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## Action Teaching Reports

# Teaching Students How to Think, not What to Think: Pedagogy and Political Psychology

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### Abstract

Academia is often critiqued as an “ivory tower” where research, thinking, and teaching are isolated from the complexity and everyday experience of so many people. As instructors of political and other psychology courses, we strive to break down these barriers and engage with the dynamic and nuanced nature of phenomena as situated in lived social and political contexts. In this report, we unpack and detail how we strive to achieve this goal by expanding on Plous’ articulation of action teaching (2012). We first define our pedagogical focus on active engagement, critical thinking, and staying on the move between multiple perspectives. We then provide specific examples of how we enact our philosophy in activities and assessment. We end by articulating how this approach to teaching in social and political psychology can be understood as furthering not only our students’ intellectual growth as psychologists, but also their development as democratic citizens. In doing so, we argue that action teaching not only involves course activities directly engaging with social issues, but also provides students with a scaffold to actually do so in a way that is attentive to the complexity, pluralism, and dynamism of social and political issues.

**Keywords:** active learning, civic development, critical thinking, higher education, pedagogy

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Academia is often critiqued as an “ivory tower” where research, thinking, and teaching are isolated from the complexity and everyday experience of so many people (e.g. [Stockdill & Danico, 2012](#)). In our research as psychologists, we seek to break down these barriers and engage with the dynamic and nuanced nature of phenomena as situated in lived social and political contexts. As instructors, we similarly grapple with how to engage our students in questions, discussion, and activities that are rooted in these realities because many classrooms in higher education are not. We cannot always physically break down the barriers between the classroom and the outside world, but we strive to support students in intellectually bridging these worlds. These connections can be built through actively engaging diverse students as social scientists and as developing humans with multiple viewpoints and methodologies.

In this report, we unpack and detail how we strive to achieve this goal in line with an orientation toward action teaching: putting psychology in the classroom into action on a social problem to support students feeling better able to contribute to a harmonious and just world (Azar, 2008; Plous, 2000). Drawing on Kurt Lewin's (1946) articulation of action research, the classical notion of action learning entails students directly applying material learned from our classes to create meaningful societal change (Plous, 2012). In our formulation, we subsume this notion of 'direct action' into an extended pedagogical vision. Action teaching, for us, is not only about students having a direct impact in their communities, but also about developing as democratic citizens. That is, they learn fundamental and flexible skills from our political psychological pedagogical approaches that will serve them both in their immediate and proximal communities, and as they progress throughout their lives. We argue that critical thinking, active engagement, and staying on the move between multiple and diverse perspectives enables students to both have immediate impact on processes of social change and also through their career and life trajectories.

Our goal is to present a framework and concrete takeaways for instructors of social and political psychology to destabilize students—that is, cause them to question their assumptions and perspectives (Martin, 2015)—and then actively engage with the complexity, nuance, and value of issues in the world beyond the classroom. That is, we aim to offer a guide to be employed to support an action orientation in social and political psychology courses. We first detail key foundational concepts for us as instructors: active engagement, critical thinking, and staying on the move between multiple perspectives. We then offer guiding ideas for other instructors by explaining how we structure our courses with this focus in mind and provide specific examples of how we enact the philosophy in activities and assessment. Finally, we end by articulating how this approach to teaching would serve likeminded social and political psychologists by furthering students' development. Throughout these sections, we draw specifically on three classes touching on political psychology that we have taught at two private institutions in the Midwestern United States.

## Our Classes

Before delving into philosophical orientations and concrete strategies, it is important to provide a frame for the classes, and our own work, from which these orientations have emerged. One of us, Gabriel Velez, came to his doctoral studies from a background of teaching high school in various countries in Latin America. His work focuses on adolescent civic development, in relation to human rights and peace, and his research explores how Colombian adolescents make meaning of peace and their connection to it during the recent peace process in the country. His courses often incorporate a social justice framework and have included "Constructing a Society of Human Rights: A Psychological Framework," and "Human Rights Across the Life Course." His syllabi draw from psychologists across the world and usually include culminating assessments involving proposals to harness the discipline for policy and political action. In this report, we draw on his experiences teaching two distinct courses in different university contexts: "Memory, Reconciliation, and Healing: Transitional Justice and Psychology" was an advanced seminar sponsored by the human rights center that he taught in 2017 as a doctoral student at the University of Chicago in the Midwestern United States; and "Introduction to Child and Adolescent Development in a Diverse World" as an assistant professor in 2019. The latter was a first-year lecture taught at Marquette University, a midsized Catholic university in the same region.

The other, Séamus Power, researches economic inequality and social movements as well as migration into western liberal democracies. He has taught courses on political and cultural psychology with contextualized and

globalized orientations. His syllabi draw on trans-disciplinary perspectives, from researchers throughout the globe, to inform theoretical and methodological perspectives in social, cultural, and political psychology. His courses have research components, so students have an opportunity to conduct original investigations into contemporary socio-political phenomena. This helps students link their reading of the literature with hands-on experience. For this report, we draw specifically on his experience teaching a class titled “Political Psychology: Rallies, Riots, Revolutions” at the University of Chicago in both 2017 and 2018. This seminar involved a practical research component designed to augment and extend debates and discussions based on selected readings.

We recognize that as two individuals with distinct experiences and trajectories, we have different foci and bring specific positionalities to our classes. Yet, as instructors of political psychology, we hold and apply similar orientations to treating our classrooms as mini-polities—i.e., small scale democratic societies (Flanagan, 2015). In other words, we see these classrooms as spaces where we and our students engage with each other and with society as critically-minded citizens (Plous, 2012). Next, we present our shared perspective on teaching because we believe conceptual and theoretical definition is an important foundation for what we then offer as possibilities for employing action orientation in classrooms.

## **Active Engagement, Critical Thinking, and Staying on the Move**

“Active learning” and “critical thinking” imbue conversations about teaching in higher education and beyond (e.g., Bensley et al., 2010; Halpern, 1999; Lloyd & Bahr, 2010). As commonly-used mantras, they are often undefined or employed with different meanings. We employ these terms with specific reference to engendering motivation in students to move beyond rote memorization and simplistic, static, clear answers to important socio-political questions that are at the heart of action teaching. For us, active learning means excitement, interest, and being challenged with diverse perspectives, while critical thinking underlies this engagement in the classroom by complicating and challenging established understandings and fundamental assumptions of the world (Halpern, 1999). In short, we see the development of critical thinking skills as a means of teaching our students *how* to think, not *what* to think. This foundation complements an applied focus to social problems in the world to stimulate students in contextually situated problem solving, argumentation, perspective forming, and decision making. Active engagement and critical thinking are central to effective teaching of political and social psychology—as they are to so many disciplines—but we argue and demonstrate below how instructors can enact these principles in their classrooms in order to support students’ agentic development as democratically engaged citizens.

Applying this foundation, we link our teaching with research and application, so students are challenged to employ a skill set as social scientists that engage with everyday settings and social contexts. A clear connection between research, teaching, and the world outside the classroom helps students to learn how to evaluate and produce social scientific evidence. In the classes we teach, we strive to create spaces for students to learn to think about “the big picture”: They learn to think beyond the specifics of each academic study or idea and to locate these central issues within a broad context. For instance, educational interventions for violence prevention in Milwaukee were an entryway into discussing what purpose violence might serve, what ways individuals make meaning of it, and how to consider cultural schema without applying denigrating or deterministic frameworks. How we approach

our unit on violence is further explained below to demonstrate the process by which we encourage students to move toward critical thinking.

Just as these broader contexts are dynamic, we also extend active learning and critical thinking through keeping students on the move between multiple perspectives, methodologies, considerations, and questions. The world outside of the classroom—and the laboratory—is complicated and rapidly shifting (Power & Velez, 2020). Human development, psychology, and politics often defy linear models or straightforward explanations. We therefore encourage an orientation to engaging students in social issues by challenging them to consider various perspectives and arguments. We have found female genital cutting and human rights to be productive topics for this complication of straightforward discourses. The vast majority of our students enter with strongly held, though never challenged, perspectives on these issues. Many are thus unsettled at first when considering indigenous perspectives (e.g., Boddy et al., 2007).

When students engage with this challenge, they may be disoriented. That is, the complexity, possibly incongruent perspectives and new ways of thinking may feel contradictory to students. This disorientation may be especially intense if they are accustomed to traditional psychological courses in high school that teach theories and studies as universal and as information to be memorized. Students often struggle with differentiating a pluralistic and a relativistic worldview as we ask them to apply psychological theories and engage with social problems. Their first reaction to cultural psychological approaches may be a resigned relativism: that everything is “messy.” As instructors, we are fine with “messy” as a first reaction to how to think about phenomena in the real world; it forces students to consider multiple perspectives and possibilities at once and face head on the dissonance that may emerge.

As an example, in “Political Psychology: Rallies, Riots, Revolutions,” the question, “Can violence be moral?” is posed as an entryway into identifying and deconstructing students’ values and beliefs. Prior to the lesson, students read chapters from the book *Virtuous Violence* by Alan Fiske and TAGE Rai (2014). The authors argue, contrary to what people generally believe, many instances of violence are perceived to be moral from the perpetrator’s point of view. Examples from the text include numerous cases students struggle to see as moral, such as gang-related homicides and terrorist attacks. The counter-intuitive thesis generally engages students through provocation. Students linked the philosophical, theoretical, and methodological content of the book to contemporary issues and acts of violence that are in the news headlines.

By the end of the lesson, they understand not all violence is the same or morally acceptable, but rather may be motivated by a sense of morality from the perspective of a perpetrator. Students may push back, and often with personal examples, such as talking about the horrific and incomprehensible nature of violence they read about in communities just a few miles away from their university campuses in Chicago and Milwaukee. To address this resistance, we first have students reflect on acts of violence within their own lives, as experienced, witnessed, or discussed in their communities. Students then analyze media articles and activist blog posts about violence in the local areas around campus to comprehend collective meaning-making in relation to the virtuous violence hypothesis. Finally, we end by pushing students to go further and take a stand. They draw on their position as students of social science and citizens to develop opinion pieces on the topic. We encourage them to submit these to media outlets around campus.

By understanding the psychology underlying violence (that it is mostly not random, senseless, psychotic), and by understanding the complex morality behind it, students are better able to understand and then potentially bring this comprehension with them into their careers. Implicit in the instruction given in the class is the idea that you

need to understand the psychology of violence before you can do anything to reduce or prevent it (on a policy level, or even an individual or community level). While some still argue that such violence is wrong, this process challenges students to engage in multiple ways with the possibility that individuals and groups make moral meaning of violence. They are forced to consider and advocate for violence reduction, as related to real world and personal contexts, through this lens. With this example, we hope to demonstrate to others how “messiness” around salient social and political issues can be harnessed for motivation and engagement.

In summary, if a goal of social and political psychology courses is promoting students’ development as democratic citizens and potentially as social scientists, then we must thoughtfully and carefully employ active learning and critical thinking concepts in our courses. But even more so, we propose these terms must be grounded and applied with a specific orientation toward students grappling with the social and political world beyond the classroom. This world is inherently multifaceted and in flux, and thus to promote their active learning and critical thinking, we aim to disorient students and keep them on the move between multiple perspectives. To further demonstrate this approach, we next describe the structure of our classes and then concrete activities so other instructors may consider applying these in their courses.

## Structuring Classes

A focus on active, critical engagement must imbue classes from the very start of the teaching process: designing and structuring syllabi to bring a plurality of perspectives, ideas, research, and disciplinary orientations into the classroom to effectively teach social and political psychology. Disorientation is only a first step; from this beginning, we then strive to facilitate students developing tools, theories, and applications to work through the questions that arise. At the end, students may demonstrate synthesis by applying these lessons to psychological phenomena as studied and lived in the world (in contrast to memorization or application for invented test questions). This approach is malleable to various course objectives and learning materials. In our transitional justice course, this takes the shape of concrete proposals for interventions that could support psychosocial health in conflict or post-conflict settings, which are then disseminated publicly. In our developmental course, students are asked to create culturally relevant research projects about an area of development and human rights to present to the teachers and administrators at a volunteer site where they have been working all semester.

This broader arc across a course can be motivated by an opening concrete example to challenge monolithic and singular viewpoints. By using a relatable example to destabilize their preconceptions, students start to problematize their intellectual thinking and world viewpoints. From this point of entry, students can then be guided into drawing out broader themes and theory. For example, our developmental psychology course begins with the paper “Who sleeps by whom revisited: A method for extracting the moral goods implicit in practice” (Shweder, Jensen, & Goldstein, 1995). Family sleeping arrangements are a mundane everyday practice that are tied into social contexts and the public/private divide. While imbued with morals and cultural norms, they are not often thought of as encoding these values. Students can understand and connect with the content at question—i.e., how families choose to sleep in given arrangements—though they are also often challenged by the alternate possibilities it offers. In our experiences, some students push back by citing studies, or popular media, extolling the dangers of co-sleeping between parents and children. This pushback then leads to an important conversation about data, the intersection of data with social and political context, and cultural norms that further destabilize preconceptions about evidence that students bring into the classroom. Ultimately, we find the possible reframing of this topic

piques their curiosity and sparks questioning of their own moral frameworks, leading to a broader discussion on pluralistic and relativistic stances on morality, assumptions implicit in certain widely-known theories of moral development, and the real-world implications. The concrete and everyday then moves into the deeper engagement in foundations and theories. The students develop ways to understand and think through this complexity before being asked to consider and take action on social issues.

A second concrete aspect of course structure is a commitment to engaging diversity not only in inclusivity toward students, but also in readings and classroom dynamics. This entails drawing on readings from various perspectives—different subdisciplines of psychology, scholars from across the globe, studies employing multiple, iterative methodologies (Power, Velez, Qadafi, & Tennant, 2018)—but also drawing on the diversity of the student body itself. In our political psychology course, students read the original texts of Stanley Milgram's famous experiments so they understand and appreciate the foundation of these questions. This foundation is integrated with considering modern re-imaginings and cross-cultural replications of the experiment (Burger, 2009; Milgram, 1963). We then complicate the current research and stoke discussion by asking what obedience looks like within the contexts and cultures in which students grew up. As such, discussing what might be universal, and what might be local, in relation to topics such as obedience means we move beyond ethnocentric research and WEIRD samples (that is, the predominant samples in psychological research that come from Western, Educated, Industrial, Rich, and Democratic contexts), to create discussions and debates that draw on research throughout the world (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010). This approach has taken students beyond focusing on the takeaways about obedience or critiquing the ethics to question preconceptions and personal cultural frameworks.

Our approach to diversity more broadly involves building classroom environments that are inclusive because such settings motivate engagement, facilitate community bonds, and promote deeper learning (Westwood, 2018). Based on our experiences and training, we understand an inclusive classroom as requiring persistent attention: devoting time to relationships; actively listening; using varied examples; being attentive to language; setting norms for respectful discussion; stepping back so others can step forward. It also entails structuring courses to incorporate a range of interests, settings, and perspectives. Readings and resources include conventional sources, but also items from different cultural lenses and authors of diverse backgrounds.

In our introduction to child and adolescent development, we use opinion pieces and editorials arguing about civic decline and youth activism to structure class debates on how to interpret data and measure successful developmental outcomes. These pieces not only include ones in the context of the United States generally, but also focus on marginalized groups (e.g., Diemer & Li, 2011)—such as youth of color in communities just miles from the university campus—and international perspectives and trends (e.g., Sacipa-Rodriguez & Montero, 2014). The latter includes opportunities to engage real world contexts as we read liberation psychological perspectives on youth civic development in Colombia (Sacipa, Ballesteros, Cardozo, Novoa, & Tovar, 2006), hold a skype session with a foundation working with youth on forgiveness and reconciliation, and then collectively construct a list of key trends in adolescent civic development to present to the foundation. This approach not only diversifies course material, but links this diversity into the challenge of action: thinking through application of theories and concepts with cultural context and social issues in mind.

## Applying the Approach: Concrete Techniques and Examples

Throughout our courses, we employ a variety of techniques and strategies to support students' active critical engagement in breaking down barriers between the classroom and everyday life. Below, we detail a number of these (see [Table 1](#)) and provide specific examples as guiding possibilities for other instructors to employ in their classes.

Table 1

*Concrete Techniques and Outcomes*

Area of focus	Technique	Outcome or skill
Introducing concepts	Defining terms	Psychological literacy (McGovern et al., 2010); Complexity of studying real world phenomena (Power, Velez, Qadafi, & Tennant, 2018)
Reading	Student-led discussion	Agency and ownership of classroom environment (Dunn et al., 2007)
	Group jigsaw	Deeper understanding of material, variety of student engagement (Perkins & Saris, 2001)
Interacting	Flipped debates	Integration of theory into context (Allen et al., 2000; Chew et al., 2018); Evaluating evidence and theory (American Psychological Association [APA], 2013)
Assessing	Opinion pieces	Public engagement with social issue (Plous, 2012); Translate psychological science for application (APA, 2013)
	Research projects	Understand and use research methods with application to social issues (Allen et al., 2000; APA, 2013)
	Presentations	Deeper understanding of theory as applied to the world (Plous, 2012); Translate psychological science for application (APA, 2013)

### Introducing Concepts: Defining Terms

One opening activity is defining key terms through interactive and iterative engagement with diverse perspectives. This entryway into a unit can be an effective means of identifying and highlighting students' prior frameworks, as well as beginning to challenge and complicate these as a collective group. By accomplishing this, the activity can build their psychological literacy, an important foundation necessary for then moving to the complexity and nuance of real world social and political issues (McGovern et al., 2010).

Using the online software *Poll Everywhere*, we solicit students' definitions of key terms. These explanations can take the shape of full sentences or keywords and populate a visual display (e.g., an evolving word cloud) that serves as the foundation for discussion. As a class, we then deconstruct the commonalities in these ideas, the stark differences that may arise in their definitions, and ask them to consider how these formulations might differ across disciplines, historical times, and cultural contexts. What we have constructed is then paired with technical, academic, and cross-cultural definitions, with students identifying similarities and differences between their own understandings and academic and cross-cultural ones. As an example, for our course on transitional justice, we began by asking students to submit all words they associated with the concept of human rights. Common responses included "universal" and "moral." As students considered the size of these terms in the word cloud definition, some then pointed out that these concepts were also multifaceted and differentially understood. One, less prevalent,

response was “western.” The discussion then moved to students reading in groups the definitions of human rights by the United Nations and North American and other psychological associations, as well as statements invoking human rights by groups who are the targets of human rights advocacy (such as indigenous populations in Latin America and African women in tribal communities practicing female genital cutting, which linked to a later unit on this topic). This led to a class debate on the cultural and psychological assumptions underlying human rights. At the end of the unit, we returned to these opening thoughts to close the loop, with students articulating how their conceptions had changed. Students described seeing their own ideas change, as well as reconceptualizing human rights as tied to cultural perspectives and psychological meaning making.

## Reading: Student-Led Discussions and Group Jigsaw

There are many ways class discussion can facilitate active, critical engagement. Discussion can serve not only to process and integrate across readings, but to delve deeply into the texts to better understand the scientific process and the applicability of research. Yet, discussion in psychology courses in universities often is either overlooked in larger introductory classes or only engages part of the class in smaller, upper level seminars (Dunn, Halonen, & Smith, 2008; Dunn, Mehrotra, & Halonen, 2004). Here we offer two concrete techniques we have found successful to building toward an action orientation in our courses: structured, student-led discussions and small group jigsaw activities. While neither approach is new, they may be overlooked as important foundations for students’ agency and nuanced engagement with social and political issues beyond the classroom (Dunn et al., 2007; Perkins & Saris, 2001).

First, discussions can be structured by having two students lead each class. A day before class, these leaders engage in a conversation with the instructor about questions and discussion points, which focus on presenting the key takeaways. The instructor can serve as a guide both in understanding the material, but also in tying it to broader, applicable themes across the class. On the day of the class, these students begin the conversation by offering deep, sometimes provocative questions and issues, based on the readings. Other students then engage with these issues and the ‘push and pull’ of the class begins. It is by articulating ideas—and defending and modifying these concepts in relation to ideas and opinions from classmates—that students develop their own understandings of class concepts. Instructors contribute by helping answer concrete questions that arise, tying in outside literature, and bridging to the world beyond the classroom (e.g., what would this look like in your everyday life). The dynamic created can model civic discourse and begin to place students in the role of agents—a significant shift from many traditional psychology classrooms that is needed to move toward an action orientation.

As a second technique, instructors can intermix student-led discussions with small group activities, and specifically a jigsaw approach (e.g., Perkins & Saris, 2001). This can create a “fresh environment” and provide quiet students with a chance to articulate their views (Dunn, Halonen, & Smith, 2008). In our political psychology seminar of 20 students, we create four groups of five, and disseminate them throughout the building they are in. On occasion we simply ask them to take 15 minutes to reflect on one of the readings and discuss their individual “takeaways” from these readings. We visit each group and “check in” on their discussions. The groups regather and new groupings are formed with one person from each of the first (i.e., if there were four original groups, new groups have a person from each of those four). Each representative presents the main points from what they discussed in their small group. This activity can be implemented with readings, but also perspectives on a controversial, salient topic (such as the role of social media in political behavior). As one concrete example, in the same class we have found students often struggle with the density of Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* (1983) as

part of an introduction to how societies and nations are psychologically conceptualized. In this case, each first group analyzes a specific key quote we provide from the text and then considers its implications for how an imagined community is conceptualized.

One benefit of these activities is for quieter students to have an opportunity to speak. Another is to create a different “entry point” into larger class discussions that builds on the inertia of the more intimate setting. On the whole, these various discussion approaches motivate students in understanding themselves as intellectual and political agents, while also creating accountability as students must report to others in small group settings. We have seen the development occur in students in our classes, and it is supported by research on self-efficacy, belonging, and community engagement (e.g., [Martin, 2004](#); [Shaw, Brady, McGrath, Brennan, & Dolan, 2014](#)). To this end, though these techniques do not directly bring students into the world beyond the classroom, they lay a foundation by placing the student as the agent, motivator, and creator in the course.

### **Interacting: Flipped Debates**

Flipped debates provide an opportunity for students to begin to learn to stay on the move between multiple perspectives and start to consider applications of what they are learning (i.e. what action on social issues would look like). Debates tap into affective motivation, compel students to consider various and possibly contradicting evidence, and actively connect research, theory, and practice to arguments ([Allen et al., 2000](#)). This technique can be adapted and push students to consider other perspectives by assigning them to defend a position other than the one they held before. This disorientation engages students with the complexity and nuance of controversial topics by requiring them to carefully consider contradictory points of view, rather than simply choosing and employing what supports the framework they already have. The activity furthermore develops critical assessment as a psychologist as they evaluate the validity, strength, and applicability of various types of evidence ([APA, 2013](#)). Finally, by choosing social issues as the topics of debate, students can begin to move from theory and the classroom to the world beyond ([Chew et al., 2018](#)).

As a first step in this activity, instructors can assign a provocative statement for debate based on previous class discussions, readings and lectures. We employed this technique in our political psychology class by asking students to take a stand on the following statement after having read literature on the roles of collective memory in informing the formation of present and future realities: “To create more harmonious future societies, we must forget atrocities of the past.” They are then told they will be defending the opposite perspective, put into groups on the side they would defend, and given thirty minutes to prepare their arguments. Each member is assigned a role: notetaker, speaker, group guide (to make sure all voices in the group are heard), or timekeeper. Groups are explicitly given directions to plan how they will present their arguments. Some students like to split their 10 minutes of opening remarks between each student, while others select a number of students speak and others make notes of potential rebuttals. The flexibility allows students to connect with the activity in relation to their interests and comfort level with class participation. After both sides make opening arguments, each side has a chance to rebut, refute, and reframe arguments made by the opposition. Finally, each group makes concluding remarks. At the end, the instructor can intervene through final statements to repair any potential divides in opinion and to extend student suggestions to reflect on future lines of research or social implications.

After these debates, students often have more to say on the topics and more developed thoughts on possibilities for action on these issues. Therefore, instructors can give them the chance to develop their own perspective on the debate prompt by responding to it in a midterm take-home assignment or as a separate reflection post on a

discussion board. Employing an action orientation to assessment, final projects that move beyond the classroom can also emerge from the intensity, thinking, questioning, and dynamic nature of these debates. Overall, we have found this activity encourages students to consider social and political psychological phenomena holistically, allows them to triangulate their perspectives on the issues with those of classmates, and to 'break new ground' by seeing other perspectives. While they are often motivated by the affective component underlying a debate format, at the same time the stakes are not as high as they would be in a usual debate because they are defending a side that is not "their own." Still, many leave with an interest to take these issues a step further, and final assessments or culminating class projects can provide them guidance and an outlet to act on this motivation.

## Assessing: Opinion Pieces, Research Projects, and Presentations

Assessments in higher education psychology classes often take the form of exams testing memorization of theories and key ideas or papers synthesizing research on a topic or phenomena (Dunn, Halonen, & Smith, 2008; Dunn, Mehrotra, & Halonen, 2004). Some courses may ask students to integrate their classroom learning with their development as a psychologist by conducting a small study and analyzing results. We see value in these assignments as part of a holistic approach; assessment in various forms and as both formative and summative promotes inclusivity and growth (e.g. Brookhart, 2004; Bubb et al., 2013; Dixson & Worrell, 2016). Our own choice of assessment for each course relies on constructive alignment (e.g., Biggs, 2012).

An action orientation to assessment can serve as an orientation to in-class evaluations and self-reflections (Plous, 2012). As one concrete possibility for instructors, a typical final paper assignment can be reframed to require more applicable arguments, which students can then further develop for publication, future study, and dissemination that makes an impact on the world outside the classroom. Rather than following a usual paper format, students are challenged to write a pithy, two-page opinion piece in reply to topical prompts of social and political relevance. For instance, we have asked students in *Political Psychology: Rallies, Riots, Revolutions* to reply to questions like "is the United States becoming a dictatorship?" or "how do we arrange social relations to promote social harmony and reduce civic discontent?" This provocation can be a virtue: students must engage with alternative, and potentially uneasy, topics, issues, and statements in order to advance as deep and critically aware thinkers about social issues. The grading rubric can help move students beyond the typical research paper they may be accustomed to: emphasizing audience, brevity, and clarity. Students can be graded on how they are able to coherently and insightfully integrate social, political, and cultural psychological theory into current socio-political context, while also articulating these points to an audience beyond just the instructors. With encouragement, students can then more seamlessly move from these classroom assignments to action on social issues (Plous, 2012). In our courses, some students have expanded these projects to publish on blogs and in undergraduate publications. For example, in our course on transitional justice, one student published her final paper in the university's political science journal. Her proposal for a program to support the reintegration of female ex-combatants in Colombia drew on literature on psychosocial healing, in and out-group dynamics, and economics to construct a concrete proposal for action.

A second action-oriented strategy for assessment involves adapting the typical research project to include an applied orientation beyond the classroom. Beginning with a broad prompt allows students to pick a salient social or political topic that interests them. They can then be asked, as a first step and grade, to analyze how their chosen phenomenon is represented in a sample of left- or right-wing media. Reviewing media representations from the left and right helps students stay on the move between perspectives, while rooting their project in its real-world

implications. Next, they must use their insights to generate a protocol and interview a self-identified liberal and conservative (or left-wing and right-wing) person on the issue. Sampling and analyses take many forms, though students must justify their choices with theoretical literature. After they carry out the research, they not only present preliminary findings, but must outline concrete steps for how this work could be engaged with the media and public discourse on the issue. Some students may take this avenue and pursue it, while others simply become more aware of how research builds from social dynamics (i.e., the media) and can in turn be oriented toward acting on these social dynamics (i.e., possible paths forward).

An illuminating example comes from our political psychology course in which one student compiled a database of every news report from Breitbart—a right wing news outlet—and the New York Times—a liberal one—on the topical issue of “the caravan” of central American migrants traveling to the southern border of the United States. She then generated an interview schedule and sampled a small group of liberal and conservative informants to interview about the issue. The media analysis involved compiling all relevant articles, thematically analyzing the headlines, and then randomly sampling one in ten articles to explore in more depth through discourse analysis. These types of projects allow students to develop valuable applied skills that have served them beyond the classroom and in their career trajectories: producing undergraduate theses, producing graduate school applications, considering other methodological approaches for graduate theses and dissertations, and developing ideas for grant applications (Allen et al., 2000; APA, 2013).

We have found these research projects help students in developing the link between class readings, debate and discussion, and action. Students become experts in their own subfield of political psychology and—using multiple methods at different levels of analysis—they can examine their topic of interest from multiple viewpoints (Power, Velez, Qadafi, & Tennant, 2018). We encourage students to “suspend disbelief” (Shweder, 1997) and be slow to judge the viewpoints of others (de Montaigne, 1948; Shweder, 2003). Perhaps most important for an active critical engagement, they also develop broader perspectives on material in class through their lived experiences as researchers; they can more concretely evaluate the scopes and limits of research as they have first-hand experience conducting their own work. In certain courses, this technique can provide a basis for students moving from observing social and political issues to bringing their learning to bear on it. Our developmental class, for example, includes a service component, and so students are required to structure their research presentation in a way that could be insightful to the staff at their site. Their final assessment includes a reflection on how the presentation was received and what they learned in the process of giving it.

As a third assessment building on research projects, presentations offer another opportunity to have students in smaller classes integrate material and produce work with audiences beyond just the instructor. Providing students with the space and challenge of articulating analyses and arguments to peers, they must not only consider a different and broader audience than a paper only seen by the instructor, but also take public ownership of their ideas and independent research. Presentations also create an organic space for students’ applications of the material to come into dialogue. Even when time constraints make it difficult to directly respond to others’ research, simply putting the various forms of work into the classroom through final presentations stimulates connections and further development. Finally, class presentations give students yet another opportunity to have their voice heard and be the classroom leaders. Such ownership and participation draw on psychological research on civic education and citizenship to promote students’ development as active, democratic agents (e.g., Campbell, 2008; Torney-Purta & Amadeo, 2011). We believe it contributes to developing democratic values as students communicate their unique political psychology research project to their peers, and peers have the chance to ask questions and engage

with the ideas for action that students present. Much like we have laid out throughout this teaching report, this approach is dialogical and a form of “pedagogical pluralism”—integrating multiple activities and diverse perspectives to further active learning and participation (Allen et al., 2000; APA, 2013).

Concretely, each five-minute presentation is followed with a question or two from students and one from instructors. Questions are generally directed towards developing the research agenda and considering how to disseminate the findings. These questions may also challenge the fundamental assumptions of a student’s project and thus force them to engage with an alternate interpretation, viewpoint, or ideology. There are many approaches an instructor can take to promote these links: what steps would you take to advance this research; did your research with left and right wing media and people make you think differently about your own beliefs; how would you disseminate these findings and what are the implications you would draw for your audience? The activity, and particularly this question session, can solidify students’ ownership of the material, is informative to the class, applies and extends class concepts, and bolsters confidence in presentation and mastery in line with clarifying steps for action.

## Conclusion

In a recent class in our human development course on child labor, there was a deep lull at one point in the discussion. Reading the room, we interjected to ask what everyone was thinking in the moment. One student raised her hand, and simply stated “it’s all messy.” Her comment was met with widespread acknowledgment and nodding, while others added they felt a bit confused. We responded that it was a first step in our learning journey.

That moment encapsulates our first goal in social and political psychology courses that underlies an action orientation: Students care because they are becoming increasingly aware of and are increasingly grappling with the complexity of humans’ social and psychological life. What they thought was clear and certain can be challenged, and easy answers are re-examined and doubted. But this is not where we want our students to leave the course. A relativistic nihilism about psychology does not serve their engagement or growth as developing social scientists and engaged democratic citizens. The next step is an important one: To move from destabilization to forming the tools to synthesize, appreciate, and work between abstract theory and applied, real world contexts amid the messiness of these phenomena and their study. To this end, we must support and guide students in understanding the breadth and nuance of what is encompassed between pure subjectivity to pure objectivity and from universal to contextual.

This process includes offering holistic and applied frameworks. Students will not benefit most by simply reading from a textbook about theories and understandings of social and political phenomena, but rather through engaging in debates, delving into study methodologies, encountering and reconciling diverse viewpoints, and appreciating the methodological value in iterative, integrative, and multiple methods. They then must begin a process of taking these understandings and this work out into the world to act on social and political issues. Building such bridges is difficult and requires support—partly because it is so different from many students’ experiences—and so we encourage an approach that guides them across the course in working toward action (Azar, 2008). In doing so, we encourage instructors to give the study of social and political psychology deeper meaning for students and pique their interest by addressing the complexity and nuance of lived, everyday worlds.

Complementing our orientation as scholars, as instructors we see ourselves as supporting students' broader growth as people, democratic citizens, and learners who are beginning in the class to contribute to more holistic, applied, and nuanced understandings of how people interact in communities, countries, and across the globe (Moghaddam, 2016; Plous, 2012). In the modern classroom, students must be engaged as content and activities vie for their attention with the omnipresence of social media, the possible distracting nature of technology, and the easy access to facts (Bates & Sangra, 2011). Through the framework, structure, and techniques we present here, we seek to present an adaptable path to addressing this challenge broadly by relating academic knowledge to contemporary global issues and debates. Using these approaches can help facilitate students in developing relationships, skills, belonging, and passions to inform their contemporary political and social lives (Freeman et al., 2014; O'Connor, 2013; Torney-Purta & Amadeo, 2011).

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