Don't Argue, Reflect! Reflections on Introducing Reflective Writing into Political Science Courses

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In this article, I discuss an alternative way of conceptualizing and structuring essay assignments in political science courses. Generally, political science teachers have tried to encourage critical thinking about political issues by assigning essays that ask for *argumentative* writing. An argumentative essay format asks students to present several positions or concepts covered in a course, analyze them, and argue for their own position on the issues at hand. A better format, I suggest, is to ask students to engage in *reflective* writing. Reflective writing has four basic stages. First, students are asked to explain course materials. Next, they are challenged to reflect explicitly on how this material calls into question their preconceptions about the topic. Third, they analyze the conflicts, confusions, or questions that arise from engaging their preconceptions. And finally, they formulate plans to use the knowledge gained by the reflective process. In short, reflective writing invites students to search for the truth rather than develop rhetorical skills. My case for reflective writing is made here in the form of a reflective essay, so readers can take from this essay both a demonstration of the reflective process as well as an explanation. Thus, I will explore my pedagogical preconceptions and experiences with student writing, explain my initial understanding of reflective writing and my first attempt at using reflective writing in an introduction to American government course, and, finally, refine my pedagogy by analyzing the success of the assignment in light of a deeper reading of John Dewey and other theorists of reflective reasoning.

Exploration

I have been teaching sections of the introductory American Government course for eight years, and in that time I've been fairly disappointed with the quality of essays I receive. At the same time, however, I have always been rather proud of what I took to be a rigorous and effective 10-page essay assignment. These essays follow what I had always presumed to be the standard essay format, the *argumentative essay*. I assigned students to explain Republican and Democratic ideologies and answers to public policy problems and also argue for their solutions to these problems through the institutions of American national government. I expected the assignment to test the ability of students to read, understand, and analyze what they had learned about public policy and then apply it in a way that demonstrated further knowledge of how the institutions of American government work. The assignment also expressed my notion that students would be better citizens if they understood the platforms of the political parties and could, therefore, make a critical choice about whether to identify as Democrats or Republicans. But my most basic assumption was that this assignment would harness the students' analytical abilities by asking them to make an argument for what they thought were the best solutions to America's problems. I assumed that a desire to formulate informed opinions or defend cherished ideological points of view would drive my students toward feats of analytical rigor and rhetorical creativity.

This argumentative essay format did produce some successes, but in my more honest moments I have always been vaguely unsatisfied with the results. But lacking any alternative I was only left with a vague sense that my students' laziness and intellectual unsophistication were responsible for any failures of the assignment. The essays failed, I now think, largely because students did not take responsibility to deeply analyze the issues at hand. Instead, they either unthoughtfully deployed their existing partisan predispositions or (even worse) relied on their common sense understandings of political issues to get the assignment done rather than done well. The challenge to develop and argue for their own views did motivate some students, but not enough. Some students did clarify their partisan predispositions, but often the conclusions of students' essays were strangely disconnected from their analyses. Even when they happened to hit upon a careful explication of, say, the role of federalism in influencing the character of welfare policy, they had a difficult time integrating such an analysis into their overall political view. Proponents of a state's rights approach would bemoan that ending the federal entitlement to welfare would cause a race-to-the-bottom. Strong advocates of a free-market approach to school vouchers concluded that Democrats were right to use federal grants to reduce class size and raise teacher salaries. In general, I was disappointed with students' ability to analyze and integrate ideas. They could explain what a reading said, but it was difficult for them to analyze that reading with others, integrate their critique with their personal political views, and then use that knowledge to make plans for how to act in the future as a citizen.

Explanation

The impetus for reevaluating the role of the argumentative essay in my pedagogy came from my involvement on a committee that redesigned a key general education course to teach reflective rather than argumentative writing. At my college, our general education curriculum includes a program for fostering liberal arts learning called Personal Development Portfolio. The signature aspect of the program is the yearly requirement that students produce a portfolio documenting their personal development in four key areas that the college has defined as contributing to the "whole person": intellect, emotional and physical wellness, ethical and spiritual growth, and citizenship and community responsibility. The center of the portfolio is the Personal Reflective Essay, in which students reflect on their development in these four areas and their goals for the future. When the quality of these reflective essays was found lacking, the college decided to revise its required first-year course, Personal Development and the Liberal Arts, to teach distinctively *reflective* writing.

The committee I served with began by reviewing some of the literature on reflective writing, most of which has

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been developed in conjunction with teacher education and service learning programs. Perhaps our most important starting point was to buy into the fundamental distinction made in these articles between reflective writing and critical thinking or argumentative writing. Argumentative writing, these authors suggest, emphasizes traditional logical skills such as marshalling evidence and avoiding fallacies. Such a focus, they argue, insufficiently engages the personal feelings and values that affect learning and the application of learning. Reflective writing, on the other hand, encourages the student to critically and explicitly explore these personal responses by developing her responsibility and capacity for acting based on what she learned (Scoggins and Winter 1999; Barnett 1997). In short, whereas argumentative writing emphasizes the logical analysis and construction of arguments for the purpose of persuasion, reflective writing critically evaluates and develops personal judgments for the purpose of applying the analysis to future action and goals.

Most of these advocates for reflection begin with the work of John Dewey; thus, Dewey's views became the basis for the specific format of our reflective writing program. From the beginning we wanted to construct a format or model organization of the reflective essay that could be used to teach and to consistently evaluate reflective writing across the numerous sections of Personal Development and the Liberal Arts. Articles about Dewey and reflection led us to identify five elements in such a model.

The first of these, **exploration**, arose from Dewey's distinction between reflection and conventional belief. Dewey thought that belief was an inferior mode of thinking, devoted to applying "prejudgments" instead of reasoning more fully on the values, evidence, and context surrounding an issue (Rodgers 2002, 850). Such prejudgments always affect thinking, for "we do not approach any problem with a wholly naïve or virgin mind; we approach it with certain acquired habitual modes of understanding, with a certain store of previously evolved meanings." The trick of reflective thinking, then, is to check this habit of simply applying prejudgments (Dewey 1998, 147). Thus in the exploration stage of a reflective essay we meant for students to explicitly state the prejudgments or beliefs they held about a particular issue so they could hold these up to more critical examination. Whereas in an argumentative essay such unstated premises are hidden to maintain rhetorical conviction, in a reflective essay they are explicitly revealed and questioned.

The second element of the model, **explanation**, expressed Dewey's view that reflective reasoning was prompted by some sort of perplexity or disequilibria caused when an individual is not exactly sure how to respond to a situation (850). This stage of the reflective essay explains the readings or concepts encountered in the course that might occasion such perplexity. In explaining, students engage in a kind of comparison/contrast exercise in which they not only elucidate a challenging set of concepts, but also clarify how these concepts challenge the beliefs identified in the exploration stage. Therefore, this kind of explanation is very different than the sort that characterizes an argumentative essay, for the goal is to practice openness to new material rather than exercise persuasive skill.

We included the third element of the model, the **conjecture**, to express Dewey's characterization of reflection as analogous to the scientific method. From the initial state of perplexity, Dewey suggested that individuals formulate hypothetical solutions to their difficulty, which they can then test in some way to check their validity (Rodgers 2002, 854–855). Therefore, in this stage we directed students to formulate a conjecture or question that might help them resolve or at least further explore the tensions created between their presuppositions and the course readings. Such a conjecture might resemble the thesis statement of an argumentative essay, but a conjecture preserves the exploratory purpose of the essay: intellectual reconnoiter.

The **analysis** involved in this inquiry constituted our fourth stage. This element of the model reflective essay required students to test or answer their conjecture by engaging in a deeper re-examination of their presuppositions, life experiences, and the course readings. As Dewey put it, "Through judging, confused data are cleared up, and seemingly incoherent and disconnected facts are brought together. The clearing up is *analysis*" (Dewey 1998, 148). Such a reflective analysis openly searches for truth, rather than argues for a particular position.

The final stage, **synthesis**, followed from Dewey's concern that reflection is always directed toward taking some concrete action that resolves the state of perplexity that initiated the reflective process (Rodgers 2002, 855). This is the crucial stage of the reflective process, in which practices and understandings are restructured and new actions are put forward (Schön 1983). In our model, the synthesis stage encouraged students to draw out the implications of their analysis. Whereas an argument requires merely a pithy restatement of the author's conclusions (and is thus invariably the most boring and inconsequential section of the student essay), a reflective synthesis requires that the student say something important and new at the end of the essay. This could entail an explanation of how their beliefs or presuppositions have changed as a result of their reflection, or a discussion of how their inquiry directed them to apply what they learned from the reflective process toward new goals or specific actions. As Dewey summed it up, this "bringing together or unifying is *synthesis*" (Dewey 1998, 148).

Together, these stages, we hoped, would guide students to engage in deeper reflection about their presuppositions, the readings, and their goals and actions. On the one hand this entailed teaching the stages of reflection, but more importantly, we thought it would be crucial to write essay assignments (what we called *prompts*) that were specifically designed to explicitly require explanation, exploration, analysis and synthesis. Appendix A (www.apsanet.org/ps/oct05/josefsononline.pdf) demonstrates the kind of detailed assignment prompts that are necessary to lead students through the reflective process. And, since students are (sadly) primarily motivated by grades, we explicitly evaluated student writing through a rubric (see Appendix B) that is structured around the reflective writing model.[1] This rubric is given to students with the assignment, so they know they will be held accountable for each stage of the reflective process.

Conjecture

After being a member of the committee that formulated this reflective writing program and foisted it upon the unsuspecting corps of 22 colleagues who would teach the redesigned Personal Development and the Liberal Arts course, I decided to demonstrate my faith in reflection by redesigning my introductory American government course to include a 10-page reflective essay.[2] The prompt for this essay is available online (www.apsanet.org/ps/oct05/josefsononline.pdf). It demonstrates both the detailed nature of the prompts required for reflective writing assignments and how such prompts lead students through the reflective process.

I expected that the reflection format would facilitate not only deeper analysis but also make this analysis more relevant to students' lives. Whereas argumentative essays have students complete an assignment to demonstrate their knowledge to the professor, I thought the reflective essay would better mobilize students by

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making the main audience for their efforts themselves and by making their primary goal coming to a better view of their own ideas and citizenship. The point was to discover their real beliefs about American politics rather than to just have them take a position; coming to this knowledge would better enable them to integrate course readings into their political beliefs and plans for active citizenship.

Analysis

I found the resulting essays to be a significant improvement over the argumentative essays on the same topic that I had been assigning for seven years. Students did seem to engage in deeper analyses of the readings. And, more importantly, they in most cases explicitly discussed how they integrated what they learned with their preconceived beliefs about politics. Furthermore, this integration was in many cases truly reflective rather than reflexive. Even students who took positions in line with the preconceptions outlined in their exploration section engaged in much more open analyses of writings that conflicted with those views, and they engaged in more critical analyses of readings that supported their initial beliefs. Another notable accomplishment of the reflective format was the way it prompted students to confront the vacuity of their wholly nominal (Republican or Democratic) political commitments (the condition of a seeming majority) and caused them to recognize their need to develop a more critical and informed citizenship.

The reflective writing assignment, however, was not a complete success. The notable problem with the reflective writing model, as I formulated it, was the difficulty students had in fitting their reflection into the systematic constraints of the format. Students had special difficulty in formulating a conjecture that could be "tested" in the analysis section. This problem was less severe in my American government sections, but it was a big obstacle to students in Personal Development and the Liberal Arts.

To understand the success of my reflective writing assignment and the relative failure of the conjecture section, I decided to reflect on my experience and re-examine my reading of Dewey and other scholars of reflection to understand the experience more deeply and thus further refine my pedagogy.

Analyzing the Conjecture

We had included the conjecture and analysis sections, if you recall, in order to express Dewey's concern that reflection follow the scientific method. However, my and my students' problems with mapping the formal scientific method onto the reflective process led me to re-evaluate my commitment to Dewey's scientism. My first take on the problem was that Dewey was a naïve positivist who had unrealistic expectations about the intellect of my students.

My consequent rereading of Dewey, however, has caused me to discard my previous conception of Dewey as a positivist. Dewey's project was a reaction against the European epistemological tradition with its portrayal of both thinking and the objective of thinking (objective apperception of the Real) as different or apart from our everyday practices and experiences. Instead, Dewey suggested that thinking was immanent within the everyday experiences that come from pursuing our goals. Such experiences, in Dewey's view, produce cognitive and non-cognitive responses in our minds that express the pragmatic working out of solutions to the problems of existence. Thus intelligence was always already practical, what Dewey was left to do was to "intellectualize practice," to use the tools of philosophy to better integrate, conceptualize, refine, and broaden the knowledge inchoate in these experiences (Eldridge 1998, 5). Scientific experiences, in Dewey's estimation, thus take on the character of any everyday experience. Indeed, for Dewey, the scientific method as such is made systematic only by reflective reconstruction, "possible only after the result has first been reached by unconscious and tentative methods" (Dewey 1998, 149).

But if Dewey conceptualizes the scientific method as a refinement of everyday practical intelligence, then we have no real need to model reflective thinking on any inflexible construction of the scientific method. Instead of a rigorous model of induction or deduction we are led to Dewey's concern with dealing with distractions from truly reflective practice. For instance, Dewey emphasizes that the scientific method represents practices of bracketing issues that bring on cultural conflicts such that we can focus on the crux of the matter: openly and honestly judging whether the results of our actions (empirical data) are congruent with our desired ends (solutions for problems, support for hypotheses) (Eldridge 1998, 6, 16–20; Dewey 1963, 47–50). The crux of establishing such a practice, then, is not so much a scientific *method* as a scientific *posture* toward the process of inquiry. If we understand Dewey's sense of this posture, then we grasp his conception of the sciences as *the* quintessential liberal art, reflecting open-mindedness, a lack of self-absorption, courage, and a sense of responsibility to think and act with integrity (Rodgers 2002, 858–863). In *How We Think*, Dewey puts it this way: "Alertness, flexibility, curiosity are the essentials; dogmatism, rigidity, prejudice, caprice, arising from routine, passion and flippancy are fatal" (Dewey 1998, 147).

Thus my initial interpretation of Dewey as requiring a formal conjecture like a hypothesis was clearly wrong. For Dewey the scientific method is less about formal hypothesis testing and more about openness to new information, the seemingly insignificant fact, insight, or even luck. The conjecture failed, then, I think because it impinged on the alertness, flexibility, and curiosity that could come from a less formal method of analysis. If anything, following Dewey, perhaps the formal conjecture is really the purpose of the synthesis, a reflective reconstruction of the inchoate conjectures that flow through the laissez-faire process of analysis.

Indeed, Dewey's views seem to argue somewhat against the overly restrictive character of the model in general. What I wish to be teaching, after all, is ultimately judgment, wisdom, and the posture of liberal inquiry rather than process and academic vocabulary. Dewey was especially concerned with this issue in *Democracy and Education*, for he feared that efforts to indoctrinate students in academic disciplines (what he called the "logical" method) would alienate students' learning. Instead, he focused on fostering capacity for judgment (what he called the "psychological" method) by coordinating reflection on the subject matter with the unique goals and abilities of each student (Garrison 1998, 69; Dewey 1931, 256–261).

Analyzing the General Success of Reflective Writing

Dewey's focus on cultivating judgment rather than the accumulation of knowledge may be key for understanding the character and pedagogical power of reflective writing. In *How We Think*, reflection is precisely about moving students from the possession of knowledge about a subject (an academic concern) to judgment about how to solve problems (the province of wisdom). For to Dewey,

> If one is not able to estimate wisely what is relevant to the interpretation of a given perplexing and doubtful issue, it avails little that arduous learning has built up a large stock of concepts. For

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> learning is not wisdom; information does not guarantee good judgment. Memory may provide a refrigerator in which to store a stock of meanings for future use, but judgment selects and adapts the one to be used in an emergency—and without an emergency (some crisis, slight or great) there is no call for judgment. (Dewey 1998, 148)

This way of conceptualizing education places a premium on creating such an emergency, by structuring assignments and course content in such a way to put students into a crisis ("slight or great") in which an easy application of their prejudices and common sense knowledge is impossible. Such a crisis forces students to go beyond the kind of learning associated with memorizing cold, hard facts and, instead, engage in deeper learning. Indeed, Dewey's contrast between reflection and memorization suggests that the pedagogical practices we usually promote are demonstrably inferior to reflection.

Research into the cognitive character of reflection compared with other forms of pedagogy support Dewey's contention. For instance, John Biggs' taxonomy of learning levels places the pedagogical practices most frequently used in political science courses at lower levels and reflection at the top. "Unistructural" learning, constructing paraphrases of texts or lectures that demonstrate basic comprehension and memorization, represents the lowest or surface level of learning according to the model. This is the kind of learning tested by most multiple-choice exams. The next level, "multistructural," involves the learning associated with sifting through a text and being able to pull out central ideas or arguments from a variety of information. Such learning is frequently tested by short answer questions like, "What is federalism?" The next level, "relational," involves applying concepts in some way: explaining in depth, evaluating lines of reasoning, or using concepts to address an immediate problem. Most argumentative essays, I would contend, leave students stuck at this stage, emphasizing an ability to demonstrate knowledge of the arguments a student has encountered in a course and cite reasons for favoring some set of positions. The highest level of learning, however, emphasizes reflection. Biggs calls this level "extended abstract" or "deep" learning, where students apply concepts to "far problems," the development of new hypotheses and theories, and the reevaluation of actions, goals, and values (King 2003).

Jennifer Moon provides a more complete understanding of why reflective learning is deeper learning, relying heavily on the work of Mezirow (1991). She describes the network of knowledge, preunderstandings, and prejudices within the mind of the learner as a "cognitive structure" that is both used to understand new material and which must be integrated with new material if learning is to take place. At basic levels of learning, such as Biggs' unistructural understanding or Moon's "noticing" or "making sense," the material learned is only laid upon this cognitive structure without being integrated with its deeper elements; hence terming it surface learning (Moon 1999, 136–142). At Moon's next level, however, new knowledge is linked with existing elements of the cognitive structure, such that a concept is related to some existing element of the structure. This kind of learning Moon calls "making meaning," because new meanings for both the preexisting cognitive components and the material learned must be formed in order for this integration to take place. This is, however, only an intermediate level of learning, since such learning does not necessitate a very deep reorganization of the cognitive structure (143). For instance, while the student might understand that Madison's concern with ameliorating the problem of factions connects with her hoary civics lessons about checks and balances, she hasn't significantly modified more central understandings about American democracy and citizenship that Madison could bring to mind. This would require the deeper levels of learning associated with reflection.

Moon conceptualizes such basic reflection as "working with meaning," work associated with reflecting on the tensions that arise between newly integrated knowledge and deeper understandings, values, or goals. This means generating significantly novel meanings within the cognitive structure as Deweyean hypotheses, tentative essays toward resolving the difficulty that is the occasion of reflection. In our example, this might mean reflecting on the contrasts between naive conceptions of popular democracy and Madison's concern for refining and enlarging public opinion away from its leveling impulse (143–145).

Moon's deepest level, "transformative learning," is accomplished when working with meaning has produced significant reordering of the cognitive structure. Moon, following Mezirow (1991), associates this kind of learning with the critical theory of Jurgen Habermas, in which knowledge is critically evaluated for the purpose of achieving human emancipation rather than any instrumental values. Truly reflective thinking, in this reading, involves not only reevaluating preconceived values and conceptions but also the systematic distortions (such as dynamics of power) that may prevent the emergence of liberating self-understandings and actions. The learner at this stage is truly active, taking control of her own learning and responsibility for transforming her own actions and prejudgments in the light of the learning process (146, 13–15).

This critical dimension of reflective learning recommends the pedagogy to any discipline, but is especially appropriate to courses in political science. I have always taken political science (and especially the teaching of political science) to be primarily concerned with fostering democracy.[3] Dewey is rather persuasive that the cultivation of a democratic society is essentially an exercise in reflective education. Democracy, in Dewey's view, is "more than a form of government; it is a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience" in which the community reflectively searches for solutions to the problems of living together (1931, 101). Thus, just as the point of reflection, for Dewey, is to make sense of experience for the purpose of pragmatic action, the point of democracy is to make sense of the communal experience of American life such that its inchoate goods (the "liberation of a greater diversity of personal capacities") can be deliberately sustained and extended. A society of individuals trained to be reflective, then, is indispensable if democracy is to adequately express this reflective character, the "flexible readjustment of its institutions through interaction of the different forms of associated life" (115).

This discussion of deep learning and the connection between reflection and the transformative learning of democratic citizenship suggest why my reflective writing assignment was so much more successful than my old argumentative essays. Argumentative essays allow students to merely layer new information onto their existing cognitive structure, using what they have learned to support their preconceptions without significantly reordering them. Reflective essays, on the other hand, succeed because they are explicitly structured to promote the integration of old preconceptions with new material. The catalyst to such integration is getting students to highlight their preconceptions (the exploration stage) and then to deftly put those preconceptions into crisis (with challenging course content in the explanation stage) so that students must struggle to "make meaning" with the ideas involved. I had thought that students would spontaneously

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mobilize their energies to feats of civic education, but now I see that, while the core of Deweyean citizenship may rest in everyday knowing, it must, nevertheless, be deliberately sustained and extended through teaching reflection.

Synthesis

In Dewey's model of reflection, the synthesis is the moment when the thinker reconstructs from his or her experience principles that can be used for dealing with the future. My reflections on reflective writing have led me to derive several important principles. When I began my inquiry into reflective writing I was torn between two contradictory understandings. On the one hand, I saw it as concerned primarily with coming to grips with core personal values and beliefs. But on the other hand, following a naïve interpretation of Dewey, I saw reflective writing as a kind of formalized method of hypothesis testing to derive such ethical principles. The fist idea narrowed the application of reflective writing to expressive topics, while the second constrained the reflection to an almost scientistic formula. Now that I understand reflection better, however, I think that reflective writing has much broader and more flexible applications. Because it involves deeper cognitive processing and, thereby, deeper learning, structured reflective assignments can be appropriate for most topics. And reflection on these topics can be structured relatively formally or loosely as the occasion or the student's needs require. Students do not need to be directed toward approximations of hypothesis testing (the goal of formal conjectures). Indeed, my students failure to write good conjecture sections shouldn't be surprising given Dewey's view that scientists also rarely operate with formal hypotheses. Therefore, a more basic and fluid model of reflective practice that requires exploration, explanation, analysis, and synthesis, but leaves the organization of reflection up to the student, may be more effective. The organization of these four elements is less essential than their clear presence and the creativity, honesty, and openness in which the reflection is pursued.

I've tried to synthesize these reflections into the changes I've made to my prompt for the introduction to American government reflective essay (available online as Appendix C, www.apsanet.org/ps/oct05/josefsononline.pdf). Note how I have eliminated the conjecture stage, allowed students to organize the essay any way they wish, and emphasized that the assignment is more about reflecting on arguments and preconceptions than making them. I worry that the lack of an explicit required organization will lead to poorly organized essays, but I'll have to reflect on that experience after next semester.

Notes

1. The five elements of our model of reflection correspond closely (with the exception of the conjecture) to the four-scale instrument for assessing reflection developed using confirmatory factor analysis by Kember et al. (2000).

2. Reflection and reflective writing have been given limited attention in political science. Reflection is advocated in discussions of service learning programs, but no detailed model for teaching or assessing reflection is developed (Patterson 2000; Hepburn, Niemi, and Chapman 2000; Ehrlich 1999). Brock and Cameron's (1999) article on Kolb's learning preference model advocates something like a model of reflection, but the author's do not provide an accessible way to implement their model into the political science curriculum. Canfield and Reeher's (1998) shorter essay "response papers" are similarly designed to stimulate ongoing reflection in an introductory American politics course. Political scientists looking for better ways to teach social science writing (Zeiser 1999; Bob 2001) tend to focus on argumentative writing skills rather than reflection.

3. A notable example of connecting democracy and reflection in political science is the "Public Achievement" program described by Hildreth (2000).

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