

Reading the Western Canon from Elsewhere: Teaching Political Theory Through Writing

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 TEACHING POLITICAL THEORY IN CONTEXT

Teaching political theory is, in many ways, teaching how to think about the political world abstractly – about justice, equality, legitimacy, and power – but also how to locate those abstractions within lived experience. Yet this balance is not easily achieved, particularly in classrooms situated outside the Western contexts in which much of the political theory canon was written. For many students, especially those taking political theory as a general education or distribution requirement, canonical texts can appear distant and irrelevant, filled with assumptions that feel alien or exclusionary. This challenge is amplified in classrooms where students' lived experiences of political instability, occupation, or inequality stand in stark contrast to the hypothetical neutrality of thought experiments such as John Rawls's *Original Position* or Thomas Hobbes's *State of Nature*.

My experience teaching political theory in a liberal arts program in Palestine has continually returned me to this question of relevance and accessibility. Students come from varied disciplinary backgrounds – computer science, literature, biology, media studies – and encounter these texts for the first time in English, through frameworks often disconnected from their social and political realities. The difficulty, then, is not merely one of comprehension but of connection. How can students meaningfully engage with texts that were written for entirely different audiences and contexts? How can we teach the canon without re-inscribing its authority, while also avoiding the opposite pitfall of discarding it wholesale? In seeking answers to these questions, I have become increasingly convinced that the key lies not in what we read, but in how we read – and, crucially, in how we write about what we read.

1.2 THE PROBLEM OF THE CANON AND RELEVANCE

The political theory canon carries immense intellectual value, but it also encodes specific historical and cultural assumptions about personhood, reason, and political community. When introduced uncritically, these assumptions risk alienating students or reinforcing a sense of distance between “universal” ideas and their own political realities. Teaching these texts in non-Western settings thus requires a double movement: first, to help students understand what the text argues and how it argues it; and second, to enable them to interrogate the text’s underlying premises, audience, and exclusions.

This double movement parallels what scholars in Writing Studies and Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) describe as *rhetorical reading*: the practice of attending not just to a text’s claims, but to its rhetorical situation.¹ When students are trained to read rhetorically, they learn to see how arguments are shaped by audience, purpose, and context. In doing so, they also learn to position themselves in relation to those texts; to enter into dialogue with them rather than passively receiving them. This approach opens a path toward a more reflective, critical, and dialogic pedagogy, one that aligns closely with the values of the Bard College Institute for Writing and Thinking (IWT) and with engaged and liberatory traditions in education.²

1.3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This capstone grows from my attempt to translate these insights into the context of a political theory classroom. Specifically, it asks:

- 1 How can exploratory, low-stakes writing make normative political theory more palpable and relevant to students, especially those taking it as a distribution requirement?
- 2 How can students be supported in reading political theory texts with rhetorical awareness – paying attention to assumptions, audiences, and the “moves” a text makes?
- 3 How can Western political theory texts, originally written for Western audiences, be made relevant in non-Western contexts?
- 4 How can rhetorical writing practices help students critically examine and renegotiate the concepts and authority of the Western canon without discarding it?

1.4 STRUCTURE OF THE PROJECT

To address these questions, I draw on research and practices from Writing Across the Curriculum,³ Writing-to-Learn pedagogy, political theory education, critical pedagogy, as well as on my own classroom-based teacher research. The project introduces a *Commonplace Book* – a structured journal that integrates IWT-based exploratory writing with rhetorical reading exercises drawn from *Writing Analytically*⁴ – as a central pedagogical intervention. The *Commonplace Book* serves as both a site of reflection and an ongoing dialogue between students and the texts they encounter.

The project unfolds as follows: Section 2 reviews relevant literature in writing studies – especially Writing-to-Learn and Writing Across the Curriculum, and critical approaches to teaching political theory, especially in non-Western contexts. Section 3 outlines the teacher research methodology, data sources, and classroom context. Section 4 presents the pedagogical intervention, including the design, rationale, and representative exercises of the *Commonplace Book*. Section 5 examines findings and reflections based on student notebooks, observations, and survey data. Section 6 concludes by synthesizing the project’s central insights, revisiting the guiding research questions, and outlining the broader implications of this work for teaching political theory in contexts where students engage the Western canon from outside its assumed audience.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 JOURNALING AND WRITING-TO-LEARN

The pedagogical foundation of this project draws on early Writing-to-Learn scholarship, particularly Toby Fulwiler’s essay “The Personal Connection: Journal Writing Across the Curriculum.”⁵ Fulwiler positions journals as spaces where students can “write themselves into understanding”⁶ by exploring new ideas in low-stakes, expressive, and intellectually flexible ways. His central claim – that learning deepens when students write informally, frequently, and without fear of evaluation – helped shape later developments in Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) and Writing-to-Learn (WTL) pedagogy.

For Fulwiler, journal writing is not a peripheral activity but a genuine cognitive tool. He emphasizes that journals work best when they are *used*, not merely completed: when the writing becomes the basis for discussion, clarification, and continued thinking. In-class journal work, he observes, “stimulates student discussion, starts small group activity, clarifies hazy issues, reinforces learning experi-

ence, and stimulates student imagination.”⁷ This emphasis on writing as a mode of active engagement rather than retrospective reporting underpins the design of the *Commonplace Book* used in my course.

Fulwiler also stresses the versatility of journals, noting that teachers across disciplines have adapted them under various names: “‘logs,’...‘commonplace books,’...‘writers’ notebooks’.”⁸ He situates journals between private diaries and formal class notebooks:

While diaries record the private thought and experience of the writer, class notebooks record the public thought and presentation of the teacher. The journal is somewhere between the two. Like the diary, the journal is written in the first person. Like the class notebook, the journal may focus on academic subjects the writer wishes to examine.⁹

This hybridity – personal yet academic, expressive yet analytical – makes journals particularly suitable for political theory, a field where students must navigate both abstraction and lived experience.

The Bard College Institute for Writing and Thinking (IWT) builds upon precisely this point. Its central principle – “writing is not merely a record of completed thought, but also an exploratory process that deepens learning across disciplines” – echoes Fulwiler’s insistence that writing is a tool for thinking, not simply for communicating finished arguments. Like Fulwiler, IWT positions low-stakes writing as a vehicle for inquiry that slows students down, makes the movement of thought visible, and cultivates metacognitive awareness. IWT practices such as Focused Freewriting, paraphrase, and textual annotation share Fulwiler’s belief that students learn best when they can explore confusion, articulate tentative connections, and respond to texts on their own terms.

Fulwiler’s work also anticipates the importance of affect in learning, a dimension often overlooked in political theory classrooms. He notes that journals invite students to explore their own belief systems, values, and intellectual positions,¹⁰ which becomes especially relevant when students encounter abstract arguments that feel culturally distant or morally provocative. This affective entry point aligns with later developments in feminist and critical pedagogy that reject the dichotomy between reason and emotion. In my context, this has proven crucial: students frequently used journal entries to connect theoretical claims to their lived experiences as Palestinians, to articulate ethical discomfort, or to question the assumptions embedded in canonical texts. Such connections are not merely personal; they sharpen analytical engagement by providing students with a standpoint from which to interrogate the material.

My use of the *Commonplace Book* synthesizes these two traditions. Borrowing from Fulwiler, it affirms the value of blending the personal with the academic by asking students to trace their own questions, confusions, disagreements, and insights as they read. Borrowing from IWT and from *Writing Analytically*,¹¹ it incorporates structured rhetorical exercises – identifying pitch/complaint/moment, uncovering assumptions, paraphrasing a passage three ways – that teach students not only *what* a text says but *how* it says it. In doing so, the *Commonplace Book* becomes both a site of expressive meaning-making and a site of analytical skill-building.

Taken together, Fulwiler, IWT, and *Writing Analytically* offer a shared pedagogical vision: that writing is a mode of inquiry, that slowing down improves reading, that the personal and analytical can productively inform one another, and that students learn political theory more deeply when they can converse with the text in their own language. The *Commonplace Book* in this course attempts to operationalize that vision.

2.2 WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM AND DISCIPLINARY THINKING

Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) emerged as both a pedagogical philosophy and a programmatic initiative aimed at transforming classroom practice across disciplines. Its premise is that writing supports learning in all fields – not only in composition courses – and that instructors must recognize writing as integral to disciplinary thinking rather than as a detachable skill. As Susan H. McLeod explains, WAC encompasses not only Writing to Learn (WTL) but also a “rhetorical approach,” which teaches students to write within specific discourse communities, using forms of writing characteristic of those fields and understanding writing as “a form of social behavior in the academic community.”¹² From this perspective, disciplinary knowledge is not merely discovered but socially constructed, shaped through the written and oral conversations that define each field. Thus, writing becomes a situated practice inseparable from the epistemological habits of a discipline.

In political theory, adapting WAC principles requires attending to the distinctive nature of the field. Unlike empirically driven disciplines, political theory is grounded in normative argumentation, conceptual analysis, and philosophical reasoning. Students often struggle not simply with vocabulary but with the rhetorical conventions and argumentative structures of theoretical texts. WAC-inspired methods are particularly suited to addressing this challenge: they encourage students to read rhetorically, to identify how arguments are crafted, what assumptions they rely on, and what audiences they imagine. Rosenwasser and Stephen’s *Writing Analytically*¹³ provides a practical bridge here. Their strategies – such as analyzing a text’s “pitch,”

“complaint,” and “moment” – help students see theoretical writing as situated, strategic, and dialogic. Instead of treating canonical texts as untouchable authorities, students learn to view them as interventions in ongoing debates, opening space for their own critical engagement. Such rhetorical attention also stresses the constitutive nature of language, enabling students to see theory as world-making rather than merely descriptive.

My use of the *Commonplace Book* is shaped by this disciplinary framing. It functions as an academic journal that blends reflective, exploratory writing with structured analytical exercises. This hybrid form aligns with Fulwiler’s emphasis on writing as a tool for thinking and with the more explicitly rhetorical aims of WAC: helping students enter disciplinary conversations by practicing the moves that theorists make. The value of this structured approach is reinforced by Susan Peck MacDonald and Charles Cooper’s¹⁴ comparative study of journal types in a Chinese literature course. They found that students keeping academic, teacher-structured journals demonstrated greater conceptual understanding and produced stronger final essays than those keeping dialogic, open-ended journals – and that the latter group sometimes performed worse than students who did not journal at all. Their research warns that unstructured personal writing, though meaningful in other ways, may not itself foster the disciplinary learning expected in university settings. This insight supports my choice to design the *Commonplace Book* as a guided space, balancing openness with intellectual scaffolding.

Yet WAC’s focus on disciplinary discourse is not without its critics. As Bazerman, Little, and their collaborators note, the field has long wrestled with concerns about whether writing instruction empowers students or pressures them to assimilate into dominant academic norms. They summarize debates within composition about whether teaching academic discourse equips students with needed linguistic tools or “coerc[es] them into accepting the dominant discourse.”¹⁵ These concerns are particularly acute for non-mainstream students. Lisa Delpit’s essay “The Politics of Teaching Literate Discourse”¹⁶ captures this dilemma: teachers worry, she writes, that asking students to adopt academic discourse may “smack of racism or classism” by privileging a language that has historically marginalized them.¹⁷ Delpit ultimately argues that teaching dominant discourses can be liberatory when done transparently and respectfully, but her articulation of the dilemma underscores the stakes.

Other scholars echo these concerns. Victor Villanueva¹⁸ warns that disciplinary discourses risk assimilationism unless instructors actively value and translate the cultural voices students bring with them. McCrary¹⁹ argues that students from less privileged backgrounds often cannot access the “reservoirs of knowledge” assumed by academic texts and that academic discourse is frequently valorized

without sufficient justification. To counter marginalization, he advocates using culturally resonant texts to provide students with “an accessible discourse and hermeneutic” that challenges oppressive rhetorical norms.²⁰ LeCourt²¹ similarly worries that strict adherence to disciplinary conventions can silence students whose literacies fall outside dominant norms. She proposes a two-pronged approach: first, teaching students to critically examine disciplinary discourses to uncover their exclusions; and second, integrating expressive writing so that “the personal and disciplinary interact in a dialectical fashion” rather than in a hierarchy.²²

This critical conversation provides an important bridge to the next section of the literature review. For instructors teaching political theory in non-Western contexts or working with students whose lived experiences sit outside the assumptions of canonical texts, the tensions identified by Delpit, Villanueva, McCrary, and LeCourt become central. WAC encourages disciplinary apprenticeship, but critical pedagogy insists on interrogating the power relations embedded in disciplinary discourse. Bringing these frameworks into conversation is therefore crucial for designing pedagogical practices that both support students’ entry into political-theoretical reasoning and honor the situated knowledge they bring to the classroom.

2.3 TEACHING POLITICAL THEORY IN NON-WESTERN CONTEXTS

Teaching Western political theory in non-Western contexts raises pedagogical, epistemological, and political challenges that converge directly with writing-based approaches such as Writing-to-Learn. Scholars in Comparative Political Theory (CPT) have shown that the Western canon presents itself as universal while being grounded in particular historical experiences – experiences often shaped by colonialism, imperialism, and specific trajectories of modernity. As James Tully²³ argues, CPT requires more than the additive gesture of including “non-Western thinkers” alongside a dominant canon. Instead, it demands rethinking the epistemological assumptions through which political theory constructs its objects of inquiry and its claims to authority. Because the canonical texts presume social, political, and institutional realities not shared by all audiences, teaching them elsewhere, such as in Palestine, requires both translation and critique. The pedagogical task becomes dual: helping students understand the texts on their own terms while also examining the conditions under which those terms became authoritative.

This tension is felt acutely by students learning political theory in contexts marked by occupation, fragile institutions, or historical injustice. Texts that presuppose stable liberal polities or legitimate sovereign states may appear, as my own students regularly note, abstract or politically alien. Yet excluding these texts would forfeit an opportunity to interrogate the ideas that travel globally and shape

contemporary debates about justice, order, equality, and democracy. Writing-to-Learn practices help navigate this terrain by giving students tools to articulate their confusions, resistances, and interpretive hypotheses. The *Commonplace Book* becomes a site where students negotiate the relationship between their lived experience and the conceptual universe of canonical theory, fostering both comprehension and critical distance.

Critical pedagogy offers complementary guidance. William Sokoloff²⁴ argues that political theory classrooms should challenge the hierarchies of knowledge production and foreground the politics of canonicity itself. His account draws on a tradition that views education as entangled with power. Sokoloff draws attention to how disciplinary boundaries and methodological orthodoxies obscure the political work that disciplines perform. Quoting Timothy W. Luke, he notes that “American political scientists remain among the most recalcitrant disbelievers in the notion that disciplines serve as political structures interconnecting larger systems of political economy and the academic production of disciplinary knowledge.”²⁵ This blind spot, Sokoloff continues, is reproduced through methodological training that sidelines critical theory, and through insufficient attention to how the discipline itself is shaped by the politics. A more self-conscious critical turn, he argues, is therefore necessary.

Paulo Freire’s work provides a foundational account of what such a turn might entail. Freire insists that the educator “must begin with the educands’ ‘here’ and not with her or his own...”²⁶ For him, education is a “co-intentional” process in which teachers and students inquire together into their social conditions: “The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students.”²⁷ Freire repeatedly brings attention to the politics of language itself: “problems of language always involve ideological questions and, along with them, questions of power.”²⁸ This resonates strongly in contexts where English is not the first language and where political discourse is shaped by asymmetries of power, occupation, or international governance.

bell hooks similarly argues that “to educate as the practice of freedom” requires attending to students’ lived realities and engaging their emotions and experiences as legitimate sources of knowledge.²⁹ Her insistence on “engaged pedagogy” challenges the hierarchy between theory and experience – a hierarchy already unsettled in Writing-to-Learn approaches, which treat expressive, personal, and exploratory writing as integral to intellectual development.

Taken together, these insights position Writing-to-Learn as more than a cognitive scaffold: it can also function as a critical and democratizing practice. Informal writing allows students to question textual authority privately before entering public debate; it makes room for irritation, resistance, confusion, and critique. It allows

students to connect canonical ideas to conditions of coloniality, class, gender, and violence that those texts may obscure. And it invites them to see themselves not as passive recipients of a tradition but as participants in its reinterpretation.

In this way, teaching political theory in non-Western contexts requires a deliberate balancing act. WAC and Writing-to-Learn emphasize disciplinary apprenticeship – learning to read and write like political theorists – while critical pedagogy emphasizes interrogating the power relations embedded in the discipline itself. Combining these approaches allows students both to enter the field’s conversations and to question the terms under which those conversations have historically excluded or marginalized experiences like their own. Writing becomes a medium through which students develop intellectual agency: they learn to understand theory, to critique its universalizing claims, and to articulate how political thought might look different when read from “the margins” rather than from the contexts that produced the canon.

2.4 BRIDGING THE TWO STRANDS

The two strands discussed in the previous sections – Writing-to-Learn/WAC approaches and pedagogical work on teaching political theory in non-Western contexts – converge around a shared understanding of writing as a mode of inquiry. Both bodies of literature view writing not simply as a tool for demonstrating knowledge but as a process through which understanding is formed, tested, and revised.

Taken together, these strands inspire a pedagogical stance that can be described as “decolonizing without discarding.” Writing does not require instructors to abandon the canon, but it opens a space in which students can examine the canon’s limits, question its claims to universality, and reinterpret its arguments in relation to their own contexts. The goal is not to replace theory with experience, or vice versa, but to create opportunities for students to engage the two in conversation.

This bridging of WTL/WAC approaches with critical pedagogical perspectives advances both disciplinary learning and critical reflexivity. Students develop the skills needed to read political theory rhetorically and analytically, while also learning to question the assumptions that structure the field. As Fulwiler notes, journal writing helps students “write their way into knowledge”; in settings like the Palestinian classroom, it can also help students reshape inherited ideas and articulate their own positions within or against established theoretical traditions.

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 RESEARCH DESIGN AND ORIENTATION

This study follows a practitioner-research approach, examining how structured writing practices – especially the use of a *Commonplace Book* – shaped students' engagement with political theory in a Palestinian classroom. The methodology is qualitative and exploratory. It relies on reflective observation and interpretive reading of student work rather than formal coding procedures or attempts at generalization. The goal is to understand how these pedagogical practices operated for this particular group of students, and to situate those insights within broader conversations in political theory pedagogy, Writing-to-Learn, and critical pedagogy.

This orientation aligns with work in Writing Studies³⁰ and with reflective practitioner traditions influenced by Freire and hooks. In these models, teaching and research are mutually informing; classroom materials are understood as situated and relational rather than neutral data extracted from controlled conditions.

3.2 CONTEXT: COURSE, STUDENTS, AND LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

The research took place in Contemporary Political Theory, a required course in the STEP (Social Theory, Economy, and Policy) program at Al-Quds Bard College for Arts and Sciences (AQB) in Abu Dis, Palestine. Most students commute to campus from cities across the West Bank, passing through checkpoints and taking winding roads. The campus itself sits directly beside the West Bank wall, which brings regular military incursions onto campus. Together, these conditions mean that classes often face significant disruptions.

The course enrolled students from a range of majors – including Molecular Genetics, Digital Communications and Media Studies, and Human Rights – not only STEP students. As a liberal arts college, AQB requires students to take a certain number of distribution courses: classes outside their major designed to expose them to different ways of thinking, methods, and forms of knowledge. As a result, students varied widely in their preparation, motivation, familiarity with abstract argumentation, and experience with academic writing.

The course was taught primarily in person, though several sessions shifted to Zoom because of checkpoint delays or security conditions. These interruptions occasionally influenced students' participation and the way they completed writing tasks.

Most students had previously encountered informal writing practices in Core Curriculum courses (especially Language & Thinking and IWT-derived activities),

but they did not view these as transferable methods. Few had experience with rhetorical reading, systematic journaling, or exercises aimed at tracing assumptions, binaries, or argumentative structures.

The curriculum combined textbook chapters with philosophical texts spanning utilitarianism, liberalism, socialism, libertarianism, feminism, communitarianism, and critical race theory. Students also completed two short papers – each based on their participation in classroom simulations.* The *Commonplace Book* functioned as the central tool linking these components.

* Hobbes's and Locke's *State of Nature*, Trolley Problem, Original Position

3.3 DATA SOURCES

3.3.1 Student Writing (*Commonplace Books*, *In-class Writing*, and *Final Papers*)

Students submitted their *Commonplace Books* for two to three check-ins, producing a substantial record of Focused Freewrites, paraphrases, tracing binaries and assumptions, reflections connecting theory to local experience, etc. Entries differed widely in length and detail. Some students wrote only the required exercises; others used their notebooks for their own notes on readings and classes. All excerpts used in this study are anonymized or paraphrased. Writing was not graded for correctness or argument quality.

3.3.2 Instructor Notes and Observations

Throughout the semester, I kept informal written notes on:

- classroom dynamics, participation, and difficulties
- how students took up or resisted writing exercises
- spontaneous transfer (students using strategies unprompted)
- disruptions caused by lateness, absences, or sudden Zoom transitions
- moments when students linked theory to Palestinian political realities

These notes served as a reflective lens for interpreting patterns in student notebooks and papers.

3.3.3 Anonymous Post-Course Survey

A twenty-one-item survey offered qualitative and limited quantitative insight into student perceptions of:

- the usefulness of writing exercises
- which tasks supported their learning
- perceived gains in reading, writing, and critical thinking
- transfer to other classes
- challenges (including AI, discomfort with collaboration, or difficulty with specific genres)

These responses contextualized, but did not determine, the interpretation of writing samples.

3.4 ANALYTIC APPROACH

Analysis involved several rounds of interpretive reading of student notebooks, final papers, survey responses, and my own observational notes. Rather than using a coding scheme, I was guided by broad questions about engagement, development, and the interaction between writing and learning:

- How did students use writing to interpret and interrogate political theory texts?
- What patterns emerged across entries in terms of depth, clarity, rhetorical awareness, or critical orientation?
- How did repeated exercises (e.g., *Pitch*, *Complaint*, *Moment*, *Uncovering Assumptions*) evolve over time?
- What tensions emerged between students' perceived learning and the patterns visible in their notebooks?
- How did students use writing to connect canonical theory to the Palestinian context?

This approach follows qualitative traditions grounded in close reading, pattern recognition, and attention to divergence or anomaly. Because the *Commonplace Book* was designed as a learning tool rather than a data-collection instrument, entries are treated as evidence of students' thinking-in-process, not as polished demonstrations of mastery.

3.5 POSITIONALITY AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

As both instructor and researcher, I had direct access to student work and classroom interactions, but I also had a responsibility to separate pedagogical guidance from assessment or analysis. Student work was anonymized in all research uses; writing quality did not affect grades, which were based only on completion and engagement.

4 PEDAGOGICAL INTERVENTION IN PRACTICE

4.1 OVERVIEW OF THE INTERVENTION

The pedagogical intervention at the center of this study was a semester-long use of a structured *Commonplace Book* designed to support students' reading, writing, and reasoning in political theory. Whereas the methodology section outlined the broader rationale, data sources, and interpretive stance of the project, this section turns to how the intervention unfolded in practice: the kinds of writing students completed, how exercises were sequenced, and what forms of engagement emerged over the semester.

The *Commonplace Book* functioned as the course's central learning tool. Students wrote frequently – in short bursts during class, at greater length between sessions, and in response to a mix of analytical and reflective prompts. Rather than serving as an occasional supplement, the notebook became the primary site in which students processed readings, experimented with interpretive strategies, and tested emerging ideas before bringing them into discussion. In this sense, the intervention was not a single activity or assignment but an ongoing practice that accumulated through repetition, variation, and gradual increases in complexity.

Three aims guided its design:

First, the exercises were meant to slow down reading by foregrounding close attention, paraphrase, and rhetorical analysis. Political theory often appears dense or abstract to students encountering it for the first time, and exercises such as *Pitch*, *Complaint*, *Moment* or *Tracking Binaries* offered accessible entry points into argumentative structure.

Second, the *Commonplace Book* created space for reflective and exploratory writing, giving students a low-stakes way to articulate confusions, connections, and emerging questions.

Third, it aimed to cultivate a classroom culture in which writing served as a mode of thinking, not a polished performance. Students were encouraged to treat writing as a tool to clarify ideas, surface assumptions, and bring texts into conversation with their own social and political contexts.

These aims took shape within the practical realities of the semester. Although the course was primarily in person, several sessions moved to Zoom due to security-related delays or disruptions. Attendance was uneven, and the emotional and logistical pressure of the political situation affected students' ability to maintain a consistent academic rhythm. The *Commonplace Book* provided continuity across

these disruptions: it offered an adaptable structure that could be sustained regardless of modality and gave students a stable intellectual routine when circumstances were unpredictable.

The following sections outline the major types of exercises, how they were implemented, and the scaffolding that supported students' development. Together, they illustrate how the *Commonplace Book* enabled students to approach political theory not as a set of predetermined conclusions, but as something they could analyze, question, and reinterpret through writing.

4.2 EXERCISE TYPES AND IMPLEMENTATION

In this section, I outline the main types of writing exercises that structured the *Commonplace Book* over the semester. While the intervention ultimately unfolded in a cumulative, developmental sequence, the most useful way to understand the pedagogical design is through the functions the exercises served in students' learning. The exercises themselves draw from three primary sources: established pedagogical practices developed by the Institute for Writing and Thinking (IWT), selected tools from *Writing Analytically*, and several activities I designed or adapted for the specific needs of this context. Many exercises were used in their familiar forms (such as Freewriting or paraphrase-based work), while others were modified to accommodate the setting of an EFL classroom engaging with dense theoretical material. When an exercise follows a recognizable IWT practice or a *Writing Analytically* framework, I note this explicitly; all remaining activities should be understood as adaptations or original designs developed as part of this pedagogical intervention.

Accordingly, the exercises are grouped into three broad categories: analytical, reflective/exploratory, and collaborative/interactive, which together offered multiple entry points into political theory. Analytical exercises encouraged students to slow down their reading, identify key argumentative moves, and experiment with rhetorical tools such as paraphrase, pitch/complaint/moment analysis, and the identification of underlying binaries. Reflective and exploratory exercises made space for students to connect course texts with personal, social, and contextual understandings, often through Freewriting, believing/doubting prompts, or scenario redesign. Collaborative and interactive exercises then extended these practices into shared spaces, using in-class writing as the foundation for dialogue, peer engagement, and collective meaning-making. Using this functional typology to present the exercises shows the range of thinking students did and how the *Commonplace Book* helped support different kinds of thinking over the semester.

4.2.1 Analytical Exercises

Pitch-Complaint-Moment Analysis

Writing Analytically

Students identified the “pitch” and “complaint” in short argumentative texts, beginning with Judith Jarvis Thomson and later applying the same tool to Robert Nozick. After discussing Thomson’s “moment” collectively in class, students completed a concise written identification of the two components at home. With Nozick’s text, they applied the same process independently, identifying all three components on their own. This exercise helped them distill an argument’s motivating problem and its proposed solution without requiring them to evaluate or interpret it.

Uncovering Assumptions

Adapted from *Writing Analytically*

Using a structured set of prompts based on *Writing Analytically*’s assumptions framework, the exercise was expanded by asking students not only to identify the unstated beliefs in passages from texts such as Jean Hampton’s “The Problem of Political Authority” and Ursula K. Le Guin’s “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas,” but also to consider whom these assumptions served and how the text would change if they were altered. The task encouraged students to slow down their reading and notice the ideas underlying statements that might at first seem neutral.

Tracking and Reformulating Binaries

Adapted from *Writing Analytically*

Students practiced identifying the binary oppositions structuring an argument – first in accessible texts such as “Harrison Bergeron” and later in more complex theoretical writing such as Will Kymlicka’s chapter on feminism. They described how each binary functioned rhetorically: whether it simplified, clarified, constrained, or destabilized the argument. The exercise introduced habits of noticing conceptual tensions and opened space for students to consider what happens when a binary is reframed, collapsed, or complicated.

Using One Theory as a Lens on Another

Adapted from *Writing Analytically*

Students applied a theoretical framework to reinterpret a second text or scenario, such as reading “Harrison Bergeron” through Ronald Dworkin’s Equality of Resources. The assignment required them to identify how the lens highlighted or obscured certain features of the case and to articulate the interpretive gains and limitations. This exercise laid conceptual groundwork for the final paper, though here it was tightly bound and focused on a single comparison.

Paraphrase x3
Adapted from *Writing Analytically*

Students selected a passage from theorists such as Will Kymlicka or Susan Moller Okin and, building on the original exercise, produced three types of paraphrases: literal, colloquial, and interpretive. The task asked them to focus on tone, word choice, and conceptual density, paying attention to different registers, contexts of expression, and the range of meanings that word choice can create. A brief reflective note asked them to explain what the act of paraphrasing revealed about the original passage.

*Textual Annotation and
Intertextual Commentary*
Original Exercise

For paired passages from Charles Mills and Madison Powers, students copied passages into their *Commonplace Books*, tagged them with conceptual labels, and produced short interpretive commentaries on each. They then wrote a synthesizing paragraph articulating how the texts complicated or enriched one another. This exercise reinforced close reading while modeling the analytic practice of placing texts in conversation.

4.2.2 *Reflective and Exploratory Exercises*

Focused Freewriting
IWT Practice

Early in the semester, students composed timed Freewrites on selected passages from John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, responding to prompts that asked them to paraphrase, question, and connect ideas without concern for structure. Similar Freewrites appeared throughout the course, including in-class writing on property, ownership, and colonial narratives. These exercises lowered the affective barrier to engaging with dense theory and cultivated fluency in articulating emerging ideas.

Believing and Doubting
IWT Practice

Working with Adam Swift's chapter on Rawls, students wrote a charitable reconstruction of Rawls's argument (the believing phase) followed by a critical interrogation of its assumptions and limits (the doubting phase). The exercise made explicit the habit of entering and exiting theoretical frameworks. It also provided a structured way to practice intellectual empathy and intellectual critique.

Scenario Redesign
Original Exercise

Assignments such as rewriting Vic Finkelstein's "Village" or modifying the conditions of Omelas in Ursula K. Le Guin's "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" asked students to redesign the normative and material structures of a scenario. Each redesign required them to articulate what principles guided their choices and how those principles diverged from or challenged those in the original. These exercises fostered speculative thinking and underscored the constructed nature of political concepts.

Personal and Political Reflection

Original Exercise

Several short writing prompts invited students to connect theoretical concepts to everyday contexts – whether through contemporary examples of inequality, personal observations, or questions arising from their own experiences. These reflections were not evaluated for content but served to anchor theoretical ideas in lived contexts and to make students’ interpretive positions visible to themselves.

4.2.3 Collaborative and Interactive Exercises

Pair and Small-Group Discussions Following Writing

IWT Practice

Many class sessions followed the IWT sequence of writing-to-thinking-to-speaking: students produced a short piece of writing, shared it with a partner or small group, and only then entered whole-class discussion. These conversations helped students articulate preliminary ideas, test interpretations, and notice divergences in understanding before engaging the full group.

Whole-Class Assumption-Mapping Adapted from *Writing Analytically*

In early sessions, students collectively identified the assumptions structuring Jean Hampton’s introductory chapter on political authority. Working as a group, they surfaced presuppositions about the reader, the state, and the nature of political obligation. This activity established assumption-analysis as a shared classroom norm and modeled the interpretive work that later homework assignments required.

Applying Theories to Case Studies

Original Exercise

Students worked in small groups to apply Nozick’s entitlement theory to concrete distributive scenarios. Groups outlined whether Nozick would consider each situation just, and articulated why. This activity pushed students to operationalize abstract principles and made visible the friction between ideal theory and real-world complexity.

Gallery Walk IWT-Informed Classroom Practice

After producing an individual written analysis of a binary in Kymlicka’s feminism chapter, students displayed their interpretations in a gallery walk. Peers responded with comments, questions, and alternative readings, followed by a synthesizing class discussion and a short reflective write-up completed at home. The activity encouraged comparative reading and exposed students to a range of interpretive possibilities.

<i>Jigsaw Activity</i> Common Collaborative Method	Students were divided into expert groups to master different components of Marxist and analytical Marxist thought, then reorganized into mixed groups where each student taught their component to peers. Groups produced shared concept maps to visualize how their components connected. The structure ensured distributed expertise and emphasized collective knowledge construction.
<i>Collective Redesign of a Parable</i> Original Exercise	In class, groups collaboratively redesigned Finkelstein's satirical "Village" to make it accessible to both wheelchair users and able-bodied residents. Each group produced concrete proposals regarding buildings, labor, transportation, and governance, which they then presented to the class. Students later wrote individual reflections analyzing what the redesign revealed about structural barriers and assumptions about disability.

4.3 SEQUENCING AND SCAFFOLDING

Although the preceding section groups exercises by their pedagogical function, the actual implementation of the *Commonplace Book* followed a carefully structured cognitive progression. Across the semester, students moved from foundational practices of comprehension and clarification toward increasingly complex forms of rhetorical analysis, synthesis, and contextual application. Early exercises such as *Paraphrase* x3 and Focused Freewriting on key passages established habits of close attention and textual grounding. Once students had developed confidence in understanding what a text says, subsequent tasks introduced analytical lenses – such as pitch/complaint/moment analysis and the identification of binaries – that opened up questions of how a text argues and what assumptions shape that argument. Only after these skills were in place did students take up more demanding forms of synthesis and application, including intertextual commentary, lens-based rewriting, and exercises that situated canonical arguments within local or contemporary contexts. In summary: students first focused on understanding and clarifying texts, then moved on to analyzing structure and argument, and finally engaged in generating new interpretations and applications. This section illustrates how the *Commonplace Book* operated not as a series of disconnected exercises, but as a thoughtfully scaffolded sequence of intellectual practices.

A key aspect of this sequence was how earlier, lower-stakes exercises set the stage for the more complex analytical work that followed. Freewriting was introduced first because it reduced students' anxiety, let them write without worrying about mistakes, and helped them gain fluency with unfamiliar theoretical material. Paraphrasing came next, before any rhetorical analysis, since students needed a solid understanding of the text before examining its argumentative structure. Tracking binaries was scheduled before synthetic exercises because it encouraged students to map a text's conceptual framework, a skill that later supported more complex tasks, such as using one reading as a lens to interpret another.

Repetition functioned as a central scaffold throughout the semester. The class regularly returned to familiar writing moves – particularly Freewriting, paraphrasing, and belief/doubt work – so that students could develop a sense of continuity and cumulative skill-building. This rhythm of repetition helped make new analytical activities feel less intimidating, as students could recognize how each new task extended and deepened skills they had already begun to practice.

Finally, the sequencing was responsive to the particular conditions of the semester. Several unplanned shifts to Zoom, prompted by the security situation, required adjustments to pacing and structure. At times this meant extending work on a single text across multiple sessions, combining two related writing activities

into one, or dedicating additional in-class time to modeling an analytical exercise that had originally been planned as homework. These adaptations reinforced the overall scaffolding logic: when external disruptions occurred, the emphasis shifted toward providing students with stability, clarity, and ensuring that they felt well-equipped before moving forward.

Together, these choices created a purposeful but flexible sequence that helped students develop progressively more sophisticated intellectual skills.

4.4 STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AND RESPONSE

Student engagement with the *Commonplace Book* developed in dynamic and sometimes unexpected ways throughout the semester. An analysis of notebook entries, alongside informal observations and anonymous survey data, reveals a set of recurring patterns: increasingly sophisticated analytical work, uneven but meaningful reflective writing, and mixed responses to collaborative activities – largely shaped by the realities of inconsistent attendance under ongoing security conditions.

A clear progression emerged in the analytical exercises, which produced the most substantial and sustained engagement across the semester. Even when students did not fully follow each procedural step, they frequently generated sharp analytical insights. For instance, in her analysis of Le Guin's *Omelas*, Student 1 distilled the core assumption of the society: "this assumption suggests that social prosperity can only be fulfilled at the cost of some sort of suffering." Although she did not restate the assumption in her own words as instructed, her responses to the remaining questions, such as describing the belief as "romanticiz[ing] injustice," demonstrated conceptual depth and an ability to situate the story within broader ethical debates.

This pattern – procedural looseness paired with conceptual sharpness – was visible across multiple exercises. In the *Pitch, Complaint, Moment* task, first practiced on Thomson and later repeated for homework on Nozick, several students showed noticeable improvement. For example, Student 5, who offered tentative and summary-like statements in the Thomson exercise, later produced a precise identification of Nozick's pitch: "Nozick argues that justice lies in historical processes and individual rights." The parallel development across students suggests that repeated exposure, even when spaced over disrupted weeks, helped them internalize rhetorical moves and apply them with greater confidence.

Several students made interpretive leaps that tied theoretical material to their own political and social contexts. Student 2, for instance, read Nozick "with fresh eyes," describing his complaint as rooted in the historical reality that "all sources of material wealth come from unlawful actions... we should approach disparities

with a historic lens.” This reading positions Nozick less as a libertarian critic of redistribution and more as someone centrally concerned with rectifying historical injustice – a perspective shaped by contemporary Palestinian experiences of land dispossession. Such moments illustrate how the exercises enabled students to bring their own interpretive frameworks into conversation with canonical texts, without requiring an explicit “personal reflection” prompt.

The *Uncovering Assumptions* exercise similarly displayed the tension between following the steps carefully and engaging deeply with the ideas. When analyzing Le Guin’s authorial assumptions, Student 5 selected the line “Happiness is based on a just discrimination of what is necessary...” and concluded that it “reflects enlightenment ideals... [but] the human experience... can’t be dictated through some sort of logical formula.” Others used the exercise to challenge the very feasibility of moral theories: Student 6 argued that utilitarian happiness in Omelas is psychologically implausible because “our behavioral biology” makes conflict and violence inevitable. These examples indicate that assumption analysis, both in Hampton’s political theory and in literary texts, helped students question the universalism implicit in many theoretical claims.

Reflective and exploratory writing elicited a different, though still meaningful, pattern of engagement. Entries were more uneven in length and depth but frequently linked theory to contemporary or local political conditions. Early in the semester, Student 3 articulated a core challenge of normative theory: while useful for “challeng[ing] injustice,” it risks “ignor[ing] historical realities.” Similarly, Student 6 argued that normative theorizing should be led by “minorities and historically marginalized groups” – a conclusion that anticipates later class debates about feminist, postcolonial, and critical race critiques of the canon. These early reflections suggest that students were already predisposed to bring critical and political sensibilities to theoretical questions, and the writing exercises gave them language to articulate that instinct.

The speculative and redesign exercises generated especially original thinking. In rewriting Finkelstein’s “Village,” Student 8 emphasized the need to eliminate “the significance of body ability” and “the significance of gaze.” In a modified Omelas scenario, he reasoned that the child’s suffering would appear “more justifiable... because suffering is necessary for people’s survival.” These responses show students experimenting with the moral structure of thought experiments, sometimes complicating the original author’s intent, sometimes revealing the normative commitments that shape their own reasoning.

Collaborative writing produced the least consistently positive responses. Attendance disruptions, internet instability, and a general reluctance to speak in large Zoom groups all interfered with the intended flow of IWT-style write-to-talk activ-

ities. Several students later reported that group activities felt “rushed” or “stressful.” Still, the collaborative work that did occur had notable impact. The whole-class assumption-mapping of Jean Hampton’s introduction proved foundational: students quickly noticed that her implicit reader was “an average American or European college student,” not someone living under military occupation or with fragmented political authority. One student observed that while she may not personally “need” a nation-state, she “both needs and wants it” because the world’s political order presupposes it. These discussions sharpened students’ awareness that assumptions are historically and socially situated, and that the canonical texts they read were not written with them, or their political realities, in mind.

Students’ independent transfer of analytical tools was among the most striking patterns. By mid-semester, students began spontaneously using *Pitch*, *Complaint*, *Moment* and *Tracking Binaries* during class discussions without any prompting. This habit extended beyond the course: the end-of-semester survey revealed that about half the class had begun applying these tools elsewhere, such as interpreting the Oslo Accords through theoretical lenses or identifying binaries in news commentary. One student reported automatically tracing binaries “whenever I read now,” suggesting that certain habits of rhetorical reading had taken root beyond the confines of the course.

Despite this broadly positive trajectory, the notebooks also reveal unevenness. Some students produced short or incomplete entries, particularly early on or during weeks of political disruption. Others misinterpreted tasks or used AI to complete them, as seen when Student 7 redefined the pitch as “believing” and the complaint as “doubting” – a reinterpretation that appeared to come from an AI hallucination rather than misunderstanding of classroom instruction. These examples show how challenging it was for students to maintain consistent engagement under the semester’s conditions.

Taken together, the notebook entries, survey responses, and classroom observations show that structured writing significantly transformed how students engaged with political theory. Through repeated cycles of paraphrasing, slow reading, assumption-mining, and rhetorical analysis, students learned to dwell in difficult texts rather than rush to extract a gist. They interrogated the conceptual scaffolding of canonical arguments, questioned their universality, and increasingly used theoretical vocabulary to articulate their own political insights. Reflective entries, both assigned and spontaneous, demonstrated that students were able to connect abstract theory to the Palestinian context, their lived reality, and even personal experiences. Collaborative exercises, though challenged by external circumstances, still produced moments of genuine intellectual exchange.

Most importantly, the *Commonplace Book* became not just a record of assignments but a site where students practiced inhabiting theoretical arguments, testing them, resisting them, and placing them in dialogue with their own questions and contexts. Even when their writing was brief or uneven, students consistently demonstrated the cognitive moves emphasized in the course: noticing, questioning, paraphrasing, comparing, reframing, and contextualizing. These emerging habits of rhetorical reading and reflective writing formed the foundation for the broader pedagogical outcomes discussed in the following section.

4.5 INTEGRATION WITH PEDAGOGICAL GOALS

The *Commonplace Book* served as the central mechanism through which the course's pedagogical aims were enacted, refined, and ultimately made visible in students' work. Many of these aims were shaped by the approach of Rosenwasser and Stephen in *Writing Analytically*, particularly their emphasis on cultivating readers who are conversant with texts rather than readers who skim for the gist. Their premise – that active, exploratory writing is essential for deep reading – guided both the design of exercises and the classroom culture that developed around them.

Across the semester, I sought to help students read political theory not only for what it says but for how it says it: to attend to audience, purpose, framing, rhetorical devices, and the assumptions embedded within authors' claims. This rhetorical stance, central to *Writing Analytically*, proved especially valuable in a context where canonical texts often presuppose political conditions radically different from those of my students. By slowing down through paraphrase, assumption analysis, and attention to binaries, students learned that texts do not merely describe political realities but construct them – and that examining what kinds of worlds particular arguments imagine, authorize, or foreclose is the essential part of critical reading.

The *Commonplace Book* also served as a space for reflective, exploratory, and dialogic writing. Low-stakes entries encouraged students to engage with ideas before evaluating them, to articulate confusions and tentative thoughts, and to bring texts into conversation with their own experiences. Many students' entries revealed that, over time, they began using theoretical vocabulary not as a set of definitions to memorize, but as tools for thinking. They became more comfortable posing questions, identifying tensions, and tracing the implicit structures of arguments.

One of the central goals of the course was to bridge the gap between abstract political theory and students' lived realities as Palestinians – an aim that emerged organically through their writing. Some of the most striking moments were when students used theoretical frameworks to examine concrete aspects of their social and political environment: Nozick's historical entitlement theory became a lens

to analyze land expropriation; Locke's account of property prompted discussions about settler colonial logics; and Dworkin, Mills, and Powers helped students articulate structural dimensions of injustice experienced daily. These connections arose not because the course asked for "applications," but because the exercises invited students to inhabit arguments long enough to see how those arguments interacted with their own contexts.

In this regard, one of the biggest pedagogical successes was witnessing students take ownership of the analytical tools themselves. By mid-semester, they spontaneously used them in class discussions without prompting, and several students later reported using these methods in courses across the curriculum. This transfer suggests that the exercises were not merely techniques for this course, but frameworks students internalized as part of their intellectual toolkit.

Another success was the way students challenged the assumptions of the canon from their situated perspectives. Many recognized colonial or exclusionary premises in canonical texts with a clarity that students in more "typical" political theory classrooms often do not. They detected inconsistencies, power asymmetries, and implicit cultural narratives quickly, and their skepticism toward the neutrality of liberalism or the universality of social contract theory enriched our discussions. Importantly, these challenges were thoughtful rather than dismissive – they used the tools of rhetorical and analytical reading to question rather than to reject.

There were also several pedagogical surprises. I was deeply pleased when students used theoretical frameworks in their final papers to analyze concrete cases – for example, applying Nozick and Cohen to a land dispute in Hebron, or using Marxist concepts to articulate the experience of alienation under occupation. Another memorable moment occurred when students discussed Locke's conception of property. They connected his dismissal of Indigenous land use to Palestinian histories, offering detailed explanations of pre-1948 forms of usufruct and drawing parallels between Locke's logic and contemporary systems of dispossession. These were moments in which the canonical texts became not just objects of critique but catalysts for deeper understanding of their own political reality.

At the same time, the semester illuminated areas I would revise or expand in the future. Because many disruptions were beyond our control, students sometimes missed opportunities to revisit and deepen skills across multiple exercises. If circumstances allowed, I would reduce the total number of texts and instead create more opportunities to apply multiple exercises to the same reading. I would also incorporate more metacognitive writing earlier in the semester in the form of brief prompts inviting students to reflect on how the exercises were helping them read or think, rather than relying primarily on the final survey for that insight. More fre-

quent but lighter forms of notebook review or peer-review might also help students stay accountable without overwhelming them.

The use of AI also surfaced in unexpected ways. Although most students used it sparingly, a few entries clearly bore its traces. Even when hand-written assignments are required, AI can still shape phrasing or structure. The experience convinced me that while it is necessary to address expectations and boundaries around AI explicitly, it is equally important to cultivate assignments that resist automation by requiring genuine engagement with textual detail and students' own interpretive work – something *Writing Analytically*-style exercises are well suited to do.

Finally, teaching political theory to Palestinian students revealed dynamics that shaped the classroom's intellectual texture. Students often recognized colonial assumptions and structural inequalities embedded in canonical works with particular acuity. They responded strongly to perceived inconsistencies or injustices in arguments and showed willingness to interrogate claims that students elsewhere sometimes take for granted. While some expressed skepticism about the feasibility of certain normative theories, they also expressed a persistent sense that it *does* make sense to talk about justice – an insight that itself became a central theme of the course.

Overall, the *Commonplace Book* and related writing practices supported the pedagogical goals in ways both intended and emergent: slowing reading, sharpening rhetorical awareness, cultivating habits of questioning, and creating openings for students to situate political theory within their lived realities. The exercises invited a kind of intellectual presence that was often difficult to achieve on Zoom or under unpredictable political conditions, and they helped build a classroom culture where students learned not only to consume arguments but to converse with them, challenge them, and make them their own.

5 FINDINGS AND REFLECTIONS

Across the semester, students' engagement with the *Commonplace Book* and the accompanying rhetorical and analytical exercises revealed several patterns of learning, struggle, and growth. Taken together, the notebooks, classroom observations, and end-of-semester survey form a coherent picture of how students encountered political theory when writing became the central mode of reading and thinking.

One of the clearest patterns was a gradual deepening of engagement. Early entries were often short, tentative, or inconsistent, and several students admitted through their writing, or through the chaos of lost pages and missing notebooks, that they were still figuring out how seriously to take the work. After the first note-

book check-in, however, the tone changed: entries became longer, more sustained, and more deliberate. Students who had initially resisted writing by hand or worried about legibility eventually began to write with greater ease. The notebooks show that slowing down through writing encouraged fuller responses and more careful reading; for example, paraphrases became more precise over time, and the later instances of the *Pitch*, *Complaint*, *Moment* exercise show clearer identification of argumentative moves than the early ones.

Students engaged most confidently with exercises that offered a clear lens into the text – especially *Tracing Binaries*, *Uncovering Assumptions*, and *Applying a Theory as a Lens*. The notebooks show students repeatedly returning to these tools on their own initiative, sometimes even using them in class discussions before being asked. Several students spontaneously applied the exercises in other courses; for instance, one applied neoliberalism as a lens to analyze the Oslo Accords in a political economy class, and another used focused freewriting on George Corm’s work. The survey corroborates this preference: analytical exercises were ranked as the most helpful, whereas collaborative or movement-based activities (gallery walk, jigsaw) were consistently rated the least effective.

The notebooks also show that students brought their own political and social realities into conversation with canonical texts in thoughtful ways. In Freewrites responding to the prompt about why normative theory matters, students reflected on the possibility of justice under occupation and the meaning of “how things should be” when political structures are outside one’s control. In exercises on Locke, multiple students noticed what one described as his “settler tendencies,” pointing out how his conception of property parallels arguments used to justify land seizure in Palestine. Similarly, the assumptions exercise on Hampton’s chapter generated sophisticated reflections about audience and context: students recognized that Hampton writes for readers who take stable political authority for granted – an assumption they do not share. Their comments showed a nuanced awareness of how one’s political environment shapes what counts as “normal.”

Patterns of difficulty also appeared. Some students struggled with the requirement to restate assumptions or to ground claims in textual evidence, especially early in the semester. Others found it difficult to maintain notebook consistency because of checkpoint delays, absences, or the general instability of the term. A small number used AI sporadically, often detectable in moments when the writing suddenly lost specificity or contradicted the text. Yet even those students tended to revert to more authentic writing as the course progressed and as they learned that close textual work cannot be successfully outsourced. A discrepancy emerged between the strength of students’ self-assessed growth in the survey and the more uneven development visible in the notebooks: while most students described the

exercises as extremely helpful, their actual written engagement varied. This tension does not undermine the value of the exercises but highlights the difference between perceived difficulty, perceived learning, and demonstrated practice.

Peer interaction played a less central role in students' learning than anticipated. While whole-class discussions after writing were often productive, students rated collaborative tasks poorly. In practice, writing first and talking second created a safer space for them to test ideas, but the social dynamics of group activities, perhaps intensified by the small cohort and the disruptions of travel delays, made those formats less effective. The notebooks suggest that students' best insights emerged in private writing or full-group discussion, not in small-group collaboration.

Finally, the *Commonplace Book* enabled a kind of intellectual independence that became visible in later assignments, including final papers. Students applied theories by Nozick, Cohen, and Marx to analyze concrete cases from Palestinian life: one wrote about distributive justice in Hebron; another on alienation under occupation. These connections did not appear automatically but emerged from the slow, cumulative work of writing with and alongside the texts throughout the semester.

6 CONCLUSION

This project set out to examine what happens when writing-to-learn practices are deliberately integrated into the teaching of normative political theory in a Palestinian, EFL classroom. At its core, the study argues that exploratory and analytical writing – particularly when structured, low-stakes, and cumulative – creates the conditions for students to encounter theoretical texts with greater agency, rhetorical awareness, and contextual sensitivity. Rather than treating political theory as a distant canon to be mastered or rejected, students were able to use writing to position themselves in relation to the arguments they read, to interrogate assumptions, and to situate theory within their own political and social realities.

Revisiting the research questions makes this contribution clear:

First, informal writing made political theory more palpable and relevant by slowing students' reading and giving them time to grapple with conceptual difficulty. Exercises such as paraphrasing, tracing binaries, and focused freewriting asked students to stay with the text long enough for meaning to emerge – not by simplifying arguments, but by externalizing their own thinking. Many students who initially felt overwhelmed discovered that writing enabled them to clarify confusions, articulate questions they did not know they had, and identify which parts of an argument res-

onated or troubled them. In this sense, writing served not as an add-on to reading political theory but as the primary cognitive tool for making sense of it.

Second, the project shows that rhetorical awareness can be taught explicitly and productively through writing. Students learned to pay attention to assumptions, audiences, argumentative “moves,” and the conceptual scaffolding of a text. As their notebooks reveal, these skills did not remain procedural: students repeatedly used them to interrogate the authority of canonical arguments and to recognize that texts construct political realities rather than merely describe them. The *Commonplace Book* became a space where students practiced this shift in orientation – moving from “What is the main point?” to “How does this argument work, and what worldview does it presuppose?”

Third, the study demonstrates that Western political theory can be made relevant in non-Western contexts without demanding uncritical acceptance or wholesale rejection. Students used writing to bring canonical texts into dialogue with the Palestinian context: connecting Locke to histories of dispossession, Nozick to debates about historical entitlement, and Mills and Powers to the structures of inequality they navigate daily. Writing did not impose relevance; it allowed students to discover it, question it, and reshape it. This aligns with the project’s larger pedagogical claim that students can “decolonize without discarding”: they can engage with the canon critically, ethically, and on their own terms.

Fourth, the project highlights how rhetorical writing practices help students negotiate the authority of theory itself. Through repeated cycles of Freewriting, assumption analysis, and lens-based interpretation, students learned to see themselves as thinkers capable of responding to, challenging, and reworking inherited ideas. Several explicitly reflected on this growing confidence, noting that they now “read with questions” or automatically trace binaries in other courses. Such transfer indicates that writing-to-learn supports the development of durable intellectual habits.

This project also contributes to scholarship in Writing-to-Learn and WAC by demonstrating how structured, rhetorical writing can function effectively in EFL settings and under politically unstable conditions. It shows that even when attendance is irregular or external disruptions intervene, cumulative writing practices help maintain continuity of thought and foster student autonomy.

The study, however, has limitations. The sample is small and context-specific; political disruptions and shifts to Zoom affected participation; and some entries reflect uneven engagement or the influence of AI tools. The findings therefore illuminate possibilities rather than produce generalizable claims. Still, the patterns are strong enough to suggest that writing can meaningfully reshape how students encounter theory across diverse contexts.

Looking forward, this work points toward several implications: concentrating on fewer texts to deepen engagement; integrating earlier and more frequent metacognitive writing; developing clearer scaffolds for collaborative activities; and opening conversations about AI not as a threat but as part of students' writing environments. More broadly, the project suggests that writing-to-learn pedagogies hold particular promise for political theory classrooms outside the West, where students' lived experiences call for modes of engagement that are both critical and dialogic.

NOTES

- 1 Rosenwasser and Stephen 2015
- 2 Freire 2005a; hooks 1994
- 3 Bazerman et al. 2005; Fulwiler 1987; Neff and Whithaus 2008
- 4 Rosenwasser and Stephen 2015
- 5 1982
- 6 16
- 7 15
- 8 16
- 9 17
- 10 Fulwiler 1982, 25
- 11 Rosenwasser and Stephen 2015
- 12 McLeod 2000, 3
- 13 2015
- 14 1992
- 15 Bazerman et al. 2005, 100
- 16 1993
- 17 207
- 18 2001
- 19 2001
- 20 549
- 21 1996
- 22 400
- 23 2016
- 24 2020
- 25 10
- 26 Freire 2009, 47
- 27 Freire 2005a, 80
- 28 Freire 2005b, 132
- 29 1994
- 30 Fulwiler; Brodsky and Meager in *The Journal Book*

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