Introduction

Today, the importance of experiential learning has been widely acknowledged. Especially after 1980s, the social science classroom witnessed a paradigm shift in the teaching strategies as the desired outcome of learning became more learner centered and focused on critical thinking (Svinicki 1999, 5). Thus, simulations, role-play and games have been integrated into the curriculum of many undergraduate level political science classes in order to increase the interactive learning based on experience. However, we observe that undergraduate level political theory courses are still structured in a traditional lecture style (Moore 2011).

A typical introductory level political theory class is structured as a survey of western political thought covering a selection of the major theories and thinkers from antiquity to the 20th Century. As instructors, we want our students to read difficult philosophical texts and engage with these highly abstract political ideas critically. Ideally, at the end of the semester, we expect that our students would acquire a basic understanding of political concepts and critically analyze and react to the current political environment. Pop-quizzes, reaction papers and discussion group activities are generally employed to encourage students to engage with the material presented. However, it is still difficult to convince students about the relevance and importance of the material that we are teaching to the contemporary political affairs that they are most interested in. For students, the text is too abstract and demands serious thinking process. There lies the challenge for the teachers of political theory. How can we get our students to understand the importance and the relevance of political ideas so that they can devote the necessary time to understand and critically analyze them?

After years of being a teaching assistant for the survey of western political thought classes, I was convinced that I should somehow bring the political philosophers down from their ivory towers so that students can engage with their ideas, connect the dots between historical and contemporary political events and perhaps be inspired by the ancient wisdom to initiate political action for future. Even though I was determined to change the structure of my class in order to incorporate interactive learning tools, I felt lost due to the fact that I have never taken a political thought or theory class different from traditional lecture style in my 12 years of higher education. In this conference paper, I would like to share my experiment with the role-play activity in my survey of western political thought class. For my class, I designed my syllabus rather different than usual and included role-playing activities. I prepared a newspaper consisting five articles about ancient times (all made up and but relevant to texts) and basically asked my students to imagine themselves as either Plato or Aristotle sitting in a coffee shop, enjoying their morning paper and discussing the news with the opposing party.

Overall, I believe that role-playing sessions provided necessary active learning environment for my class. My students did not only enjoy their discussion in a theatrical setting but also had the opportunity to apply theory to practical issues. The structure of the paper is as follows. First, I will briefly introduce experiential learning theory, Kolb's four stage of learning cycles and the importance of learning tools like simulations and

role-playing for the adaptation cycle of learning. Second, I will discuss the challenges that political theory classes are facing in terms of interactive learning and possible ways to overcome them. Third, I will explain my experiment with the role-playing and discuss advantages and disadvantages of integrating such a technique in political theory syllabus.

Experiential Learning Theory and Role-Play

The psychological research and theory in the area of learning have experienced a paradigm shift from a behavioral to a cognitive and its successors in constructive models of learning (Svinicki 1999, 5). The teaching strategies and motivation have changed because of the transformation of our approach to the desirable outcomes of learning in the classroom. Today, most of the instructors prioritize active, experiential and learner centered theory. "Indeed, some have asserted that true learning cannot take place when students are passive observers of the teaching process" (Poorman 2002, 32). One of the most influential learning theory that puts emphasis on the value of active learning is experiential learning theory.

Dewey as a leading American pragmatist argues that "genuine education comes from experience" (Ulrich 1997, 2). Following Dewey, experiential learning theory defines learning as "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience" (Kolb 1984, 41).

To illustrate, Kolb (1984) argues that learning occurs when four learning stages in cycle are followed by the instructors.
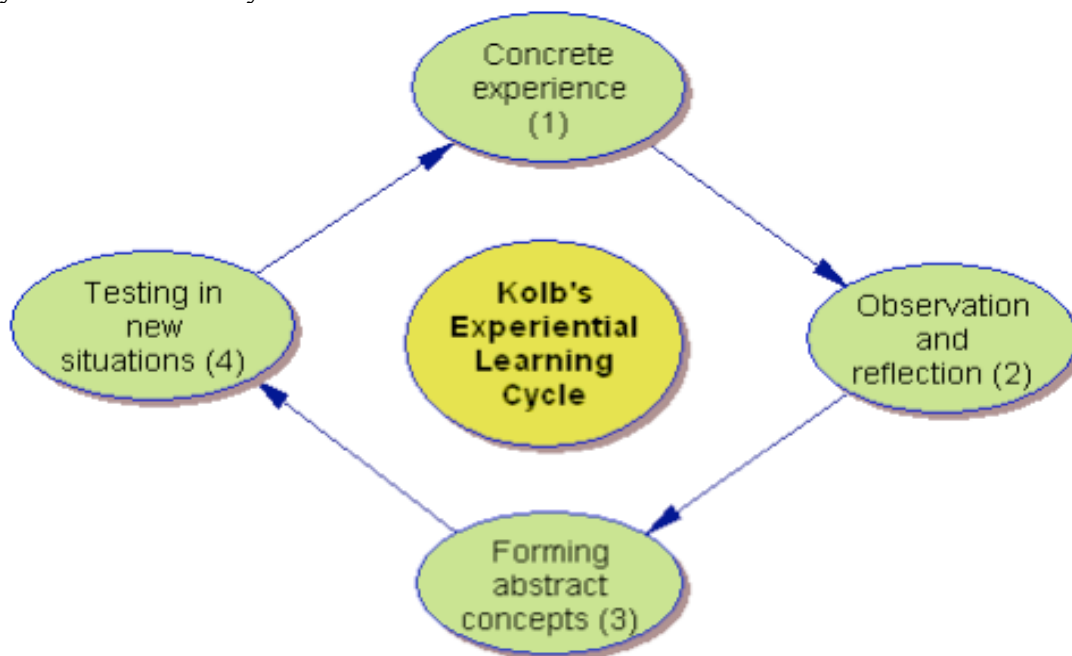

Figure 1. *Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle.*

These stages of learning are not sequential and can follow different order under different circumstances for different learners. The first stage is called *concrete experience*, which is a concrete introduction to a situation or a problem, which forms the basis for learning experience. It creates meaning and context and the instructor should act as a motivator and provide reasons for the importance of learning the subject to the students. The second stage is called *reflective observation* where students find opportunity to examine their *concrete experience* from multiple perspectives. The third stage is *abstract conceptualization* in which learner starts to understand the general concept behind their concrete experience by connecting the content to its general form. The fourth stage of learning is *active experimentation* where instructors act as a moderator to lead students to apply theory and analyze particular situations (Kolb et al. 2000, 3-5).

As the fourth stage indicates, the application of the knowledge constitutes an important part of the learning process. Thus, role-playing and simulation are important learning tools for the application of knowledge. "Role-playing is a teaching strategy that fits within the social family of models. These strategies emphasize the social nature of learning, and see cooperative behavior as stimulating students both socially and intellectually" (Ulrich 2002, 2). In this sense, traditional lecturing by itself is not sufficient to complete the learning cycle. Interactive learning activities should be incorporated to the class curriculum especially for the understanding of abstract concepts and application of theory to practice. Next, I will focus on role-playing and simulation activities and explain the reasons why these interactive learning tools are important for learning process of students.

Aronson and Carlsmith (1968) describe the role playing study as "an as-if experiment in which the subject is asked to behave as if he [or she] were a particular person in a particular situation" (26). Smith and Boyer (1996) list five basic advantages of active learning. First, simulation and role-playing help students to have deeper understanding of the issue at hand. To illustrate, Poorman (2002) argue that "integrating experiential learning activities in the classroom increases interest in the subject mater and understanding of course content" (32). In this sense, role-playing can "can bring to life and facilitate mastery of topics central to a given course"(Rivera et al. 2008, 300-3001).

Second, role-playing can be helpful to encourage students to be more active in the classroom. Third, the subjects learned by the active learning methods become more memorable for students. Fourth, role-playing activities improve collaboration between students and lastly help students to develop speaking and presentation skills. In addition to the improvement of communication skills, Poorman (2002) argues that role-playing teaches empathy and an understanding of differences between opinions. Therefore, "the literature clearly supports the view that a well-crafted simulation can be a useful and popular teaching tool" (Frederking 2005, 387). Next, I will discuss how we can incorporate these active learning methods to the political theory classes.

Political Theory Classes and Role-Playing

According to Moore's survey on the state of political theory, political theorists are not interested in incorporating the interactive learning strategies into their classes. "It is clear that political theorists have generally not adopted many of the innovations in teaching that the literature on teaching and learning has both investigated and celebrated over the past 20 years. As explained above, political theorists have largely not embraced civic education, service-learning, simulations, dramatic enactments, the use of film in the classroom, blogging, the creation of wikis, distance education, differentiated instruction, or the use of presentation software" (Moore 2011, 124).

Instead, political theory classes generally tend to be structured in a traditional university lecture style. This lecturing style is based on behaviorist theory of learning, which is centered on transmitting information to the passive learner. Generally, in a lecture styled classes, "students struggle to remember various isolated details and the lecturer appears as a remote authority rather than participating in a community of learning with his or her students" (Schaap 2005, 47).

As shown above, interactive tools are essential for learning. There are several reasons why political theory classes usually do not employ these experiential learning strategies. First, the abstract content of political theory classes makes difficult to plan and implement games and simulations. The nature of the subject matter leads instructors to focus on classroom discussion. However, students usually have hard time to understand let alone critically discuss the subject matter. At the end, classes are perceived to be boring by students because of the lack of active learning.

Moreover, most of us are caught up with the immense material that we have to cover and "have trouble getting beyond the 'just the facts' content coverage and into higher-level, critical historical thinking, especially because of the limited class time available" (Vogler and Virtue, 2007, 55). Because of these reasons, undergraduate level students may find introductory level courses on the history of western political thought rather dull and irrelevant. I believe that we must change this ill-founded perspective on political theory classes by incorporating role-play games into our curriculum.

Role-playing games are actually not that unusual to the classes of history of political thought. There is a popular historical simulation series called *Reacting to the Past*. "The series provides an ingenious way for students to explore the interaction of political theory and politics in the context of key historical events" (Gorton et al 2012, 51).[1] Gorton and Havercroft (2012) have employed *Reacting to the Past* simulations to teach political theory courses and argue that "not only do the simulations increase student

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[1] "The concept for the Reacting series was first developed by Mark C. Carnes, a history professor at Barnard College, in the mid-1990s. Since that time, eight historical simulations have been created, and a dozen or so more are currently in development. Historians have created many of the simulations, but academics from other disciplines, including political science, philosophy, and psychology, have also contributed to them. In the simulations, students read historical accounts of key political events, such as the French Revolution, the trial of Socrates, or the American Revolution. In conjunction with the historical readings, students also read works of political theory that informed the debates and actions surrounding the political events" (Gorton et al 2012, 51).

engagement and enthusiasm (not to mention attendance) but they also help students learn valuable lessons about political theory that are difficult to impart through the traditional methods of lecture and Socratic questioning" (Gorton et al 2012, 51). However, these simulations are semester long and necessitate long pre-semester preparation and complete restructuring of the class. As a new teacher, I could not afford to structure my class completely different from what has been done so far; so I decided to design a role-playing game that would suit and complement the standard survey of western political thought syllabus. In the final section of this paper, I will explain the role-playing game activity that I designed and discuss merits of this venture for the student learning.

Role-Play: Bringing Back the Philosophers From the Ivory Tower

My basic aim in designing the role-play activity for my syllabus was to get students to apply the ideas of major political thinkers into practical political events. The reason why I thought role-playing would a good strategy emanates from my strong belief that one can deeply understand the underlying logic behind the abstract ideas on politics only by putting themselves in the context and mind setting of the philosopher they study.

While designing the game, I tried to follow McDaniel's (2000) four steps strategy (357). According to McDaniel, the success of each role-play activity depends on four essential steps. First, role-playing activity depends on the information that students have. Without prior knowledge, students cannot be expected to engage in critical discussion. Within this context, I reserved two weeks (week 5 and week 11) for the role-playing activity that I named *Bringing Back the Philosophers From the Ivory Tower* in the syllabus. In the role-paying activity sheet that I distributed in week 4, I defined the objective of the activity as follows:

> This is a role playing game simulation developed to contribute students' understanding of ancient political thinkers specifically Plato and Aristotle. The game's basic objective is to encourage students to actively elaborate historical and political ideas. This game is staged in Ancient Greece around 485 BC. Students will be expected to imagine themselves in a coffee shop and reading their morning paper. First, they will react to the news from either Plato's or Aristotle's perspective. Second, they will have a discussion with the other party why they think their reaction is correct.

Before the role-play activity, I tried to give as much information as possible about the historical context, the priorities of the philosophers and their understanding of the basic political concepts. Thus, during the first five weeks of the class, I gave a comprehensive account of Plato and Aristotle's political thought and provided necessary information about historical, political and socio-economic structure of Ancient Greece. Students were reminded about the game in each class session.

According to McDaniel, the second crucial element for the design of a role-play activity is to include conflicting perspectives to ensure student involvement (McDaniel,

2000, 358). That is the reason why I picked Plato and Aristotle in the first session of role-play.

The third element is to set up a specific situation where student can directly adapt their roles and understand the situation (McDaniel 2000, 359). In this context, I decided on a simple plot where students imagined themselves reading a newspaper in a coffee shop. At this point, the newspaper became the focal point of the role-play activity. It was challenging for me to prepare the newspaper articles because I wanted to guide students in a flexible way to unleash their own creativity. This is also McDaniel's final step for a successful role-play design, which advocates instructor's limited involvement to enable students to take their own path to understanding (360).

While creating the newspaper articles, I want to present so called ancient time news by giving reference to a popular song. For example, I wanted my students to discuss the relationship between poor and rich from Aristotle's and Plato's perspective and wrote the news as follows:

Three class sessions were reserved for the role-playing game. For the first game session, I introduced the rules of the game and my expectations from them. For the

second game session, I provided a preview of the game's historical setting, two possible roles that students may play and the newspaper articles that they are going to react to. I explained that the roles are going to be distributed by a lottery and distributed name cards to students after the lottery.

For the third session, I assigned two group activities. First, a group of three students with the same role came together and talked about their possible reaction. This discussion took 15 minutes. For this session, I guided them by providing questions like these:

1. What would Plato or Aristotle's response be to that particular news? Why?
2. How would he defend his response/criticism/argument?

After the first group work, a group of four students (2 Platos and 2 Aristotles) came together and had a discussion about their conflicting views on the same news for 25 minutes. At the end of their discussion, students were expected to outline the differences and similarities between Aristotle and Plato. At the end of the class, I gave information about how this activity will be graded and how to write an assessment paper as follows:

Requirement and Grades

1- Arguments presented verbally or written in regards to the materials should be informative, creative and persuasive. Instructor will notice the superficiality of engagement, which will have negative effects. In order to avoid that, students need to have strong and persuasive arguments and/or evidence.

2- Class participation is very important. Especially, reacting students must express their arguments and evidence in the classroom in order to achieve their game objectives.

3- Reacting players should always remember that what other players say or do is their role as a part of the game and that there are no personal feelings involved in their arguments. For that reason, students should identify themselves by their game names and roles. They should also address other students with their game names.

4- One assessment paper(1 page, single spaced) and active student participation are required.

Assessment paper and participation in the group work will constitute 5% of your overall grade for this class.

How to write an assessment paper?

1. In the introduction, write down the name of the philosopher you played
2. Choose three newspaper articles

3. In each paragraph, focus on one news, explain your reaction to the news and your discussion with the opposing partner
4. In each paragraph, briefly mention the theoretical justification of your reaction
5. In the conclusion, sum up your overall experience (Did this game help you to understand Plato more? What can be done differently next time? What was good about it?)

Conclusion

Overall, I am glad that I took the risk and incorporated role-playing activities in my first class. I realized how a simple method could change the students' perception of the class. It was challenging since I have to come up with the overall design of the activity but it was also rewarding.

Through their assessment papers, I collected feedback from my students about the activity and received plentiful positive reaction. After the role-play activity, my students' understanding of the abstract political concepts has deepened. Through comparing and contrasting two opposing philosophers, they had the opportunity to see the foundation of philosopher's ideas. They realized the importance of history for the construction of political ideas on basic issues like freedom, equality etc. Most important of all, they understood the contextual application of highly abstract political concepts.

Moreover, I observe that students were really having fun while actively applying what they have learned in the classroom environment. They finally socialized with each other. They learned each other's names. Their argumentative skills have improved in a secure environment. For sure, there were some set backs and challenges throughout the activity. For example, the preparation of the newspaper articles took more time that I have had bargained for. Also, I realized once again that things that I find funny are not always funny for my students. That is the reason why I got my students prepare the newspaper articles for the social contract newspaper with their groups for the second role-play activity.

Lastly, I realized that my grading had a flow. I did not give incentive for the active participation during the role-play. Grading was made through the assessment papers. Next time, I will get group members to grade each other with regard to their performance to eliminate this mistake.

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