

# Teaching 'intersectionality' as a 'threshold concept' for undergraduate students of Political Science

A. Kilp, *University of Tartu*

**ABSTRACT:** The core learning objective of the Political Science undergraduate curriculum is to advance the knowledge and skills related to threshold concepts of the discipline. By attaining threshold concepts, students learn how to make sense of politics the way Political Scientists think, view and do. The paper argues that the Political Science curriculum should include the study of intersections of multiple types of inequality resulting from interconnecting identities. As a pedagogical means of teaching intersectionality to students at Tartu University, the author used sections from a film "Philadelphia" (1993), which is mostly about discrimination of a person with AIDS at the work-place, but its plot also covers instances where issues relate to: how AIDS and discrimination intersect with race, class, heterosexuality, homosexuality, status group based patterns of consumption of culture (opera), and dying and death (existential experiences everyone can relate to). The film helped students to understand that the development of personality and social identity always has intersectional dimensions and that both discrimination and the fight against discrimination can be with intersectional aspects.

## 1 INTERSECTIONALITY AS A THRESHOLD CONCEPT IN POLITICAL SCIENCE PEDAGOGY

The core learning objective of the Political Science undergraduate curriculum is to advance the knowledge and skills related to the threshold concepts of the discipline (e.g. power, conflict, diversity, justice, equality, freedom, identity). The threshold is passed, when students have abandoned customary and previously familiar views (Land, Rattray & Vivian 2014) and arrived at new ways of seeing (Meyer & Land 2003; 2005) and thinking (Yip & Raelin 2011) about the subject area. By attaining the threshold concepts, students learn how to make sense of politics the way Political Scientists think, view and do (Berstein 2012; Rauh 2014).

Correspondingly, the Political Science undergraduate curriculum should include the study of intersections of multiple types of inequality resulting from interconnecting identities (Rasmussen 2014). Intersectionality pedagogy allows students to tackle several key concepts and issues of the discipline simultaneously, contextually, and in a coherent way.

This approach, however, also has several challenges. First, in a (neo)liberal university, the teacher cannot advocate for any particular justice related solution or even whether the (social or political) problem exists or not, and if it exists, then whether the solution ought to come from state, society or from the individuals and groups themselves. The teacher can present data and demonstrate how different disadvantages overlap for specific social groups and how for others advantages accumulate.

Second, students pass thresholds neither simultaneously nor do they relate to threshold concepts in a similar way. For students, threshold concepts such as power, conflict, inequality or intersectionality constitute to a varying degree troublesome concepts that deviate from or contradict with the 'automatic thinking' regarding important political issues that they have 'learned' before coming to the class (Glover, Tagliarina 2011). Students do not relate to threshold concepts in a similar way. Whether students will pass the threshold or not may depend on "non-academic, personal experiences and a student's interpretation of those experiences" (Maitre 2013:2). Whether a specific threshold – e.g. the legal and public recognition of rights of homosexuals infected with AIDS as in the movie "Philadelphia" – constitutes a threshold or not, depends on the identity, experiences and previous formal and informal learning of an individual.

Third, as with political controversies in general, the university teacher cannot tell the 'truth' about whether the situation (status quo) is unjust or whether the solution to the problems ought to come from the state or from the individuals and groups themselves. Therefore, the task of teachers is not "to impart the "settled wisdom" of our discipline", but rather "to invite reflection and challenge students to repeatedly attempt to validate their basic assumptions" both about the way society and politics *is* and

how they *ought* to be (Glover, Tagliarina 2011:398). In issues related to social, economic, cultural and political justice it is natural and expected that students are not "of the same mind". Depending on the issue, at least some of them question the existence of the problem and support the status quo, while the others are divided over whether the responsibility belongs to individuals, groups, the society or the government.

Lastly, there exists also a limit in what a teacher can know in abstract about the knowledge, attitudes and experiences of the students. The teacher recognizes the way how students handle the issue, when students express their thoughts and the latter demonstrate "a shift in thinking, skills and attitudes" (Williams 2014:13-14). As this shift is expected to be transformative (it brings among a significant change in the perception of the subject and also a change in the related practice) and troublesome (because it involves unfamiliar and counter-intuitive knowledge) (Meyer and Land 2005:373; Yip and Raelin 2011:340), at least some students pass it with difficulty.

## **2 TEACHING INTERSECTIONALITY WITH A FILM**

As a pedagogical means for teaching intersectionality to the undergraduate students in an introductory course to Political Science at Tartu University, several short sections (clips) from a film "Philadelphia" (1993) were used. The movie "Philadelphia" is mostly about discrimination of a person with AIDS at the work-place, but its plot covers also instances where issues related to AIDS and discrimination intersect with race, class, heterosexuality, homosexuality, status group based patterns of consumption of culture (opera), and dying and death (existential experiences everyone can relate to). The film helped most of the students to understand that the development of personality and social identity has intersectional dimensions and that both discrimination and the fight against discrimination can be with intersectional aspects. After watching the selected clips from the movie and having briefly discussed it in pairs, students filled 'one minute papers' at the end of the class, where they were free to write down their questions and thoughts regarding intersectionality and the movie. Thereafter, their responses on the 'one minute papers' were systematized and added to the class conspectus. In the next class, students were expected to give a reflective and explanatory answer to a question "how and for what purpose was intersectionality used in the film "Philadelphia"? The patterns of students' responses on the 'one minute papers' will be discussed in the last section of this paper.

## **3 INTERSECTIONAL ANALYSIS OF POWER, DISCRIMINATION AND EMANCIPATION IN THE MOVIE PHILADELPHIA**

Before watching short clips (about 3-5 minutes each) from the movie, the teacher introduced the theme by a Gramscian perspective. According to Gramsci, each type of political control is based on both coercion and consent. Coercion comes from the state, but the state is not the main provider of consent (Williams 1996:373). Consent is provided and maintained in a civil society by various actors that operate in fields such as education, religion and culture. These actors construct a cultural power or 'hegemony' which legitimates the status quo. Correspondingly, the social and political actors (such as social movements or pressure groups), who want to challenge these hegemonic powers, are in need of ideational and symbolic 'weapons' with which they can question the naturalness of the existing relations of power. Movies are one of the means that can be used for the latter task.

'Philadelphia' (1993) was the first Hollywood movie that directly dealt with the discrimination of a homosexual person with AIDS. In a broader classification, the movie is about the discrimination and equal treatment of people with incurable disease at the workplace.

The main characters of the film are a successful lawyer Andrew Beckett (played by Tom Hanks), who is in a homosexual relationship with Miguel (Antonio Banderas) and a Black, heterosexual lawyer Joe Miller (Denzel Washington).

Scene 1: the fall from an intersectionally advantaged situation. Beckett works in a prestigious law firm Wyatt Wheeler, but is suddenly fired after being charged with lack of competence. As one of his colleagues had earlier asked a question about a mark on his forehead (resulting from AIDS), Beckett is convinced that he was fired because he is sick, homosexual and has AIDS, despite the fact that he had not made his sickness public and there was no explicit talk about AIDS at the time he was fired. Beckett has a close relationship with a boy-friend, but hides his homosexuality, because he knows that in the social circles where he works, homosexuality may influence his career negatively. As Andy

Beckett had contracted HIV in promiscuous high-risk anonymous sex, "Andy's sexuality includes the subcategories homosexual, unmarried, promiscuous, nonprocreative, casual, public, and pornographic..." (Nero 2004:50). In one instant, Beckett, who used to belong to the upper class by profession, income and race, fell into the class of the "other". Beckett "was stripped of his humanity. Consequently he deserved less, and he got what was coming to him" (Shaw 2004:172).

Beckett wants to sue Wyatt Wheeler for having fired him not on the basis of his lack of competence but due to his homosexual life-style and AIDS, but is unable to find a lawyer to represent him. Beckett asks Joe Miller to represent him, but Miller turns the offer down by saying "you do not have a case".

Scene 2: in a public library. The black heterosexual lawyer recognizes that Beckett suffers from public discrimination that is no different from the racial discrimination he has witnessed earlier. Due to neighborly love or human empathy, a person from the (Black) minority is now willing to help an upper-class white man who has himself 'fallen' into marginalized minority groups. This does not mean, however, that Joe Miller himself is abandoning his heterosexuality. Quite the contrary, throughout the movie, Miller's commitment to heterosexuality seems to become stronger.

Scene 3: the court-case is about homosexuality, not about AIDS. During the court process, Joe Miller offers a speech, where he asks: "what is this case really about?" He argues that the case is about homosexuality. As the case started with the focus on the legal competence of Beckett vs AIDS as the cause for the loss of his job, it becomes increasingly clear that the focus is predominantly on homosexuality.

Scene 4: the opera scene an evening before the final court day. Joe Miller visits Andrew Beckett in order to prepare for the final debate in court, but Beckett does not react constructively to Miller's initiative. Instead, he lets Miller hear the song "La Mamma Morta" by Maria Callas – who was one of the favorite singers in American gay communities (Nero 2004:49) – and re-tells him the content of the lyrics of the song. As Miller admitted that he knows nothing of opera, which is a part of white upper-class culture, paradoxically it is Miller who is culturally accepted to the upper-class through the mutual experience of the song by Maria Callas (Nero 2004:59).

Scene 5: Andrew Beckett is dying in the hospital while he hears the news that he has won the case. As each and every human being can identify with aging and dying, this scene adds a general existential and human dimension to the story.

#### **4 STUDENTS' RESPONSE TO THE MOVIE CLIPS ON THE 'ONE MINUTE' PAPERS**

In the end of the class, the 'one minute papers' where students could freely pose questions, voice their impressions and express their response reflectively, their reaction varied. Several students did not consider the movie clips useful for the study and some of them would have preferred a more conventional format of a lecture or in-class discussion. The others, who found the usage of the movie useful, argued that the movie adds a human and emotional dimension, which is lacking when the theme is studied via facts and texts.

As the overall number of students taking the class was 82, their highly diverse responses should not come as a surprise. Among the thoughts and questions that the students had after viewing the selected short clips from the movie, were:

"I felt that the "happy ending" could emerge only as a result of different minorities uniting themselves for a common goal."

"In the clips that we were watching, there were no women (I do not know whether this applies to the whole movie)."

"It helped me to understand how minorities are discriminated on the basis of 'ignorance'."

"It was Andrew Beckett's own fault that he got HIV. It is difficult to be emphatic, because he ignored the rules of safe sex."

"How useful is it to hide your status, when you belong to minorities and at the same time are a member of an elite?"

"Would the court case still be won, if the homosexual would have been Black and from a lower class?"

"How has intersectionality been used for the spreading of hatred?"

"Intersectionality is life."

"The film challenged the sexuality-related hegemonic attitudes by appealing on the other hegemonic values (success, humanism, remorse). It gave the viewers a sufficient amount of key words through which to stir up empathy towards the main character."

## 5 DISCUSSION

The threshold concepts of Political Science are troublesome and counter-intuitive neither essentially nor objectively, but due to social psychology. The issues discussed in class are the same issues discussed 'on the streets' and in Facebook, with relatives and friends, and in "public life". Paradoxically, the Political Science classroom cannot change the socially constructed versions of reality that operate outside the University, although it can offer an environment where the unrecognized aspects and dimensions of the latter are recognized and a more realistic version of reality (at times a counter-reality to what is functioning as socially constructed reality) can be constructed.

The author of the paper encourages teachers to experiment with intersectional pedagogy in Political Science, but also recognizes that the systematic implementation of intersectional pedagogy would require a collegial and institutional commitment to its principles and ideals.

## REFERENCES

- Bernstein, J. L. (2012). Plowing through Bottlenecks in Political Science: Experts and Novices at Work, in: Kathleen McKinney (Ed.) *Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in and Across the Disciplines*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, pp. 74–92.
- Glover, R. W., Tagliarina D. (2011). Ditching the Script: Moving Beyond “Automatic Thinking” in Introductory Political Science Courses, *Journal of Political Science Education*, Vol. 7, No. 4, pp. 394-415.
- Land, R., Rattray, J., Vivian, P. (2014). Learning in the liminal space: a semiotic approach to threshold concepts, *Higher Education* Vol. 67, No. 2, pp. 199-217.
- Maitre, E. (2013). Expanding the Definition of ‘Threshold Concept’, *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education*, Vol. 1, No. 9, <http://repository.brynmawr.edu/tlthe/vol1/iss9/19>
- Meyer, J. H. F., Land R. (2005) Threshold Concepts and Troublesome Knowledge (2): Epistemological Considerations and a Conceptual Framework for Teaching and Learning, *Higher Education*, Vol. 49, No. 3, pp. 373-388.
- Nero, C. I. (2004). Diva Traffic and Male Bonding in Film: Teaching, Opera, Learning Gender, Race, and Nation, *Camera Obscura*, Vol. 19, No. 2, pp. 47-73.
- Rasmussen, A. C. (2014). Toward an Intersectional Political Science Pedagogy, *Journal of Political Science Education*, Vol. 10, No. 1, pp. 102-116.
- Rauh, J. (2014). In-Class Experiments as an Accompaniment to In-Class Discussion, *Journal of Political Science Education*, Vol. 10, No. 4, pp. 453-470.
- Shaw, B. (2004). Hollywood Ethics: Developing Ethical Issues ... Hollywood Style, *Journal of Business Ethics*, Vol. 49, No. 2, pp. 167-177.
- Williams, P. D. (2014). What’s politics got to do with it? ‘Power’ as a ‘threshold’ concept for undergraduate business students, *Australian Journal of Adult Learning*, Vol. 54, No. 1, pp. 8-29.
- Williams, R. H. (1996). Religion as Political Resource: Culture or Ideology, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 35, No. 4, pp. 368-378.
- Yip, J., Raelin, J. A. (2011). Threshold concepts and modalities for teaching leadership practice, *Management Learning*, Vol. 43, No. 3, pp. 333-354.