoning visible and explicit, and learners are given the opportunity to explore, follow, and playfully challenge the rules that underlie theoretical reasoning itself (McLaren 1988: 174).

Second, because of its humorous nature, play allows the learner to safely explore different options, progressing by trial and error, and attempting the creation of the rules themselves (Dormann & Biddle, 2006). Learners can experiment with their own views about the rules of society without risking social repercussions or reprehension from their peers or the teacher. The safe and humorous environment of games reduces the anxiety generated by the realization that our world view might be mistaken. In political studies, games allow learners to experience and contextualize their personal beliefs as part of the hegemonic interpretation of implied political assumptions, such as the idea that political participation is always desirable, or that there is a morally relevant difference between citizens of one country and immigrants from other countries. As they navigate through political issues, learners are encouraged to reconsider the rules of the game – and thus of the social/political 'game', by revealing the interconnection between their own moral commitments, and "the community, culture, and the larger social context: in short, to explore the dialectic of self and society" (McLaren, 1988: 175). Because the experience of play is intense, it involves the whole concentration of the player/learner and demands that he or she detaches from reality and decontextualize the rules of theoretical reasoning (Gadamer 2004: 102-103). But the experience of play is also and at the same time humorous, making the liminal space a less anxious environment to inhabit (LSE Education blog, 2017).

Reflective Analysis

In support of the idea that games and playful enquiry are effective in facilitating the reception of theoretical reasoning in political studies, I present two episodes where I employed a game and a moment of playful enquiry in an undergraduate politics class. In addition, I also aim to uncover the appropriateness of games in overcoming the emotional tiredness and motivational challenge that inhabiting the liminal space generates. This happens, I suggest below, thanks to the fact that play creates intimacy and comradery among students, allowing for a positive environment of comfort and support among a community of peers.

The first episode is a game recreating the rules of the state of nature. Learners were presented with a scenario: “You find yourself in the state of nature. Together with your team-mates, you acquire property through your bodily labour and want to protect it against interference from others. How would you act?”. The students were divided in teams, and they were told the rules of the game: they could choose to acquire a non-occupied space, invade someone else’s space, or stay still and not acquire any new property. Most students chose to focus on acquiring as much unoccupied areas as possible, stopping when the only option was to invade some other person’s property. Student A - usually quiet and very polite - chose to go after other people’s property and play with an aggressive strategy. Others were less competitive, and by the end of the game students were laughing and teasing each other, whilst also evaluating which strategy brought the most beneficial outcomes. Given the unusual behaviour of student A, it became obvious to me that he took the opportunity to experiment a behaviour somewhat alien to him, giving the chance to the others to uncover two fundamental aspects of the theory of social contract: first, that aggression leads to conflict and consequently to the necessity of social rules, and second, that the rules must somehow be determined and affirmed by all if we aim at general compliance.

My role as a tutor was simply to facilitate the game ensuring order in the turn-based activity, and reminding them of the basic rules of the game. Students seemed to forget that I was there, and that the activity was meant to explain one of the justifications of political authority. In the totality and comprehensiveness of the game, students escaped reality and at the same time uncovered, evaluated and experienced the rules of social interaction together with their own moral commitments. This exercise seemed to also uncover the intimate assumptions and automatic response students have about social interaction among themselves. As will become clear after the examination of the second episode, the illusion that the whole world could be enclosed by the walls of the classroom made them more confident in assessing abstract values, such as that of respecting others’ property, in a real – albeit playful – situation. At the end of the game, they displayed intimacy and comradery, as well as playful competitive approach to debate and discussion, especially when they were asked to justify their actions in the game.

The second episode, directly following the game, was a conversation in the form of the Socratic Method on the topic of whether we should force people to do things they disagree about in the name of non-discrimination and equality. The Socratic Method involves the tutor guiding the flow of questioning, whilst engaging the student in an interactive and critical search for defensible and logical opinions (Booth 2006, p. 178). Students were asked what they thought about the baker in Colorado, USA, who refused to bake a wedding cake for a homosexual couple. Facilitated by the playful atmosphere generated by the previous game, students quickly understood that the question had no right answer, and that they could go on experimenting and justifying ideas that they did not necessarily believe to be right or appropriate.

As the facilitator of the discussion, I took the role of the “liminal servant” (McLaren 1988: 165) questioning the obvious, classic replies to the problem of discrimination, at times pushing the students to consider controversial statements, other times pointing at the history of discrimination that characterises the USA. With the aim of allowing the students to explore and experiment with different views, I asked them to consider whether their answer to the question would have changed if the case involved a black couple. Some of the students that initially had replied that the baker should be allowed not to bake the cake in the name of freedom of conscience changed their views when confronted with the case of racial discrimination. Because the game had created a safe environment, there was visibly no uncomfortableness in uncovering hidden assumptions, and the class welcomed the change of opinion as an entertaining twist of the ‘game’ and swiftly moved to discuss how moral and political judgements are affected by hidden assumptions that, when made manifest appear counterintuitive or unreasonable.

The debate at times turned into chatter between the students, which I allowed in part to reinforce the familiarity and comradery among the students. As a result, the students seemed comfortable to speak about race and homosexuality with me or among each other, maintaining an impersonal but earnest level of conversation that allowed them to discuss a difficult topic without having to refer to personal experiences or violate their privacy. This was made possible because the class accepted the exercise as a game, where they could be whomever they wanted for the sake of philosophical enquiry. The conversation uncovered the role of ideology in persons’ behaviours, as well as in governmental policies about racial and sexual discrimination. The conversation swiftly moved to and from the analysis of the baker’s case and the application of theoretical reasoning in evaluating the weight of beliefs and values in politics. To navigate the method of theoretical reasoning, students asked more clarificatory questions on method than they ever had in the previous workshops. It seemed to me that they were looking at each other more often, and that they looked for me only to gather the tools to continue with their conversation. As they freely exchanged ideas about great political questions, they seemed electrified with the discovery that they were demystifying the taboo associated with issues of racial and sexual discrimination, as well as with the critical views on widely accepted liberal rules of social cooperation. The class did not arrive at any specific conclusion about the case, but the political dilemma of making consistent the liberal commitment to freedom with the commitment to equality was examined to its core.

Conclusion

Theoretical reasoning is a threshold concept in politics that is troublesome because it is often implied and taken for granted by practitioners, and because it involves a deep world view transformation that can be unsettling. Because of its troublesome nature, the intellectual gap that learners must cross to become political thinkers might place them in a

protracted liminal space, within which they may lose motivation and ambition, and risk to being unsuccessful in achieving command of the discipline.

The analysis of the literature on the pedagogy of games suggests that games make the liminal space less problematic to inhabit for learners. First, when playing a game, the rules that practitioners follow to advance knowledge in their field are uncovered as they also become the rules of the game itself (McLaren 1988; Dormann & Biddle, 2006; Gadamer, 2004). Second, the fact that games are playful activities and allow students to experiment with different behaviours without the risk of being judged, makes the liminal space less uncomfortable to inhabit, and allows students to undergo the reconstruction of their subjectivity with more optimism (LSE Education blog, 2017 D'Angour, 2013; Henricks, 2015).

The reflective analysis on two episodes in an undergraduate class corroborates the finding of the literature, and highlights one further element of game and playfulness that makes the rite of passage more pleasant and productive: games are also a gateway for social cohesion and reciprocal trust, increasing the intimacy among students through playful teasing and imagination. In both activities examined, the forms of argument that are considered valid in the case of political justice are exposed, and the learners are encouraged to critically evaluate them and use them liberally within a safe, friendly and intimate environment that encourages reciprocal trust, openness, and approachability.

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