

# Decoding Political Thought

## A Fresh Take on What's Holding Students Back from Learning

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### Abstract

The responsibility for overcoming learning barriers in universities is too often placed on students. The framework of Decoding the Disciplines calls for a change of perspective by focusing on implicit knowledge as a learning obstacle. This Scholarship-of-Teaching-and-Learning study is dedicated to the decoding of political thought by conducting the first five steps of the decoding wheel. The steps are illustrated with a concrete example in a political theory seminar on the subject of power as a central concept in the work of Thomas Hobbes. As a tool, Conceptboard was used.

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### Keywords

Decoding the Disciplines; modelling; Conceptboard; teaching history of political ideas; Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

## 1. Introduction

The history of political ideas is by no means confined to the past. The fundamental questions discussed – such as justice, freedom, equality, or power – have endured through the centuries. Teaching history of ideas therefore invites students to engage with the arguments developed by different thinkers. In doing so, students are enabled to develop their own perspectives and judgements, inspired by past controversies. The process of making and defending a judgement by justifying a stand or position differs from spontaneous classifications based on anecdotal experiences from everyday life (cf. Bloom 1976; Armstrong 2010). However, in my history of ideas classes in recent years, I have observed that not all students actually transition from a spontaneous positioning to a reasoned judgement based on the theories discussed in the seminar. The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) offers the opportunity to investigate such obstacles to learning through research. This can help to identify didactic solutions to students' barriers to learning (cf. Arnold, Vöing & Reisas 2023). According to the Decoding the Disciplines framework (cf. Middendorf & Pace 2004), bottlenecks in learning processes are not primarily the result of deficient learning strategies on the part of students, but of gaps in the teaching strategies of the faculty. As experts in their fields, lecturers tend to be unaware of important steps in thinking processes. Consequently, these steps are not taught and

remain invisible to students. In such a situation, the achievement of a learning goal rather is the result of students' prior experience than of the teaching in class. The aim of decoding studies is therefore to overcome the bottlenecks in students' learning by making lecturers aware of implicit knowledge and by making implicit knowledge visible by modelling the expert's thinking.

After about two decades of decoding studies, Mohamed and Bayat's systematic literature review indicates that decoding studies predominantly concentrate on the first two steps of the 7-step-decoding wheel: identifying the bottleneck and the decoding interview, while the following steps are less frequently performed (cf. Mohamed & Bayat 2022, 223 f.). To address the students' difficulties in achieving the seminar's learning goals, this SoTL study follows steps 1 to 5 of the decoding wheel, illustrated by the example of power as a central concept in the work of Thomas Hobbes (cf. Hobbes 1966, 66-98; Anter 2018, 19-32). As a tool, Conceptboard was used. I traced and modelled the expert steps I took to come to an evaluation of a specific situation by justifying my position based on thoughts, perspectives, and arguments from the history of political ideas. Then the students were provided the opportunity to practice my steps in a motivating learning environment.

This paper will first present the theoretical framework of Decoding the Disciplines (chapter 2). It then retraces the decoding wheel's first and second step by defining the specific bottleneck and presenting

main findings of the decoding interview conducted with me (chapter 3). The following chapters cover step 3 modelling as well as step 4 practice and feedback (chapter 4), and step 5 motivation (chapter 5). Then, the advantages and disadvantages of Conceptboard as a tool for steps 3 to 5 are reflected (chapter 6). Finally, the paper closes with a summary of the main results and an outline for future research (chapter 7).

## 2. Theoretical framework: Decoding the Disciplines

Decoding studies focus on identifying and addressing bottlenecks in student learning processes by emphasising the significance of tacit knowledge (cf. Middendorf & Pace 2004; Pace 2017, 2021). The approach is based on the following assumption: lecturers, as experts in their disciplines, have internalised important steps in working on a task in such a way that they no longer make them explicit. Consequently, this implicit knowledge remains hidden from students. As 'shadow knowledge', it is not incorporated into didactic concepts and is largely inaccessible to students. This is particularly problematic for students who lack or have only limited prior training in the specific discipline, such as through previous studies, professional training, or family biography (cf. Middendorf & Pace 2004, 3; for habitus-sensitive teaching, see Stoll & Kiehne 2022).

How can these obstacles be overcome? It is not only crucial that lecturers become aware of tacit knowledge, but also that they develop ways to make this knowledge accessible to students. In a multi-step process, decoding studies therefore aim to identify the mental steps that an expert takes when he/she effortlessly overcomes the obstacle. Specifically, the approach proposes the following seven steps, which lead from the awareness of a learning obstacle to sharing the findings of the decoding process with other faculty (cf. Pace 2017, 6):

1. identify the bottleneck, i.e. a learning obstacle that prevents many students in a course from achieving the learning goal
2. identify the necessary mental steps that experts take when they (effortlessly) overcome the learning obstacle
3. explicitly model the cognitive process by allowing students to observe the expert's steps
4. develop exercises that allow students to try out the expert's steps
5. create a motivating learning environment so that students participate voluntarily and with commitment
6. create exams to gather accurate information about students' learning
7. publish the results, either in presentations or in professional journals.

The focus of this study is on the first five steps. The decoding wheel's first step is the identification of a 'bottleneck' in the student learning process. Pace defines this as follows: "They [the bottlenecks] affect the learning of significant numbers of students. They interfere with major learning in a course or courses. They are defined clearly and without jargon. They are relatively focused and do not involve a large number of very disparate operations." (Pace 2017, 28) The first aspect should be highlighted: If no student achieves the learning goal, the reason is less likely to be a bottleneck than a fundamental irritation of the learning process. This could be due to unclear tasks, for example.

Once the bottleneck has been identified, the interview with the expert follows. As faculty often work in their preferred disciplines for already a long time, it can be challenging for the interviewee to delineate the cognitive processes that are performed in his/her daily work. It is therefore recommended that interviewers and interviewees have disparate academic backgrounds to facilitate the identification of implicit knowledge. Subsequently, interviews should focus on the inquiry regarding the expert strategies. This can be complex, as experts may digress on the subject and discuss teaching strategies instead of tracing their own cognitive processes (cf. Middendorf & Pace 2004, 5 f.).

The third step is regarded as challenging and time-consuming (cf. Middendorf & Pace 2004, 7). This is not only due to the creativity needed to model a com-

plex thought process in an appealing way, but also due to the pitfalls of this process. In line with the recommendations by Middendorf and Pace (2004, 7), the decision, which steps of the thought process are modelled, will determine which students will benefit the most, and thus have ethical and political implications. It is therefore necessary that faculty subject their decisions to rigorous self-examination, ensuring that their decision does not unintentionally create structural disadvantages for students whose learning difficulties differ from the learning difficulties of the majority of students. As previously stated, even a succinctly delineated bottleneck represents the tacit knowledge of numerous minor steps. Consequently, the elements selected for the modelling process merely widen the bottleneck, enabling more students to reach the learning goal, but they do not automatically lead to the total overcoming of learning hurdles. This is consistent with Burkholder's finding that working on one bottleneck can raise awareness of further learning hurdles (cf. Burkholder 2011, 109).

While the third step offers students the opportunity to observe the expert's strategy, the fourth step provides space for practice. Students become active participants in the process, leaving behind the role of mere observers. As Middendorf and Pace (2004, 7 f.) point out, the exercises should focus on a specific detail of the whole thinking process. Otherwise, students will not be able to identify which part of the process is still difficult when they fail the task.

This leads to the fifth step of the decoding wheel: creating a motivating environment. Many small successes are suggested as well as an open and engaged attitude from the lecturer to enhance student learning (cf. Middendorf & Pace 2004, 8).

### 3. Decoding Wheel: Steps 1 and 2

How were the five steps carried out to address the learning obstacles in the field of political thought? As mentioned above, the initial step in the decoding process is the description of the bottleneck (step 1). The seminar's learning goals are based on the taxonomy levels according to Bloom: remember (K1), understand (K2), apply (K3), analyse (K4), evaluate (K5) and create (K6) (cf. Bloom 1976; Armstrong 2010). In tasks designed to practise or assess the fifth taxonomy level, I have noticed that some students fail to develop a well-founded position. It was not uncommon for students' answers to be limited to simple agreement or disagreement, or for the reasoning behind the evaluation to be rooted in spontaneous personal views without reference to positions in scientific controversies. However, the requirements of the competence to make or defend a judgement go beyond this anecdotal lifeworld reference. As specified in the decoding interview (step 2), the justification of the students' answers should be based on theoretical perspectives, with critical recourse to the

theoretical approaches discussed in class (cf. Interview I 2023, pos. 22-24; 54; 192).

In addition to this central finding, the 70-minute decoding-interview conducted with me revealed many small steps which I as an expert perform automatically. Two of them were ascribed particular importance: First and foremost, the decoding-interview made clear that the key step between reading and understanding a theoretical text and using its implications to a well-argued judgement was missing. The didactic concept of the seminar only jumped from explaining and critically discussing the theories to tasks which asked the students to evaluate a situation described by justifying their position based on the theoretical background of the seminar. The key step I take as an expert is to transfer the most relevant points of the theories into a 'grid' which allows me to easily take on different perspectives. So, when working on the task, I can judge the given example against this condensed and well-structured theoretical background (cf. Interview I 2023, pos. 216-218). This is in line with Miller-Young and Boman's findings that the adoption of different perspectives is an effective way of thinking even across disciplines (cf. Miller-Young & Boman 2017, 27 f.). Theoretically, the PowerPoint slides presented in class could have encouraged the students to expand their thinking in this way. However, despite the slides being evaluated positively by the students (cf. Evaluation 2023), they did not support the students in developing and justifying a position. My hypothesis is that due to the

PowerPoint presentation, students remained in the position of observers and did not take the step of condensing the theories themselves.

Secondly, the decoding interview revealed that I am aware of my pre-concepts even before I begin reading theoretical texts (cf. Interview I 2023, pos. 44-46). This step was already realised in the seminar, as it began with a discussion about everyday understandings of the seminar's topic. However, the didactic tool employed in the seminar was a presentation of only two students, which presented the results of self-collected interviews. Consequently, the majority of the group observed the initial step without engaging in the exercise. This necessitated focusing the modelling (step 3) on the starting point of the process and the intermediate step of developing the 'grid' between internalising the theoretical foundations and applying them to the example.

### 4. Decoding Wheel: Steps 3 and 4

The steps 3, 4, and 5 of the decoding wheel are realised using Conceptboard. This didactic tool enables the integration of synchronous and asynchronous learning units. So, what does the Conceptboard look like? The first section involves welcoming the students and outlining the specific learning goal. This is followed by an explanation of why the learning goal is considered important by the lecturers and how the learning aim fits into the overall curriculum of the

bachelor's degree. A brief instructional guide is then provided, outlining the functionality of the Conceptboard and the meaning of the different colours used to represent different stages of the thought process (see figure 1). Then, the two important parts of the bottleneck – the initial step and the steps to develop the 'grid' – are modelled in five sections (step 3). Each section on the Conceptboard comprises the documents I have produced, an explanation of my actions, additional tips and tricks, the time it takes me to complete the step, and a small exercise for students to actively retrace my thought process (step 4).

The first section begins with a pink sticky note explaining how I approach a new topic (see figure 2). I outline how I use a sheet of paper and some coloured pencils to draw a mind map, making transparent to the students that this helps me to collect my thoughts about the new topic and to reflect on my preconcepts. I also mention that this mind map is not very pretty, but that the bubbles and lines are clearly arranged.

Mind maps can be made by hand (which is how I do it) or digitally, e.g. with miro. Next to the sticky note is a picture of the original mind map I have drawn. A violet sticker accompanies the picture and provides further information. It briefly describes the understanding of power shown in the mind map and offers a brief preview of the next step, which reads as follows: "In the next step, we will look at how Thomas Hobbes understands power. We will see that some of the points are also found in Hobbes, others are not. First, however, we need to set aside our own perspective on power and look at power exclusively from the point of view of Thomas Hobbes." (Panreck 2024) I also briefly explain what is meant by justifying a judgement or evaluation on a separate violet sticky note which reads as follows: "A reasoned judgement means that you explain why you have reached a judgement. To do this, you use arguments that you formulate from different perspectives – for example, from the point of view of Thomas Hobbes or Hannah Arendt. Your judgement is then the result of weighing up the arguments. I will show you how this works in the following steps." (Panreck 2024)

Following the fourth step of the decoding wheel, this first stage of the Conceptboard is accompanied by a small exercise on a blue sticky note aiming at encouraging students to become actively involved in the thinking process. Students are asked to create a mind map on the topic of power. They are then asked to complete the following tasks 1) Summa-

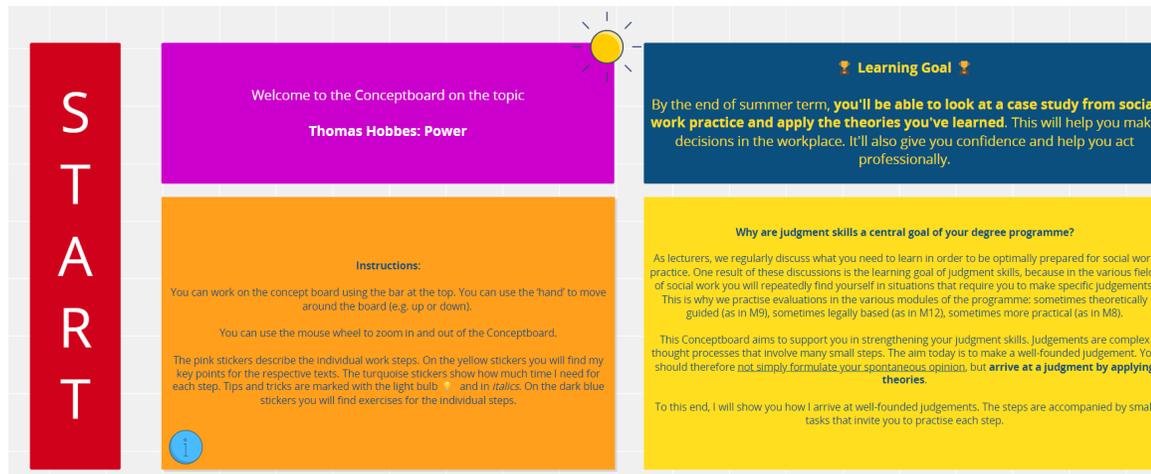


Figure 1: Close-Up of the introduction

rise in a few key points what understanding of power your mind map reveals. 2) Does your understanding of power have positive or negative connotations? 3) Based on your understanding of power, argue whether you think a world without power is possible and desirable. Students are free to decide whether they want to use digital tools to work on this exercise. Still, the advice is given, that the examination will be a handwritten. Therefore, if they do not have a corresponding compensation for disadvantages, it could be a useful exercise to solve the task by hand.

**Step 1**

When approaching a new topic, I often start with a sheet of paper and some coloured pens. I make a mind map to collect my thoughts about the topic. This allows me to see what I already associate with the topic. Sometimes I make several mind maps until I have organised all my thoughts. It's not about 'beauty', but I do look for clarity.

The next steps are about stepping back from your own opinion and understanding and applying the positions of the thinkers.

**So evaluation means weighing up different positions and then coming to a reasoned judgement.** This process is much more time-consuming than jotting down a spontaneous attitude to an issue.

Mind maps can be made by hand (which is what I do) or digitally, for example with Miro.  
<https://miro.com>

approx.  
45 minutes

Mind map for collecting first thoughts

**History of ideas:** Max Weber, Hannah Arendt, Thomas Hobbes, Michel Foucault

**Abuse:** control/cheat!

**Money is power:** Is that true? Does everyone with money have power?

**Influence:** good or bad?

**Politics:** EU, municipality, e.g. Cologne

**Relationships:** Who do I have power over? Who has power over me?

**Other notes:** Is power always negative?

A **reasoned judgement** means that you explain why you have reached a judgement. To do this, you use arguments that you formulate from different perspectives - for example, from the point of view of Thomas Hobbes or Hannah Arendt. Your judgement is then the result of weighing up the arguments.

I will show you how this works in the following steps.

The mind map reveals a certain understanding of power. It tends to be characterised negatively, but this assumption is also challenged. Furthermore, power seems to play a role in relationships as well as in politics. The danger of abuse is prominent. Finally, power is a concept in the history of ideas.

In the next step, we will look at how **Thomas Hobbes** understands power. We will see that some of the points are also found in Hobbes, others are not. First, however, we need to set aside our own perspective on power and look at power exclusively from the point of view of Thomas Hobbes.

**Exercise for step 1**  
Create a mind map on power.

- 1) Summarise in a few key points what understanding of power your mind map reveals.
- 2) Does your understanding of power have positive or negative connotations?
- 3) Based on your understanding of power, argue whether you think a world without power is *possible* and *desirable*.

Tip: The exam will be handwritten. Therefore, if you do not have a compensation for disadvantages, solve this task by hand.

Figure 2: Close-up of Step 1

My second step – reading a secondary text from the literature – is outlined in the next section (see figure 3). The pink sticky note explains that reading a secondary text is important for me because it helps me to get an overview of Thomas Hobbes' main arguments. This will facilitate my subsequent analysis of the original source. The highlighted text and my marginal notes on bright yellow sticky notes are displayed on the Conceptboard, accompanied by pale yellow sticky notes explaining why I have skipped some passages and how I have dealt with difficulties in understanding individual paragraphs (for example, by showing the students where I have looked up unfamiliar terms). This shows students that it is perfectly normal not to understand everything on the first reading. As previously stated, a turquoise sticky note makes it transparent how long it takes me to do this step. In this case, I have added a second pale turquoise sticky note indicating that the students will probably need (even) more time as I am a much more experienced reader.

Again, the step is accompanied by an exercise according to the fourth step of the decoding wheel. Students are asked to actively read the text from the secondary literature by marking key sentences and taking notes. To do this, they can either print out the text or edit it digitally. They are then invited to compare their editing with the text I have annotated, and which is displayed on the Conceptboard. Doing this, three questions can guide them: What differences

and similarities do you recognise? What surprises you? Is there anything you would do differently in the future?

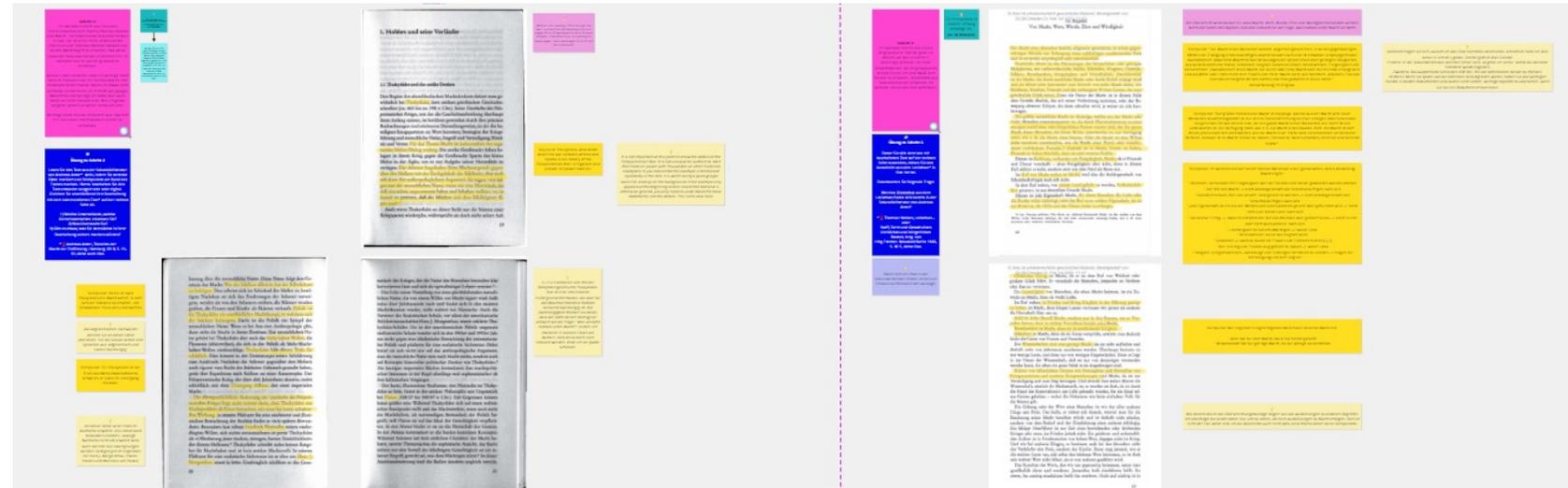


Figure 3: Step 2 and 3 from a bird's eye view

In the next step, I read the original source which is also displayed on the Conceptboard (see again figure 3). I do this in a comparable way to step 2, but I write down more quotations in the margins of the text. I explain to the students that this is widespread practice with original sources in order to keep close to the thinker and that I rarely use quotations from secondary sources as they bloat the text I intent to write afterwards.

The accompanying task should be solved before looking at my expert step. It asks the students to look at the original source by answering the following question: Which quotation from the original source is already found in the secondary literature? A pale blue sticky note next to the task explains its purpose: "If a quotation is found in the secondary literature, this is an indication of the relevance of the statement." (Panreck 2024)

In the following fourth step, I condense the central features of Hobbes' concept of power (see figure 4). In other words, I reduce the mass of material. This step I explain again with the help of a pink sticky note: "For this step, I transfer all the key points in the margins of both documents into a Word document. Each key point is followed by the page number of the original document. I then sort the most important key points under headings. All key points that answer the question 'What does Thomas Hobbes mean by power?' are important. I also include a small amount of background information that I think will help me better grasp Hobbes' understanding of power. I obtain the headings from the key points by asking myself how they could be summarised when I reread the key points. From the fourteen pages of secondary literature and the three pages of the primary source, a one-page document has emerged." (Panreck 2024) The one-page document I wrote is shown on the Conceptboard. It is one part of the 'grid', the importance of which was initially uncovered during the decoding interview and will be explained further in the fifth step.

In parallel with the exercise on the primary source, students should work on the task accompanying this step before examining my expert solution in detail. They are required to return to step 2 and record what they consider to be the ten most relevant key points. In doing so, they should pose the question, 'What does Thomas Hobbes mean by power?'. They

can then compare their selection with the condensed one-page document that I have provided.

**Step 4:**

In the last step for the time being, I condense the central features of Hobbes' idea of power. In other words, I **reduce the amount of the material**.

For this step, I transfer all the key points in the margins of both documents into a Word document. Each key point is followed by the page number of the original document.

I then sort the most important key points under headings. All key points that answer the question: 'What does Thomas Hobbes mean by power' are important. I also include a small amount of background information that I think will help me better grasp Hobbes' understanding of power.

I obtain the headings from the key points by asking myself how they could be summarised when I reread the key points.

From the 14 pages of secondary literature and the three pages of the primary sources, a one-page document has emerged.

**For this step I need approx. 45 minutes**

**Thomas Hobbes' concept of power | Central features**

**Fundamentals/background information**

- Hobbes' thinking revolves around the question of how the modern state can be legitimised (cf. Anter 2018, p. 26)
- His main work *Leviathan* was written against the backdrop of the English Civil War and aims to overcome war through the undivided power of the state (cf. Anter 2018, p. 26)
- Hobbes also makes statements about human nature, such as man not only wants to have power, but also to have more power. The reason for this is not that man hopes for a better life, but that he believes he cannot secure his current life without more power (cf. Anter 2018, p. 25)

**State of nature and its overcoming by a centralised power**

- In the state of nature, anyone can kill anyone; life there is 'lonely, miserable, disgusting, animalistic and short' → People want to overcome this state (cf. Anter 2018, p. 26)
- People submit to power and receive security in return (cf. Anter 2018, p. 27)
- However, even Hobbes realised that submission to the *Leviathan* is only valid as long as the state guarantees people's security. Otherwise, people no longer have to submit (cf. Anter 2018, p. 27)

**Is power positive or negative?**

- For Hobbes, power is fundamentally positive, functional and material (cf. Anter 2018, p. 28 f.)

**Three points of Hobbes' thinking on power (for all, see Anter 2018, p. 30)**

- wanting to have power always implies wanting to have more power
- striving for power always serves to satisfy other needs, e.g. security [i.e. power is not an end in itself]
- accumulation of power is not completed with the gain of the acquired goods, because these lead to a further increase in power, e.g. the reputation of being rich can lead to the reputation of being powerful; power does not have to actually exist, it is sufficient to be considered powerful

**Criticism of Hobbes' concept of power by Andreas Anter**

- Hobbes' concept of power is quite imprecise; power can mean anything that contributes to the achievement of one's own goals (cf. Anter 2018, p. 30)

**The core of Hobbes' concept of power**

- "The power of a man to take it universally, is his present means, to obtain some future apparent good; and is either original or instrumental. Natural power, is the eminence of the faculties of body, or mind; as extraordinary strength, form, prudence, arts, eloquence, liberality, nobility, instrumental are those powers, which are acquired by those, or by fortune, are means and instruments to acquire more, as riches, reputation, friends, and the secret working of God, which men call good luck." (Leviathan, emphasis in original)
- "The greatest of human powers, is that which is compounded of the powers of most men, united by consent, in one person, natural; or civil; that has the use of all their powers depending on his will; such as is the power of a common-wealth; or depending on the wills of each particular; such as is the power of a faction or of divers factions leagued. Therefore to have servants, is power; to have friends, is power: for they are strengths united." (Leviathan)

**Characteristics and qualities whose accumulation accumulates power (for all see Anter 2018, p. 66f.)**

- Wealth, combined with generosity → attracts servants and friends
- The reputation of power → attracts followers of those in need of protection
- Popularity/ reputation of being loved by one's country → attracts followers of those in need of protection
- Any quality by which a person is loved or feared by many others → attracts help and service from many
- Happy success → It creates the reputation of wisdom or great happiness → entails the fear or trust of others
- Bios among the already powerful → evokes love
- Eloquence, as it acts like wisdom
- Beauty → can lead to favour with women and strangers (☹)
- Reputation for having led wisely in war and peace → evokes love
- Ability to create war machines, tools and fortresses → contribute to defence and victory

**The following characteristics only bring a limited amount of power or are linked to conditions (for all, see Anter 2018, p. 67)**

- Nobility only has power where it enjoys privileges
- Science has little power because only a few understand it

**Exercise for step 4**

On the right-hand side you can see the condensed document I have created. Before you look at it in detail, go back to step 2 and make a note of what you consider to be the **ten most important key points**. Ask yourself the question: 'What does Thomas Hobbes mean by power?' Then compare your selection with the overview on the right.

Figure 4: Close-Up of Step 4

The fifth step is, in essence, an outlook. I inform the students, once more on a pink sticky note, that I will now proceed to undertake steps 2 to 4 for all thinkers pertinent to the seminar. In this manner, a map of power – or, in the terminology of the decoding interview, a ‘grid’ – is constructed in my mind, thereby enabling me to make a well-founded judgement on a case study from the perspective of the aforementioned thinkers. This ‘grid’ or ‘landscape of power’ is visualised on the Conceptboard by a sketch resembling a flower: the pistil (the case study) is surrounded by petals, each petal bearing the name of the thinker and the main message, which in turn is condensed from each thinker’s one-page document. Furthermore, I advise students to consult the works of the authors of the secondary literature on YouTube, as these videos may help them to understand their texts. A link to the relevant talk of the author of secondary literature used in the Conceptboard is also provided. The final exercise is similar in format to a typical examination task. Students are required to evaluate the statement ‘Wealth is the key to power’ from two perspectives: that of Thomas Hobbes and their own position. Consequently, the final task reverts to the initial step of the Conceptboard.

Finally, the last section congratulates the students on the successful completion of the exercise and invites them for voluntary feedback during office hours. To make the feedback conversion as fruitful as possible, I expect the students to send me their

solutions to the small exercises or a specific question or problem in advance.

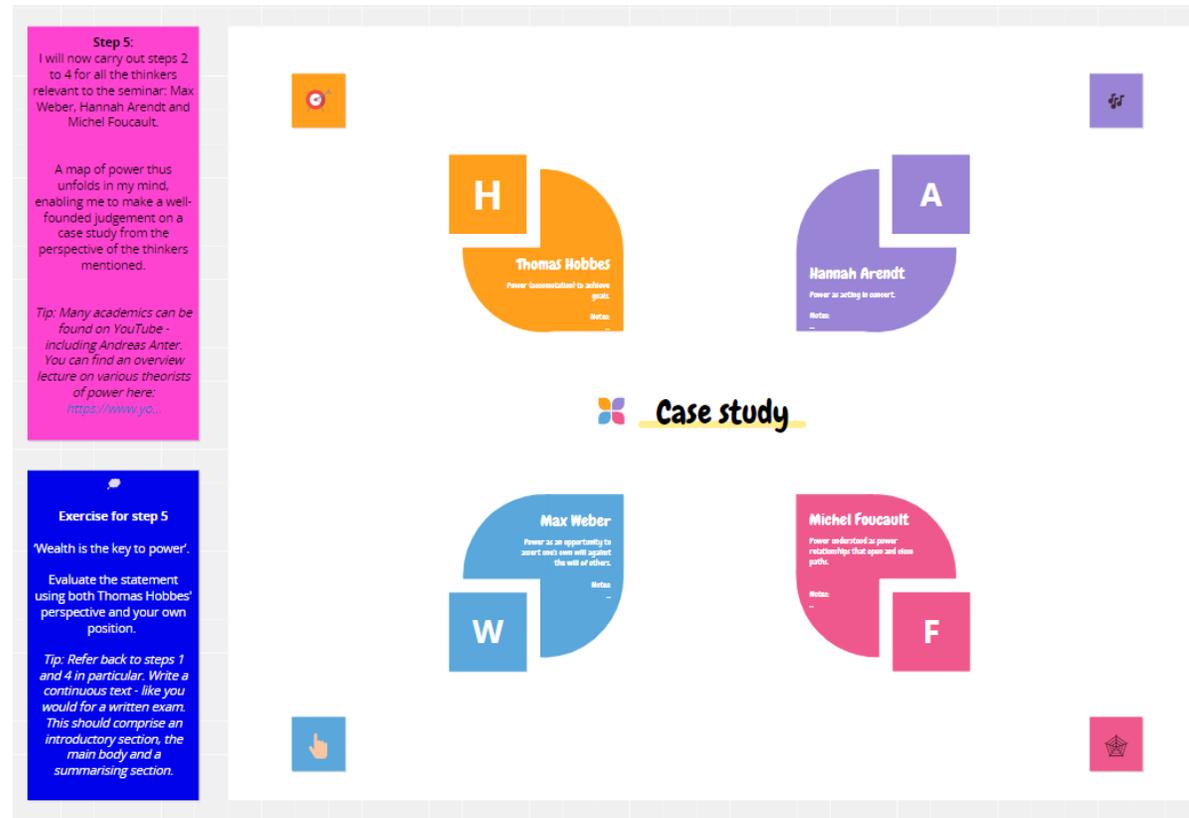


Figure 5: Close-Up of Step 5

## 5. Decoding Wheel: Step 5

In the design process of the Conceptboard, the decoding wheel's fifth step served as a guiding principle. To enhance the learning experience, it is proposed to create a motivating learning environment. As Pace and Middendorf (2004, 8) state: "If the students are not drawn actively into the modeling and the practice-and-feedback phases of the process, real learning is highly unlikely to occur." The lecturers are encouraged to facilitate numerous incremental successes for their students. This helps students to develop self-confidence, as they gain the understanding that their achievements are not the result of pure chance (cf. Middendorf & Pace 2004, 8). Where is this statement taken to heart in designing the Conceptboard? The first step – the drawing of a mind map – is conducted in a synchronous seminar setting, which implies that students are already familiar with Conceptboard and have received feedback on this initial step. This facilitates the transition to the subsequent phase, which is conducted at home. Each of the five subsequent steps through my thought process is accompanied by an exercise, so students can collect five small successes. For each step, the time required by me as an expert is indicated. This is to prevent students from abandoning the task if they cannot complete it within a few minutes. Despite my experience, I also have to dedicate several hours to this task. The first and third exercise have a relatively brief time frame, while the fourth exercise has a medium time frame.

The second and fifth exercise require more time. This variety in time spans prevents monotony.

Furthermore, the lecturer should present him-/herself as an ally who is interested in the students' learning and has invested time in developing the seminar (cf. Middendorf & Pace 2004, 8 f.). Therefore, I explicitly convey my goal of equipping students with the requisite knowledge and skills to excel in the examination and to flourish in their professional careers already at the commencement of the academic year. Additionally, I define my role as that of a learning facilitator, who encourages questions and welcomes the admission of weaknesses without fear of negative consequences on the mark. This is facilitated by the fact that the performance in the seminar is not graded. Finally, I demonstrate my own motivation through the design of the Conceptboard and a keen attention to detail. Furthermore, it was clear that I completed all the modelled steps on the Conceptboard myself.

## 6. Reflection: Advantages and Drawbacks

The students' evaluation of the Conceptboard was highly positive. The approach was perceived as a valuable tool for comprehending the distinctive disciplinary mindset and a beneficial resource not only for the specific seminar but also for other classes. However, one student had trouble with the modelling

process, as he/she had already developed an effective thought routine (cf. Evaluation 2024).

Methodically, the Conceptboard focuses on texts from primary and secondary sources and reflection exercises. To break this up and enhance engagement, the Conceptboard uses several strategies: First, numerous illustrations, colours and shapes provide visual stimulation. The icons serve as placeholders for the content, facilitating the navigation process. When selecting the colours, care was taken not to use red and green simultaneously, to avoid potential difficulties for individuals with colour vision deficiency. Additionally, the board links to a YouTube talk by the author of the basic literature, which also appeals to the auditory senses. However, the board does not include any animations, videos, or recordings of me doing the steps (an example of this modelling strategy can be found in Pace 2004, 15 f.). Second, verbal exchange occurs in the voluntary feedback conversation during office hours and the accompanying seminar session. It would also be possible to integrate minor discussions into the steps on the Conceptboard, for instance via telephone calls between students. Third, the creation of the mind map involves the utilisation of haptikinaesthetic elements, whether through manual or digital means. This approach involves using the application miro, printing texts, adding handwritten annotations, and offering students the opportunity to design their own Conceptboard. Additionally, the uni-

versity library offers a course catalogue containing the most essential literature, allowing students to use an analogue copy instead of digital texts.

Disadvantages affect students with limited language skills and students with impairments. Firstly, the Conceptboard and its focus on text can be a barrier particularly for non-native speakers. Secondly, the Conceptboard can be worked on flexibly in terms of time, allowing students to plan their breaks according to their own needs. Nevertheless, physical activities are not incorporated into the learning process (e.g. via an observation task in the form of a walk outside). This could present a challenge for students who have trouble maintaining focus and sitting still for extended periods. Thirdly, Conceptboard is not fully accessible. Individuals with visual impairments can enlarge text using the zoom function, but the contrast is insufficient, the content cannot be read with screen readers, alternative texts are missing, and the keyboard control is not always usable (for a full list see Conceptboard 2023).

## 7. Summary and Prospects for Future Research

The study of political thought empowers students to engage in critical reflection on their spontaneous judgements, to practise taking different perspectives, and to make and defend a judgement based

on arguments from the history of ideas. Still, during the last years of teaching political thought I observed that not all students reached the learning goal. To overcome this learning obstacle, I conducted this study of Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) following the Decoding the Discipline framework. I focused on the first five steps of the decoding wheel: identifying the bottleneck (step 1), the interview (step 2), modelling (step 3), exercise and feedback (step 4), and motivation (step 5). For the steps 3 to 5 I used Conceptboard. This digital tool allowed for synchronous as well as asynchronous teaching, thus enabling students to follow my expert steps at their own pace. Modelling and practising the beginning of my thinking process as an expert – implemented through a mind map and its reflection – was particularly important in making students aware of their preconceptions and spontaneous connotations. At the same time, it became clear that these initial, spontaneous positions do not meet the requirements for an informed judgement that follows the consideration of the arguments of thinkers such as Thomas Hobbes. Therefore, the intermediate step of creating a ‘grid’ was essential to provide a basis for the subsequent weighing of arguments.

The positive evaluation of the entire seminar and particularly the Conceptboard prove the effectiveness of the decoding wheel’s steps. Still, the process as well as the critical reflection show the need to further research. The student evaluation highlights the necessity for lecturers and researchers to inves-

tigate the impact of modelling on experienced students. The decoding framework’s limitation lies in its tendency to overlook the pre-existing concepts and routines of students. Furthermore, Conceptboard’s limitations in accommodating students with impairments represent a significant drawback of this modelling and training strategy.

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