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Home is Where the Heart is": Learning and Teaching Political Ideology Through Interior Design

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ABSTRACT

In the United Kingdom political ideology remains a core component of studying Politics and International Relations, yet despite varied innovations in the discipline, innovations in learning and teaching political ideology specifically are relatively sparse. Using a metaphor offered in Michael Freeden's morphological approach and guided by the principles of active collaborative learning throughout, this article explores the potential of an original and technologically innovative activity designed to aide students' conceptual understanding of three Western political ideologies - namely, Liberalism, Conservatism, and Socialism. Drawing on a sample of 36 volunteers from a year one, undergraduate political ideologies module, through a focus group discussion and questionnaire there was unanimous agreement as to the intended usefulness of the activity, as too, the creation of a collaborative, engaging, and memorable learning experience.

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Whilst its theoretical roots and forms can vary (Robertson 2018; Prince 2004), the pedagogic potential of active collaborative learning in Higher Education has become increasingly well established. In the post-COVID context its potentials are prescient, especially for reminding students that in-person, social interaction can be useful and important for effective learning (Garnham 2023; Dunbar-Morris 2023). Whilst students themselves might not always prefer it to more traditional ('passive') forms (see Deslauriers et al. 2019; Lobo 2017; Smith and Cardaciotto 2011), the benefits of active collaborative learning are impressive, ranging from creating better student attitudes (Bleske-Rechek 2001), boosting confidence and reducing assessment anxiety (Khan and Madden 2018), higher levels of motivation (Fink 2013; Saiphet 2018) and for memorizing course content (Cherney 2008).

Despite these strengths, barriers can limit active collaborative learning's implementation. These can include a reluctance or anxiety to changing one's own practices, and wider institutional factors (see Børte, Nesje, and Lillejord 2023). For my own discipline – Politics and International Relations generally, but political theory specifically – active collaborative learning risks underutilization. Discussed more below, whilst the types of skills associated with the discipline – e.g., deliberation, debate, and public speaking – lend themselves nicely to active learning techniques, in large part, the actual practice of learning and

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teaching political theory can easily fall back on more 'traditional', passive methods (Glover 2013, 2; Moore 2011, 124).

Below I reflect upon an original, and technologically innovative active collaborative learning activity designed to aide students' conceptual understanding of three Western political ideologies – namely, Liberalism, Conservatism, and Socialism. Informed theoretically by Freeden's (1998) 'morphological' approach, and a metaphor whereby he likens an ideology's conceptual structure to arranging the furniture of a room, using pre-made Padlets - an online collaborative platform for creating and editing a virtual canvas, see www.Padlet.com - participants recruited from a year one, core political ideologies module were asked to furnish three rooms conceptually to visualize their understanding of each ideology. I argue that the activity offers at least five moments for active collaborative learning – (i), through the initial selection of ideational concepts; (ii), the choice of corresponding furniture; (iii), establishing the relationality of the concepts/furniture and the ultimate design of the room; (iv), sharing their rationale with the class, and (v), the resultant discussion. Through a focus group and questionnaire, participants found that the activity provided a collaborative, engaging, and memorable learning experience – all of which contributed to its primary aim of aiding their conceptual understanding of political ideology.

I start by reviewing three specific benefits of active collaborative learning: deepening student engagement, stimulating motivation, and enhancing the understanding and recall of course content. After outlining the activity in both its preparatory and enacted stages, I then relate the findings back to these benefits. I conclude by reflecting on the activity and its potential for future development.

Active (collaborative) learning

Active learning can be understood as an '…eclectic mix of various types of instructional activities or any instructional methods that involve students in doing things and reflecting on what they learn in class rather than receiving knowledge passively from teachers' (Saiphet 2018, 38). Unsurprisingly, active learning is differentiated from what is considered its passive form – the latter, somewhat emblematically in the context of higher education, frequently characterized as listening/noting information transmitted through lectures. Central to what Barr and Tang (1995) once called the 'instruction paradigm' of teaching, the pedagogical limitations of lectures are well established. In their conventional form – i.e., without attempting to create moments for audience participation (see Schmidt et al. 2015) – aside from tendencies for poor attendance, dwindling attention span, and a dependence upon the skill of the presenter and/or the design of the presentation, their largely didactic, 'sage on a stage' approach (Bajack 2014) reflects what Schmidt et al. (2015, 14) call an 'information transmission fallacy' – it assumes that learning is the result of a one way transmission of information. For those who emphasize a 'deep holistic' form of learning – i.e., noting the importance of actively 'doing' something with such information – unless complemented (or broken up) with active learning techniques, the pedagogical potential of lectures is partial at best (ibid; Biggs, Tang, and Kennedy 2022; Mizokami 2017).

In his oft-cited study, whilst noting a shared emphasis on 'student activity and engagement in the learning process', Prince (2004, 223) argues that active learning can include 'collaborative', 'cooperative' or 'problem-based' forms. Collaborative learning is perhaps the overarching approach. It was defined some time ago as a kind of 'joint intellectual effort', whereby teachers 'tend to think of themselves less as expert transmitters of knowledge…and more as expert designers of intellectual experiences…'. The goal is to emphasize learning as 'an active, constructive process' whereby students do not simply receive information, but rather actively do something with it (Smith and MacGregor 1992, 10). Whilst Prince (2004) was cautious in noting the potentials of active learning for his own discipline (engineering), he nevertheless concluded that – depending on its form – its benefits were notable. Below I focus specifically on three areas: deepening student engagement, stimulating motivation, and enhancing the understanding and recall of course content.

The concept of student engagement is diverse and potentially confusing (see Harrington, Sinfield, and Burns 2021; Lowe 2023). I understand it as 'the perception of the student that results from his/her interactions with peers and teacher during the learning experienced which generates involvement with the topic studied' (Blasco-Arcas et al. 2013, 104). Whilst respecting different learning style preferences and noting the varied and at times entirely valid reasons for doing otherwise (Newman-Ford et al. 2008, Moores, Birdi, and Higson 2019), adherents of active collaborative learning maintain that deeper - perhaps 'transformative' - learning is dependent on collaborating with others (Magkoufopoulou 2023; Milner 2020; McNeil et al. 2021, 28). Research suggests that enhanced student engagement increases a sense of belonging, confidence, and fosters the ability to share, listen to, and deliberate the ideas of others (Andrews, Sekyere, and Bugarcic 2020; Oros 2007; Thomas 2012; Warsah et al. 2021).

Blasco-Arcas et al.s' (2013, 104) assertion that active learning enhances 'involvement with the topic studied' aligns with a particular form of motivation for doing so. Within psychology, self-determination theory (Ryan and Deci 2000) distinguishes between 'intrinsic' and 'extrinsic' forms. In contrast to extrinsic motivation, intrinsic motivation entails learning for the sake of learning – i.e., independent from any instrumental outcome. Individuals learn because they want to and not simply because they *need* to Race (2013). Whilst both intrinsic and extrinsic forms of motivation might be needed for effective learning (Race 2013, 38), research suggests that intrinsic motivation has enhanced benefits (Zepke and Leach 2010). In their reflections on integrating active collaborative learning into an English language course, for example, Saiphet (2018, 43, 45) found that enhancing students' intrinsic motivation correlated with a heightened sense of fun, interest, and desire to learn, alongside stress reduction and increased self-confidence.

Alongside the benefits for enhancing student engagement and inspiring an intrinsic motivation to learn, numerous studies highlight the links between active collaborative learning and enhanced understanding of course content. Prince (2004, 226) highlighted enhanced conceptual understanding of basic physics concepts when active learning methods were employed. The SCALE-UP development of active learning instigated by Beichner et al. (2007) had similar results, as too did the 2013–2014 pilot SCALE-UP modules (which included *social* sciences) at Nottingham Trent University, in the UK (McNeil, Borg, and Chikwa 2014). Once again, the collaborative aspect of active

learning appears to be a major factor. Understanding of course content is enhanced when ideas are discussed and deliberated with others (Andrews, Sekyere, and Bugarcic 2020, 804; Race 2013, 40–42).

Active collaborative learning's emphasis on 'deep' as opposed to 'surface' learning (Mizokami 2017) also translates into better recall. Admittedly, whilst merely recalling information is a lower order activity than reflecting upon or applying it, for some forms of assessment (e.g., exams) it remains critical for student achievement. Interestingly - citing the work of Smith and Kosslyn (2007) - Cherney (2008, 153) argues that enhanced recall corresponds with types of active collaborative learning activities whereby remembering is merely 'incidental' to the task at hand. In this sense, the challenge here is to design activities which - through maximizing student engagement - creatively develop existing knowledge in an interesting and/or memorable way (ibid: 155; Biggs, Tang, and Kennedy 2022, 67–68). Thus, as Cherney (ibid, 154) concludes, 'More discovery-orientated and student-active teaching methods ensure higher student motivation, more learning at higher cognitive levels, and longer retention of the knowledge'.

Active learning and political theory/ideology

The principles of active collaborative learning bode well for learning and teaching Politics and International Relations. Whilst the discipline has its own range of concepts, theories, and assumptions, surely one of its most exciting and creative pedagogical techniques is for students to apply them to current predicaments – and from an active collaborative learning perspective, doing so in a meaningful, memorable, and thus engaging way (Leston-Bandeira 2012, 52; Mardsen and Marsden 2012). Murphy (2017) identifies a range of techniques which develop core skills associated with the discipline, especially those which reflect its civic nature – i.e., discussion/debate, negotiation, critical thinking, and so forth (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) 2023; Oros 2007). These include role play/simulations (see Shaw and Switky 2018; Asal, Raymond, and Usherwood 2015; Chicci et al. 2021) and games (e.g., Asal 2005; Orsini 2018; Silva et al. 2023) – particularly for learning and teaching International Relations (Archer and Miller 2011, 431). There are good examples of using the same techniques for teaching political theory (e.g., for role play/simulations, see Shaap 2005; Glasgow 2015; for games, see Martin et al. 2020; Handby 2021). Yet, if like Freeden (1998, 131,132) we consider the study of political ideology as a form of political theory, research which aligns active collaborative activities with the former remains relatively limited. I outline some notable exceptions below.

Moore's (2005, 239) 'political theory speed dating' – where students are given two minutes to articulate and in turn listen to each other's ideas – can easily be adjusted to examine political ideology and/or political concepts specifically. One of the benefits of this activity is that it transcends familiar emphasis on debate and develops additional skills such as articulating and pitching complex ideas. In Plazek's (2012) activity, after providing students with a basic heuristic outline of Conservative and Liberal ideology, students are asked to align them to contemporary news media. The aim is to provide a (flexible) starting point – i.e., 'schematic building blocks' – upon which students can use (and ultimately develop) abstract ideas to help interpret current events (Plazek 2012, 184). This emphasis on applying political ideas is something I strongly endorse

– not only for helping students make sense of contemporary debates, but also for inspiring interest in those who might not have chosen to study political theory as an option. As noted earlier, making things relatable is likely to enhance both interest and engagement.

A more recent activity is proposed by Karlsson (2020). After assigning small groups a specific ideology, students are asked to create a poster to visualize its future. They are then asked to present and discuss their work collaboratively by considering each poster individually – akin to a 'vernissage or gallery walk'. Interestingly, Karlsson (2020, 93, 98,99) is clear as to the selective nature of the exercise – i.e., it is used to complement, as opposed to replace 'more traditional didactic learning activities'. Karlsson is also clear as to the continued importance of lecturer facilitation throughout. I reiterate both ideas in my own activity below.

In summary, the benefits of active collaborative learning are wide-ranging, particularly when considering deepening student engagement, stimulating (intrinsic) motivation, and enhancing the understanding and recall of course content. Whilst there is agreement that active collaborative learning activities align well to the disciplinary nature of Politics and International Relations, the development of targeted active collaborative learning activities for learning and teaching political ideology specifically remains undeveloped. Building on some of the work discussed above, then, I hope that my own activity below will provide a positive contribution.

Outline of activity

The activity's theoretical backdrop was Michael Freeden's (1998) seminal emphasis on ideological 'morphology'. According to him, premised on an underlying view of human nature, ideologies seek to establish a particular form of socio-political order - one which, for practical purposes, claims to theoretically 'de-contest' and package together a particular arrangement of political concepts. So-called 'thick' centered ideologies such as Liberalism, Conservatism and Socialism constitute a relatively coherent conceptual package, which in turn, provide solutions to a raft of perennial socio-political issues. Conceived as 'combinations of political concepts organized in a particular way' (Freeden 1998, 75), to emphasize ideologies' relational ('core', 'adjacent', and/or 'peripheral') and thus historical and contextual fluidity (ibid, 81,82), Freeden offers a useful metaphor of furnishing a room (ibid, 86–87). Whilst rooms can be distinguished by the different composition of what furnishes them, and the specific arrangement of its furniture can vary substantially, certain items are so central to the identity of the room that their removal would compromise the identity in question – e.g., think of a bedroom without a bed, or dining room without a dining table, etc. Additionally, whilst different rooms can share the same piece of furniture, this only underscores Freeden's emphasis on the relationality of each piece of furniture vis-à-vis the overall identity of the room. Thus 'The key lies in the relation of the units to one another, in their positioning *vis-à-vis* the center, and in the way units are made to interlock and support each other.' (ibid, 87).

After clearance from my institution's research ethics committee,[1] in practical terms, I prepared the activity through the following steps. Firstly, I created three Padlets – an online collaborative platform for creating and editing a virtual canvas, see www.Padlet.com - corresponding to each ideology, each with a different background image to

indicate the general nature of the room, e.g., a bathroom, a living room, and a kitchen. I determined the nature of each room for practical reasons only – it proved relatively tricky adjusting the background image of the room and I didn't want participants losing too much time trying to do it themselves.

Secondly, I chose five concepts for each ideology. For practical reasons I adjusted Freeden's own selection. Participants were drawn from a module which offers only an introduction to political ideologies. Whilst noted, Freeden's rationale for his own choice of concepts is not explored in detail. In any case, the activity was designed less for 'getting things right' and more of a means of exploring its usefulness as a form of active collaborative learning. Ultimately, blending Freeden's ideational approach with Heywood's (2021) more generic emphasis on 'core themes', the concepts chosen were as follows. For liberalism: individualism, equality, self-development, property, and democracy. For conservatism: (organic) order, authority, tradition, property, and hierarchy. Finally, for socialism: liberty, equality, community, productiveness, and democracy. The concepts were printed, laminated, and collated separately.

The activity was designed for a year one, core, political ideologies module from the BA (Hons) Politics and International Relations at Nottingham Trent University. After conducting a pilot study, making it clear that participation was extracurricular, I advertised the project to all students enrolled on the module. Overall, I recruited 36 participants in total, spread equally across two seminar groups. The composition of the groups' sex, ethnicities, and other related factors was randomly mixed. I timetabled a two-hour workshop for both groups and distributed the participant information and consent forms. These were to be completed prior to the start of the project. Via email, I also shared a short, recorded video which provided an introductory overview of the project and the basics of using Padlet.

I began the session with a short presentation which outlined the general purpose of the activity, reiterated the basics of Freeden's approach, and reminded participants of their rights. Using a pre-made Padlet (which articulated a different ideology from the ones explored in the task), I provided a short demonstration of the ensuing activity. Participants were then split into small sub-groups of around four and – making use of the collaborative layout of the room - were allocated their own table. Each sub-group was assigned an ideology and the combined sets of all concepts. Their task was threefold: first, to decide which five concepts they would choose to articulate each ideology; second, to furnish the Padlet conceptually through choosing (and positioning) images of specific furniture; and third, to provide a short justification for both tasks and to be prepared to share it with the class. Somewhat typically for an active collaborative learning activity, aside from the initial input via the PowerPoint presentation, my own role was restricted to providing formative feedback and facilitating discussion within and between the groups (Karlsson 2020, 94; McNeil et al. 2021, 21).

Overall, the activity worked nicely.[2] Whilst the preparatory stages took some thinking, and I was anxious as to how participants would engage, perhaps reflecting the novelty of the activity, they were clearly curious and engaged from the onset. The initial outline and recap of the theoretical basis to the activity certainly helped, and being on hand throughout to clarify any uncertainties was essential. Whilst one group inadvertently adjusted one of the activity's parameters – discussed in more detail below – all groups understood and engaged creatively with the activity throughout.

Discussion

I organize the ensuing discussion by linking back to the key benefits of active collaborative learning identified in the earlier section: enhancing student engagement (e.g., McNeil et al. 2021), inspiring motivation (e.g., Saiphet 2018), and increasing understanding and recall of course content (e.g., Andrews, Sekyere, and Bugarcic 2020; Cherney 2008).

Enhancing student engagement

Participants were unequivocal that the activity enhanced engagement, mainly on account of having to collaborate with others and thus discuss – and at times, rethink - each other's logic:

> I enjoyed the collaboration with my partner as it forced us to debate and explain our reasoning which improved our answers. (Participant 1).

> The activity allowed us to collaborate and discuss our thoughts with other people, which also enabled us to rethink our ideas and concepts in a different way (Participant 2).

These insights resonate with the existing literature on the benefits of active collaborative learning – particularly the collaborative element. When observing the initial stage of the activity whereby each group had to choose their five concepts, I was surprised at just how long it took for students to settle. As in Karlsson's (2020, 94) reflections, this stage involved a lot of 'interaction and modulation', and pedagogically speaking students affirmed the importance of discussing and deliberating ideas with others (Andrews, Sekyere, and Bugarcic 2020, 804). At times I intervened selectively when I deemed it necessary - not necessarily to provide students with the 'right' answer, but rather to help them think through the relationality of one or more of their concepts. A good example here was one group's indecision as to what constituted the 'core' concept of Conservative ideology (i.e., 'tradition' or '(organic) order'). In this sense, as Zepke and Leach (2010, 170, 171) noted, whilst it might entail rethinking its form, enhancing student engagement doesn't necessarily mean 'less' teaching. Drawing on a distinction offered by Blasco-Arcas et al. (2013, 104), important here is to combine 'peer-to-peer' and 'peer-to-teacher' interactivity. By being 'responsive to the moment of encounter' (Harrington, Sinfield, and Burns 2021, 143), the key challenge is learning when to intervene, and when not.

Other participants highlighted the benefits of Padlet for facilitating active collaborative learning. The key here wasn't simply 'doing' something with the concepts (i.e., representing them through images of specific furniture) but utilizing the kinds of visual, conceptual manipulation which Padlet offers, e.g., searching online for/adopting a suitable image, re-positioning/resizing it, and one way or another, linking it holistically to other concepts/furniture within the confines of the identity of the room:

> I like how the activity was creative and visual…it encourages a more interactive form of learning or students which can increase engagement amongst students opposed to more traditional forms (Participant 6).

> … the visual aspect of the activity really helped me…I found physically resizing the images helpful as it helped to decide which was the most important being the biggest, the least the smallest…being able to make links to each image was helpful as you could identify the key concept and other smaller concepts that went off each other that were connected to each other (Participant 3).

These insights align nicely with existing research on the use of 'spatial diagrams'. Defined as 'displays that represent objects, concepts, and their relations using symbols and their spatial arrangement' (Vekiri 2002, 262), for example, when used for teaching political science (specifically, the principles of 'ideology constraint, cross-pressures, framing, agenda-setting, political competition, voting systems [and] party systems'), Brady (2011, 312) argued that such diagrams should become as 'iconic for political science in much the same way as supply-and-demand curves are in economics'. Linking back to the original point regarding enhancing student engagement, the activity's requirement for such visual engagement is akin to Purcell's (2014, 129) reflections on the use of 'foldables': it 'provide[s] students with a sense of ownership in learning the curriculum in front of them'.

Inspiring motivation

Research suggests that active collaborative learning can positively impact upon intrinsic forms of motivation – i.e., instilling a want to learn as opposed to doing so out of necessity. As noted in the work of Ryan and Deci (2000), whilst to some extent this can reflect innate, individual needs, intrinsic motivation can also be inspired by the type of activity with which students are asked to engage. Given that participants were drawn from a core module, and thus the impetuous for learning about political ideologies is drawn partly from necessity, strictly speaking, care is needed in terms of interpreting whether the activity inspired specifically *intrinsic* motivation. Yet, participant feedback raised some interesting points; all of which seemed to reflect well on the nature of the activity. From my own observations, once they had cleared the initial hurdle of choosing their five concepts, participants enjoyed the process of choosing (and positioning) their appropriate furniture. Two points are worth noting here.

Firstly, participants were clear about the activity's benefits on account of it being a relatively novel learning experience which required active and collaborative effort:

> It was a fun, little bit silly activity, but it really does help you learn…it really drills home the relationship between the concepts (Participant 8).

> It wouldn't be as fun if you just sat there with someone at the board explaining it to you… if you are with a mate or two it is a bit of a laugh as well… (Participant 6).

The importance of creating a memorable – in this case, 'fun' – learning experience was noted earlier as essential for stimulating a deeper motivation to learn, as too, stimulating a higher order of cognition (Mizokami 2017, 87,88). By giving participants the autonomy to furnish each concept as they saw fit, the activity gave them the space to make interesting and at times provocative commentaries on current events. In one instance, one group even spontaneously adjusted one parameter of the activity, *adding* one of their own concepts in addition to the those provided for them. In this case, when conceptually furnishing Conservative ideology, one group

amused themselves (and myself) by visualizing the concept of 'inequality' with an empty toilet roll. When asked to explain their logic to the class, they argued that it symbolized the impact of successive UK government spending cuts! Clearly, I would argue, whilst 'having a bit of a laugh' they used the remit of the activity in a self-consciously critical fashion; linking well to existing research on the developmental potential for active collaborative learning for doing so (see Oros 2007; Warsah et al. 2021).

A final observation highlighted perfectly Freeden's emphasis on the contextual fluidity of ideological concepts. This related to the group who were tasked with furnishing a kitchen with socialist concepts and, specifically, their inclusion of an air fryer to symbolize 'co-operation/community'. Reiterating the point earlier about selective intervention, through our peer-to-teacher discussions we noted how the inclusion of an air fryer was contextually bound to attempts for limiting energy consumption amidst the UK's (2022-) 'cost of living crisis' (Butler 2022; Fish 2023). Thus, just as the concept of the 'common good' would have looked peculiar in the Liberal lexicon prior to the 'social liberalism' which emerged in the 19th century (Freeden 2000, 186), so too, during that time, would the inclusion of an air fryer as a common kitchen appliance. The eventual inclusion of either hasn't completely undermined 'Liberalism' or the 'kitchen', but in their own way, has arguably adjusted their generic conception.

Increasing understanding and recall

In terms of the activity increasing understanding and recall of course content, again, the results were positive. Participants agreed that the activity aided understanding, but interestingly, when reflecting on the aforementioned case of one group adding one of their own concepts to those provided to them from the onset, on a whole, most participants agreed that – in the first instance – having a preprepared compilation was perhaps the best option:

> [Not providing the compilation of concepts for students from the onset] would have made it harder, but for the average student, it makes it ten times easier and makes them more willing to engage (Participant 15)

> … it just gives you something to go off…when you see it all laid out in front of you, it's a lot easier to pick out what is needed (Participant 9)

My own observations of the activity confirm the feedback above. As noted earlier, given how long it took participants to select their five concepts from the combinations provided, asking them to create their own choice of concepts would have seriously diminished the time for the later and more creatively engaging (and fun) aspects of the activity. I reflect more on the potential for student-generated concepts in the conclusion.

In terms of increasing understanding, participants related this specifically to the engaging and visual nature of the activity.

> I liked how the activity was creative and visual, and it simplified concepts and ideologies which would otherwise be quite complex to understand if we were to just listen and read about it (Participant 5).

> The way that the Padlet allowed us to experiment and move things around definitely helped me understand the relationships between the concepts. Actually searching and choosing the pictures of furniture was a great way for me to experiment and think things through… (Participant 18).

As noted by Race (2013, 40–42), for the purposes of enhanced understanding, the comments above confirm the importance of actively *doing* something with – in this instance – abstract political concepts. Collectively, the feedback from participants demonstrated how useful the activity was for this purpose.

Moving now to the question of increasing the recall of course content, in a preliminary sense, the feedback was also positive. At times, participants tended to combine 'understanding and recall' in a rather generic manner, e.g.:

> I feel like the practical work and discussion helped me to remember and understand things better (Participant 3).

> The activity helped me to visualize and understand, making the key concepts more memorable, especially for recalling them in the future (Participant 7).

Noting the tendency above, in the focus group I pressed participants more specifically on whether they had found the activity productive for preparing for related coursework and/or related assessments. One participant commented that:

> For your assessment [which asks students to identify and interrogate at least one ideational concept applicable to chosen political ideology] it helped me choose the main concept. When I initially ran through it in my head, I immediately thought back to the activity we did with you… (Participant 25).

When probed further about what they found so useful:

> It was the activity itself – it just stands out in my mind as something different from what we usually do in class. Because I remembered the activity so well, I remembered the content of what we covered better… (Participant 30).

Finally, some participants linked the usefulness of the activity in terms of recall to its perceived authenticity and relatability. Consequently, they noted also the activity's inclusiveness:

> I like using … something in your everyday life because it makes it more relatable to you… you are more likely to remember something if it relates to you, and for your module, straight away I thought back to the activity we did… (Participant 9).

> Everyone knows what needs to be in a kitchen, but people have different ideas of what can be the most important in a room… (Participant 19).

As alluded to earlier, especially when teaching political theory, it is important to make abstract content relatable - ideally, in the most inclusive manner possible (Cherney 2008). By allowing participants to relate each concept to something meaningful in their own context, the activity seemed to do this well.

Interestingly, whilst participants agreed that the ability to physically resize concepts/pictures using Padlet was helpful, they didn't believe that the activity necessarily needed the technology – i.e., it would have worked just as well by physically cutting, arranging,

and pasting pictures from a newspaper, for example. Nevertheless, the overall need for inclusive pedagogies is also intrinsic for respecting student diversity, and for the purposes of enhancing inclusivity to those with differential learning needs, research suggests that the use of technology is important for doing so (McKee and Scandrett 2021, 173; Holley, Ben Goldsmith, and Fevyer 2021).

Conclusion

The potentials of active collaborative learning are exciting, and disciplinary-wise, Politics and International Relations is uniquely placed in making the most of them. Unusually, though, there is a relative gap when it comes to the learning and teaching of political ideology. As evidenced by the feedback provided, the activity discussed above contributes positively to this development. This feedback found conclusively that the activity provided a collaborative, engaging, and memorable learning experience – all of which contributed to the activity's primary aim of aiding students' understanding of the conceptual bases of political ideology.

Reflecting holistically, one of the most powerful points raised was the memorability of the activity: creating learning experiences which are different or unexpected creates an environment which inspires motivation to learn. Much of the feedback above – relating either to engagement, motivation, or understanding and recall – linked repeatedly to the activity's novel or memorable qualities.

There is scope for adjusting the activity and enhancing its insights. There is clearly room for a more quantitative approach for examining some aspects of the activity – particularly testing recall. Admittedly, my approach was more qualitatively focused. Yet, the insight and significance relating to one group's spontaneous adjustment of their conceptual package wouldn't have been unearthed without it. Linking to Feeney and Hogan's (2019) work on student-generated 'freehand drawings', one option for adjusting the activity could be to ask students to (conceptually) create their *own* ideology. This could work well as a standalone activity at the beginning of a related module, or, perhaps, used at the start and end of the module to highlight how students' ideological views have shifted over time. Either option would certainly increase students' (collaborative) autonomy, which as noted earlier, was highlighted as a key strength of the activity.

The flipside of the benefits of active collaborative learning, though, also reveals some of its key challenges; as too, important considerations as to the success, limitations, and replication of the activity. One obvious point here is the composition of the students who formed the backdrop of the study. Like many active collaborative pedagogies, one must consider cohort size, composition, and access to appropriate resources and learning facilities (McNeil et al. 2021; Spire 2023). Due to the relatively limited nature of the participant sample – both in terms of overall size and composition – the results of the study are somewhat limited; although once again, there is nothing stopping others from adjusting or expanding its remit. One option here might be to examine the usefulness of the activity specifically amongst certain (perhaps marginalized) student cohorts, e.g., black and/or ethnic minority and/or students characterized as neurodiverse (McKee and Scandrett 2021). Another option might explore the usefulness of the activity for those with a preference for learning individually (Kanevsky et al. 2022).

In terms of the practicality of the exercise, arguably, the bigger issues relate to resources and learning facilities. In the activity's original form, access to Padlet and active collaborative learning-friendly spaces were important, and I was able to take advantage of my own institution's Padlet license and SCALE-UP facilities (i.e., relatively spacious, collaborative spaces). Whilst not critical (i.e., the activity could have been done manually and non-SCALE-UP facilities could have been adapted), the success of the project hinged on a degree of such institutional support. Another common barrier to the design and implementation of active collaborative pedagogy is its additional preparation (Børte, Nesje, and Lillejord 2023). The activity was planned meticulously, and whilst ideally this would be the same for all sessions, this can be difficult. It is probably for this reason that adherents of active collaborative learning are clear as to the selective nature of its potential – activities should be used judiciously, for a specific purpose, and appropriately scaffolded (Prince 2004; McNeil et al. 2021).

Finally, the use of active collaborative learning doesn't necessarily diminish the importance of teaching. As noted earlier through my own experiences, it involves a tactical (perhaps ultimately strategic) reexamination of the dialectic between teaching and learning – one which, in all honesty, at times can be easier to avoid. Avoiding the unease and risk which comes with experimentation relates also to Moore's (2011, 124) wider conclusions regarding the relative lack in innovative practice for learning and teaching political theory. Whilst there are exceptions, this is certainly the case with learning and teaching political ideology. Given its ongoing prominence as a core element of Politics and International Relations as an academic discipline, this is a real shame, and as I hope to have demonstrated above, it is always worth taking the risk of trying something new.

Notes

1. The project received a 'favourable ethics opinion' from the School of Social Sciences' Research Ethics Committee.
2. You can view a completed Padlet by accessing the following link: https://padlet.com/OGH/my-project-g1-conservatism-kusldmrt62g77ouz.

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