



From Taxonomy to Toolbox: A Pragmatist Model for Teaching Literary Theory

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Abstract

This article addresses the persistent pedagogical problem of “theory anxiety” in undergraduate literary studies, where students frequently perceive critical theory as a set of abstract, competing ideologies to be memorized rather than practical analytical tools. Drawing on Richard Rorty’s neopragmatism and Stephen Toulmin’s model of argumentation, we propose a pedagogical shift from a taxonomic approach—which emphasizes the categorization of “isms”—to a pragmatic “toolbox” model. This article presents a theoretical framework for a “Problem-Based Theory” module designed to reframe theories as vocabularies for solving specific interpretive problems. By integrating Rorty’s rejection of foundationalism with Toulmin’s practical argumentation schema (Claim, Data, Warrant, Backing), the proposed model aims to empower students to become critical bricoleurs. Rather than seeking the “correct” theoretical framework, students would learn to select and justify theoretical tools based on their explanatory power for specific texts. Assessment is proposed through “toolbox essays,” which would require students to explicitly justify their methodological choices. This conceptual article concludes by outlining the empirical research agenda necessary to validate this pedagogical intervention.

Keywords: Literary Theory Pedagogy, Pragmatism, Problem-Based Learning, Theory Anxiety, Argumentation

Introduction

The undergraduate literary theory classroom can be a place of great anxiety. To most students, the shift from the appreciative reading of literature to the rigor of critical theory is a crisis of confidence. They are faced with a dizzying array of isms, Marxism, Psychoanalysis, Structuralism, Deconstruction, Feminism, Postcolonialism, each of which is hermetic and has its own incomprehensible jargon and truth claims. This pedagogical

crisis, commonly referred to as theory anxiety, is not only due to the intellectual challenge of the content but also the structural way in which it is commonly delivered. When theory is taught in a taxonomic form, as a history of thought or a museum of competing ideologies, students tend to withdraw into rote learning or cafeteria-style superficial application, choosing ideas at random without knowing how they work. The difficulty of imparting theory to undergraduates, as Campbell (1997) noted almost thirty years ago, is to fill the gap between the high-level abstraction and the practical act of reading.

This paper suggests a way out of this pedagogical stalemate by re-conceptualizing literary theory in terms of American pragmatism. In particular, we suggest a transition from a model of taxonomy to a model of a toolbox, which is based on neopragmatism of Richard Rorty and a practical scheme of argumentation of Stephen Toulmin. Instructors can demystify critical theory by abandoning the foundationalist perspective of theories as rival accounts of the world, and adopting the perspective of Rorty, who sees theories as linguistic systems or coping mechanisms (Rorty, 1989). Moreover, the model of argumentation by Toulmin (1958/2003) offers the scaffold needed in this approach, enabling students to visualize how theoretical concepts serve as the so-called warrants that relate textual data to interpretive claims. The subsequent paragraphs describe the module of the Problem-Based Theory, a pedagogical approach that realizes these philosophical implications. This model does not start with abstract systems but with concrete interpretive problems that occur in literary texts. It challenges students to choose, defend, and use theoretical instruments to address these issues, thus alleviating anxiety and promoting a more realistic critical practice.

This article is primarily conceptual and theoretical. It describes a pedagogical model that combines philosophical pragmatism and argumentation theory, but lacks empirical evidence of the effectiveness of the model. The following sections present the Problem-Based Theory module as a theoretical framework, illustrate its conceptual consistency, and finally, specify the particular empirical research questions that would have to be answered to prove this method. This article aims to provide a solid theoretical basis of a pedagogical intervention that can then be tested, refined and evaluated by classroom application.

Literature Review

The Pedagogical Challenge: Theory Anxiety and Student Resistance

Student resistance to theory is a phenomenon that is well-documented in the scholarship of teaching and learning in the humanities. According to Campbell (1997), students tend to feel that theory is an alienation from the text, and they are afraid that the aesthetic enjoyment of reading will be ruined by over-analysis using theoretical lenses. This opposition is increased by the teaching of theories as abstract philosophical systems

divorced from the immediate act of interpretation. In the conventional survey courses, students are usually supposed to learn the main principles of complicated intellectual traditions within the course of one week, which results in a shallow approach to the subject, where names and terms are thrown into the essays without understanding.

The recent research on problem-based learning (PBL) provides a possible remedy to this passivity. Markušić and Sabljčić (2019) believe that problem-based methods in literature teaching can greatly improve student engagement by making them less passive receivers of knowledge and more active in their inquiry. In the same way, Rahman, Azmi, and Wahab (2016) show that the higher-order thinking skills of students are enhanced when they are introduced to ill-structured problems that involve critical negotiation. More recently, Corrigan (2023) has shown that a strong scaffolding pedagogy, or one that explicates the implicit moves of critical reading using structured templates, can be very effective in enhancing interpretive confidence and competence in literature courses among students. Nevertheless, the implementation of PBL to the particular field of high theory is under-theorized. The question is: how to make the problem of literary interpretation operational in such a manner that high theory becomes a necessary, not an optional, resource for students.

The Theory Wars and Taxonomic Thinking

The current pedagogical landscape is still haunted by the “theory wars” of the 1980s and 1990s, a period marked by intense ideological conflict over the canon, the status of truth, and the political function of criticism (Slevin & Young, 1996). One legacy of this era is the tendency to teach theories as fortified encampments or competing political identities. In this “taxonomic” mode, a Marxist reading is positioned as fundamentally antagonistic to a Deconstructive one, and students feel compelled to “convert” to a particular ism to write successfully. This approach encourages a form of dogmatism where students learn to mimic the rhetorical moves of a theoretical school without understanding its pragmatic utility. By presenting theories as totalizing worldviews, instructors inadvertently raise the stakes of adoption to an existential level, contributing to the anxiety that paralyzes undergraduate writers. As Southworth (2022) argues, moving students from confirmed belief to productive doubt requires deliberate perspective-taking exercises, since traditional dispositions such as open-mindedness alone cannot overcome cognitive bias.

Pragmatism And Anti-Foundationalism in the Humanities

In order to break this taxonomic trap, we may resort to the tradition of American pragmatism. According to Abbas (2012), the teaching of literature can be enriched with pragmatics, the study of language in action, in which the text is not viewed as a fixed object

but as a communicative action. But, the pragmatism of Richard Rorty is more philosophical and provides a meta-theoretical position that is especially liberating for students. Provided we take the pragmatist assumption that there is no privileged, non-perspectival position in which to interpret the text (Rorty, 1979/2008), then theories no longer qualify as candidates for the Truth, but are rather optional vocabularies to serve various human ends. This anti-foundationalist change is essential to pedagogy; it reduces the metaphysical barrier to entry, and students are able to experiment with theoretical ideas as heuristics, not dogmas.

The choice of neopragmatism of Rorty among other anti-foundationalist models (deconstruction by Derrida or genealogy by Foucault) is not accidental and deserves a few words of defense. Rorty's vocabulary of "tools" and "coping" offers convenient metaphors to undergraduate students, and his outright denial of theory-as-doctrine is consistent with the pedagogical aim of alleviating anxiety. The prose style and focus on solidarity, rather than objectivity, of Rorty provide an approachable point of entry to theoretical discourse to students new to the field of theory.

Toulmin's Model as Pedagogical Framework

As Rorty gives the philosophical rationale for a toolbox approach, Stephen Toulmin gives the mechanics. *The Uses of Argument* (1958/2003) by Toulmin criticized the abstraction of formal logic, and instead offered a field-specific model of reasoning, which reflects the way arguments take place in practice. His schema, which includes Claim, Data, Warrant, Backing, Qualifier and Rebuttal, has been effectively applied in composition studies and rhetoric (Hitchcock, 2005; Karbach, 1987; Rex, Thomas, & Engel, 2010). In the context of literary theory, the model by Toulmin can be potentially revolutionary as it makes the implicit logic of criticism explicit. It enables students to observe that a theoretical framework is in effect a warrant—a bridge that justifies the jump between textual evidence and interpretive claim.

The model by Toulmin was chosen instead of other approaches to argumentation (pragmadilectics or informal logic models) due to its proven effectiveness in composition pedagogy and easy visual representation. The six-part schema offers concrete terms that students can use at once, as opposed to more abstract argumentation theories that can replicate the same theory anxiety that this model is aimed at eliminating.

Theoretical Framework

Richard Rorty's Neopragmatism: Vocabularies without Foundations

The main theoretical foundation of this pedagogical model is neopragmatism of Richard Rorty, especially as expressed in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979/2008) and *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989). Rorty famously dismissed the

epistemological project of the Enlightenment, which attempted to establish a basis of knowledge that would be true to reality in the sense of being a reflection of it (Rorty, 1979/2008). Rather, he suggested that we should not think of our different accounts of the world, scientific, artistic, political, as efforts to get nearer to an intrinsic reality, but as linguistic systems which we construct to deal with the environment and to coordinate with each other (Rorty, 1989).

To Rorty (1989), the ideal intellectual is the liberal ironist, who is both devoted to the minimization of cruelty and conscious of the contingency of his or her own beliefs. The ironist is one who confronts the contingency of his or her most central beliefs and desires—one who is aware that the language in which he or she justifies his or her actions is only one of a variety of possible languages. This is the idea of contingency that is essential to the teaching of literary theory. It implies that Psychoanalysis is not the truth of the human mind, but a vocabulary that enables us to talk about repression, desire, and the unconscious in a manner that other vocabularies do not. Likewise, Marxism is not the science of history, but a language that emphasizes the struggle of classes and material conditions.

When applied to the classroom, the position of Rorty may help to defuse the tension of the theory wars. The aim of inquiry is to increase human solidarity, not to attain detached objectivity, as Rorty (1984, p. 12) contends in his article, *Solidarity or Objectivity?* In this sense, literary theories are instruments of increasing our ability to observe things in texts and in the world. The student does not have to answer whether Feminism is true or not in an absolute sense, but whether the feminist vocabulary can enable them to say something meaningful about the silencing of a character in a novel that would otherwise not be said.

Stephen Toulmin's Model of Argumentation

If Rorty provides the “why,” Stephen Toulmin provides the “how.” In *The Uses of Argument* (1958/2003), Toulmin dismantled the syllogism as the primary model of rationality, arguing that real-world arguments act more like legal proceedings than mathematical proofs. He proposed a layout of arguments containing six components, which we adapt here for literary analysis:

Claim refers to the interpretive assertion the student wishes to make about the text (e.g., “The protagonist’s silence is an act of resistance”).

Data refers to the textual evidence, quotations, or formal features that support the claim.

Warrant refers to the underlying principle or assumption that connects the data to the claim. In this pedagogical model, the literary theory functions as the warrant.

Backing refers to the support for the warrant itself. This is where students cite theoretical texts (e.g., Foucault on power, Butler on performance) to validate the theoretical

lens they are using.

Qualifier refers to words that indicate the strength of the leap from data to claim (e.g., “presumably,” “in this context”).

Rebuttal refers to acknowledgement of conditions where the warrant might not hold or where alternative interpretations exist.

The pedagogical power of this model lies in the “Warrant” and “Backing.” Students frequently struggle to explain why a certain image in a text implies a certain meaning. By identifying the warrant, students would learn that their interpretation relies on a theoretical assumption (e.g., “I assume that slips of the tongue reveal unconscious desires”). The “Backing” then requires them to engage with the theoretical scholarship directly to support that assumption. As noted by Verheij (2005) and Erduran, Simon, and Osborne (2004), explicit instruction in argumentation schemas significantly improves the quality of student reasoning. Wilner (2020) reinforces this point, arguing that structured support for reading at the interpretive level constitutes support for the deepest kind of disciplinary learning.

Synthesizing Rorty and Toulmin for Pedagogy

Combining Rorty and Toulmin yields a powerful theoretical synthesis. The anti-foundationalism of Rorty does not allow the Toulmin model to turn into a dogmatic exercise in logic; it helps us keep in mind that warrants are not universal laws, but rather vocabularies. On the other hand, the pragmatism of Rorty cannot degenerate into an ‘anything-goes’ relativism because of the structural rigor of Toulmin’s model. Arguments still have to be good within their parameters of choice; claims still have to be justified by data and warrants. They combine to create a theoretical framework of pedagogy in which the student is a bricoleur in the sense of the term used by Lévi-Strauss (1962/1966): a craftsperson who chooses certain tools (theories) to address certain problems (interpretive cruxes), and who rationalizes these choices by giving them an explicit argument.

The Problem-Based Theory Module: A Theoretical Proposal

The module of the Problem-Based Theory is meant to substitute the usual Theory of the Week survey. Its fundamental design is backward design: begin with an interpretive problem that students cannot easily solve using their current common-sense vocabulary, and then present theoretical concepts as means to solve the problem. The next section is a theoretical description of how this module would be designed.

Module Structure

Phase 1: Encountering The Interpretive Problem

The module would not start with a lecture on an ism, but with a literary text, selected for its ambiguity. For this example, we will use Charlotte Perkins Gilman's (1892) "The Yellow Wallpaper." The teacher would ask a guiding interpretive question: Why does the voice of the narrator grow more and more discontinuous as the story unfolds, and why does this loss of language seem at once a failure and a release?

Students would attempt to answer this using close reading. The hypothesis is that they would normally strike a wall and would be confused but would not have the vocabulary to describe the structural or psychological processes involved. Such frustration would not go to waste; it would generate a need to have new tools.

Phase 2: Introducing The Toolbox

The instructor would then introduce specific theoretical "tools" that address issues of voice, silence, and language, drawing from different traditions but framed as functional concepts rather than totalizing systems:

Tool A (Feminist): the critique of silencing. Drawing on feminist scholarship, this tool examines how patriarchal structures (represented by the husband/doctor John) deny women authority over their own experiences. The core concept is that "silence" is often political suppression.

Tool B (Psychoanalytic): repression and the unconscious. Drawing on Freud or Lacan, this tool treats the text as a psyche. The "woman in the wallpaper" is redescribed not as a ghost but as the "return of the repressed"—the projection of the narrator's forbidden desires.

Tool C (Deconstructive): the binary of speech/silence. Drawing on Derrida, this tool interrogates the hierarchy that privileges speech over silence. It suggests that the text deconstructs itself, showing how the "meaningless" pattern of the wallpaper actually signifies more than the "rational" speech of the husband.

Phase 3: Applying Toulmin's Framework

Students would practice mapping these tools onto the text using Toulmin's schema. For example, a student attempting to use the Feminist Tool would construct the following argument scaffold:

Claim: The fragmentation of the narrator's voice represents a forced retreat into a sub-language caused by patriarchal medical authority.

Data: The text shows John forbidding her to write, laughing at her fears, and treating her like a child (Gilman, 1892, p. 649).

Warrant: A patriarchal medical establishment historically pathologized female agency and enforced silence as a “cure.”

Backing: References to feminist historians or theorists who document the “Rest Cure” and the silencing of the female gothic heroine.

This exercise would explicitly demonstrate that the theory (Warrant/Backing) is what bridges the text (Data) and the interpretation (Claim).

Phase 4: Building Multifaceted Arguments

Lastly, the students would be motivated to mix tools. A pragmatist viewpoint permits the mixing of vocabularies provided it is used to the interpretive end. A student may say that the cause of the silence is best understood in terms of the Feminist tool (external oppression) but the form of the hallucination is best understood in terms of the Psychoanalytic tool (internal repression). This synthesis would entail a metacognitive awareness of what each tool can and cannot do.

Proposed Assessment and Hypothesized Learning Outcomes

To align assessment with this pedagogical model, the traditional research paper would be replaced or augmented by the “Toolbox Essay.” This assignment would require students to write 1,500–2,000 words addressing the interpretive problem. However, unlike a standard essay where the theoretical framework might be hidden, the Toolbox Essay would require explicit justification.

Students would include a “Methodological Preface” or weave metacognitive commentary throughout the argument, explaining why they chose specific tools. They would be evaluated on the following criteria:

Problem Formulation: Clarity in defining the interpretive puzzle.

Tool Selection: Justification of why specific theories (Warrants) are appropriate for this specific text.

Toulmin Structure: Coherence of the argument structure (Data-Warrant-Claim).

Metacognition: Reflection on the limitations of the chosen tools (Rebuttal).

Hypothesized Learning Outcomes

Learning outcomes of this model would be quite different as compared to the taxonomic approach. This model would test procedural knowledge, instead of encyclopedic knowledge of “isms.” Students would be taught to see theories as heuristic

devices—tools for thinking—rather than doctrines for believing. This would be consistent with the data provided by Rahman et al. (2016), who propose that problem-based methodology would encourage more in-depth critical thinking and participation. The model would directly fight theory anxiety, as it would no longer be about the students attempting to get it right by the master philosopher, but about getting the text to work within their own community of interpretation.

These are, however, theoretical predictions. The real usefulness of this model in the reduction of anxiety, enhancement of the quality of argumentation, and metacognitive awareness is an empirical issue that needs to be addressed systematically.

Theoretical Implications and Anticipated Challenges **Implications for literary Studies Pedagogy**

The shift from taxonomy to toolbox has significant theoretical implications for literary studies pedagogy. It represents a move away from coverage—the impossible attempt to teach every major theorist from Plato to the present—toward competency in critical thinking. It encourages a form of pluralism that would be rigorous rather than relativistic. In the Rortyan sense, students would learn that while there are many possible vocabularies, not all vocabularies work equally well for all purposes.

Addressing Anticipated Critiques

The “Shallow Instrumentalism” Objection

One possible criticism of this model is that it encourages superficial instrumentalism, whereby sophisticated intellectual traditions are seen as technical devices. Critics may add that applying Marxism without the knowledge of the full burden of dialectical materialism makes a revolutionary philosophy a literary device, depriving it of its political thrust and moral obligations. Those scholars who have been interested in schools of critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1983) may argue that theory must not merely offer a vocabulary of analysis, but must change consciousness.

This objection should not be disregarded. But the neopragmatism of Rorty is a strong defence. Claims about philosophical depth often mask attempts to locate non-existent foundations (Rorty, 1989). The real intellectual stimulation is to watch how a vocabulary can enable us to redefine the world in new and helpful ways. The Toulmin model does not exclude the in-depth involvement; on the contrary, the Backing part of the model involves having students read theoretical materials closely to confirm their warrants. Knowledge of the genealogy of a tool will serve to improve the use of the tool, and so will knowledge of the optics improve the use of a microscope.

Additionally, the pragmatist answer is that political commitment is an emergent phenomenon and not a pre-existing one. A student who finds that the feminist theory lets her express previously unseen silencing patterns can be more engaged in feminist politics specifically due to the vocabulary being productive. The model does not require ideological conversion prior to the engagement; it welcomes experimentation which can result in more serious engagements.

The Problem of Theoretical Coherence

Another anticipated critique concerns the coherence of combining incompatible frameworks. Is it justifiable for a student to apply both Marxist and Psychoanalytic instruments to the same text when historically these traditions have been in conflict? Will this method not end up in the incoherent bricolage--a quilt of conflicting presuppositions? The pragmatist answer to this is that the theoretical incompatibility is frequently exaggerated. There is conflict between theories at the foundational metaphysics level, but no metaphysical consistency is needed in the interpretation of literature. Both class analysis and psychodynamic concepts can be productively used in a reading when both vocabularies shed light on various aspects of the text. The point is that students have to recognize when they are changing frameworks and explain every change by the explanatory power. The Rebuttal section of the Toulmin schema gives students room to address possible contradictions and to justify why one framework is better than the other in making certain interpretive moves.

The Risk of Dehistoricization

The third issue is that the toolbox model dehistoricises theory, showing frameworks as ahistorical tools, instead of the product of particular intellectual and political situations. This might hide the fact that theoretical vocabularies have been created out of specific struggles and contain values.

This is a valid issue that the model should take into consideration. The element of Backing must require students to engage not only with the conceptual apparatus of a theory but also with the historical development of the theory as well as its political interests. To be responsible in using these vocabularies, it is important to understand that feminist theory emerged as a result of specific struggles by women to achieve liberation, or the Postcolonial theory emerged as a result of anti-imperial movements. The model ought to focus on the fact that tools are not neutral; they have histories, values and political orientations that predetermine what we can see and say.

Limitations And Scope Conditions

First, with respect to pedagogical setting, the model is mainly used in introductory or intermediate undergraduate courses in which the main objective is to break the resistance to theory and form the minimum level of competency in theoretical reasoning. A more historicist or genealogical approach might be more suitable in the more advanced seminars or graduate courses, in understanding the intellectual history of the discipline.

Second, in terms of instructor preparation, the model puts high expectations on the instructor who should be comfortable to play the role of a generalist guide in many areas of theory. This can be difficult for early-career instructors or those who are highly specialised in one theoretical tradition. The model is effective when teachers are able to adopt an attitude of pragmatic pluralism as opposed to promoting a preferred framework.

Third, on disciplinary assumptions, the model presupposes that the main purpose of literary study is the interpretive problem-solving. This might not be in line with every pedagogical philosophy. The problem-solving framing might not be satisfactory to instructors who perceive literary study as more of a cultural critique, aesthetic appreciation, or political intervention.

Fourth, in terms of cultural and linguistic backgrounds, the model has been conceptualized in an Anglophone, North American background. The question of its applicability to other educational systems where the role of theory in literary studies can be organized in other ways is open.

Toward Empirical Validation: A Research Agenda

Although the theoretically consistent pedagogical model has been defined in this article, its effectiveness in practice is an empirical issue. The research agenda below explains the research studies required to verify, refine or even disprove this approach.

This theoretical framework yields four main research questions. The first concerns whether the Toolbox Model leads to a decrease in theory anxiety. Students who are taught using the Problem-Based Theory module would be expected to report much lower levels of theory anxiety in comparison to students who are taught using the traditional taxonomic methods. This may be measured by pre/post anxiety tests by adaptation of existing anxiety measures, comparison groups that contrasted the Toolbox method with the traditional theory survey courses, and qualitative interviews that examined the emotional and cognitive perceptions of students to theory. The indicators of success would be the decrease in the self-reported scores of anxiety, the decrease in the use of avoidance language in the student reflections, and the growth in the readiness to read theoretical texts.

The second question is whether the model enhances argument sophistication. Those students who would be taught using the Toolbox Model would be expected to have

more advanced arguments with better warrant identification and support than control groups. Some of the suggested approaches are comparative analysis of student essays based on standardized rubrics, presence or absence of explicit warrants and supporting evidence, metacognitive commentary quality, and group revision patterns.

The third question is the transferability of the critical thinking skills. The metacognitive awareness that can be achieved in the Toolbox Model can be transferred to other interpretive contexts beyond the initial course. Tracking of the students through several courses, the ability of students to implement the theoretical frameworks into the new context, and the ability of students to determine the suitability of various interpretive tools would be suitable measures.

Lastly, the fourth question deals with implementation issues. The model is expected to have certain difficulties in its implementation connected with the preparation of instructors, resistance of students to the metacognitive work, and institutional barriers. Qualitative studies of instructors using the model, focus groups with students on their experiences, and records of real-world barriers and adaptive measures would aid in identifying the most frequent barriers and inform the creation of best practices and support resources.

Conclusion

Theory anxiety in undergraduate literary studies is largely a product of pedagogical choices. By teaching theory as a museum of formidable “isms,” we invite students to feel inadequate. This paper has suggested a pragmatist alternative, which is based on the anti-foundationalism of Richard Rorty and the practical logic of Stephen Toulmin. The model of the Problem-Based Theory redefines theories as vocabularies, i.e., tools that are used to solve particular communicative and interpretive issues. By asking students to become bricoleurs who choose and justify their tools, we can possibly do justice to the richness of critical theory and make it accessible and empowering.

However, this article is primarily a theoretical proposal. The pedagogical effectiveness of the model is not ensured by its conceptual coherence. The above research agenda has identified the empirical questions that need to be answered before this approach can be strongly recommended for widespread adoption. When we beckon students into the field, we must not aim to make them soldiers in the theory wars, but to prepare them as craftspeople in the shop of meaning. Whether the toolbox model achieves this goal remains to be discovered through systematic classroom research.

This model will be applied to real classroom situations in the future; data on student performance will be gathered, and results will be reported to either confirm, refine or disprove the theoretical predictions presented here. It is only in such empirical inquiry that we can ascertain whether pragmatist reframing of theory pedagogy alleviates anxiety

and promotes critical thinking or whether it brings about new issues which necessitate further pedagogical innovation.

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