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Engagement as an educational objective

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Abstract: While internships schemes exist, few politics modules encourage research based learning to generate research and evidence for policy debate. This example draws from a final year undergraduate module that explores Britain's relationship with the EU and assesses the pedagogic role of policy engagement on student learning, motivation and reflection. This note outlines the pedagogic rationale for engagement with the House of Lords EU Select Committee and identifies actions through which it may be further enhanced.

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The Pedagogic Rationale for Student Engagement

While there may be good democratic reasons for political institutions to engage with young people, these engagements can also have considerable educational value for research based learning. Research based learning assumes that we want students to be active participants in the generation of knowledge rather than passive audiences who receive it. It also assumes that in addition to teaching good quality academic content we might also teach research skills that allow students to apply research procedures that enable them to make empirically valid claims.

In the bottom left hand corner (C) of fig. 1 students receive research content passively as an audience, for example by listening to a lecture that reviews the main literature on a subject. Students critically engage with published research content by reviewing literature (A). They also discuss methodology and theories of knowledge (D). All of these forms of learning are brought to bear when they actively research empirical material (B).

FIG1 ABOUT HERE

Delivering student research skills is therefore a combination of increasing the student centredness of the teaching and of developing the practice of research rather than incorporating knowledge. Redefining “student vs teacher”, “learning vs knowledge” dichotomies has generated long standing debate over the relationship between teachers and students in HE (Rachman 1987; Kember 1997). In this case study we examine how placing responsibility with the student, a central component of

student centred learning¹, has been enabled through the constructive alignment of student and teacher interests to focus on policy engagement (Biggs 1999; Larkin & Richardson 2013). Unlike problem based learning the approach maintains significant teacher direction. In doing so enables large classes of students to engage in policy debates while also allowing them to draw on their policy analysis skills to improve their marks in their conventional assessments and other modules.

Constructive Alignment and Practitioner Interest

Biggs' concept of "constructive alignment" was initially developed to show how linking clearly stated learning objectives with learning and assessment activities could help to integrate students from diverse backgrounds (Biggs 1999). This would shift the focus of teaching to the student, encouraging them to construct their own knowledge inside and outside the classroom (Wang et al 2013). The approach focuses on identifying learning outcomes and designing learning resources and assessments that focus on delivering these outcomes explicitly. It has been widely used in HE institutions. As a constructivist approach to education "constructive alignment" is flexible as long as module objectives and assessments are consistent with the module aims. If engaging with policy practitioners is a module aim it therefore needs to be integrated into other objectives, like skills development and assessment.

One of the main tasks of effective teaching is to challenge student epistemes as this is central to the process of learning:

¹ "ways of thinking and learning that emphasize student responsibility and activity in learning rather than what the teachers are doing"

“Individuals' cognitive schemes allow them to establish an orderliness and predictability in their experiential worlds. When experience does not fit with the individual's schemes, a cognitive disequilibrium results, which triggers the learning process. This disequilibrium leads to adaptation. Reflection on successful adaptive operations leads to new or modified concepts, contributing to re-equilibration” (Maclellan & Soden 2004:2)

Shaking students from their comfort zones by presenting them with a different perspective on their learning is a valuable resource as it forces students to reflect on the challenge, adapt and so learn. The author has experience of 20 years of professional training of pre accession candidate countries to the EU. These training sessions involved delegates from a wide range of professional backgrounds², who were taught similar policies and issues relating to the EU as a student module would. However there were important differences too. The practitioners were interested in the policies of the EU to do different things. They needed knowledge that would help them to resolve specific practical and institutional problems, rather than test theoretically informed puzzles. Second practitioners required different sorts of knowledge to students. While some conceptual frameworks were helpful, both for context and for clarity, the priority was for succinct, accurate and credible information that could usefully be used to inform effective decision making. Usually this was in the form of policy documents, formal decision making procedures and legal or quasi-legal texts. Policy makers also bring different knowledge to students making decisions about issues long in advance of their analysis in peer review literature. Making such decisions would often be in relation to expediency, strategy and immediacy with very

² These included Ministries of European Integration, the UN, WBG, FCO, EU institutions and a wide range of other NGOs. Without systematic analysis such diversity prohibits simplistic observations of practitioner requirements. But a few observations are appropriate if obvious.

little intellectual apparatus. Students would be rewarded for methodological rigour and theoretical clarity. Students and policy practitioners therefore would observe an empirical policy problem through different lenses: the former through concepts the latter through the limits of possibility³. See figure two.

FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

Introducing the module

“Britain and the EU” is a final year UG module at the University of Leeds. The module aims include developing research skills and offering evidence to policy makers. This year, for example, ten students submitted reports to the Foreign and Commonwealth Offices Review of the Balance of Competence in a range of policy areas and their submissions will be formally considered and acknowledged in the final reports. Last year four students presented their reports to the House of Lords Select Committee on EU Affairs one of the UK’s most reputable venues for discussing Britain’s relationship. Their reports all addressed a question similar to that which the Committee had been addressing: “Is EU Enlargement in the British Interest?” These students discussed their reports with Lord Boswell, Lord Trimble, Lord Hannay and Baron Maclennan in the House of Lords in May 2013. In both cases the students were informed at the beginning of the module of the expectation that their work would be submitted to an elite policy audience. This presented a “high challenge” environment for students to work in

³ There are other very important issues that also separate “constructive alignment” from the policy world, not least the importance of a concrete reality with sanctions and consequences, which a constructivist pedagogy would avoid. These issues and specifically the issue of the material or ideological nature of policy making presents many “teachable moments” not discussed here.

that was alien to their previous experiences. In order to make this a constructive experience high levels of support were also provided (Larkin, Helen & Ben Richardson 2013).

FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE

The module uses a range of techniques to deliver skills to the students. These include blended learning and problem solving but are accompanied by significant tutor led support both in the class room, in additional sessions and in online support. There are two forms of assessment a 1500 word report that requires the students to collate, analyse and present data on a specific policy related topic. Usually only one question is offered and is designed with policy makers in mind or in consultation with them, with the work submitted after the midterm reading week. The aim of this assessment is to baptise the students in the use of empirical data in its many forms (speeches, archives, statistics etc). The other 50% of the final mark is awarded to a project submitted at the end of the semester. This 3500 words project assesses the students' ability to contextualise a research question and test it using empirical information. Students are encouraged to consider how this is done in journal articles and to mimick some of the presentational and organisational characteristics of a journal article.

Integrating Student Support

At the start of the first session the students are asked to reflect what kind of learner they are. We do this in the introduction session in which students explain to

their partners how they would build flat pack furniture (the IKEA test). This enables students to identify with different strengths such as “readers” (who follow the instructions), “talkers” (who call a friend) and “doers” (who jump straight in) in the group and allows them to reflect on the skills they have and need. The primary aim of this exercise is to show students how the different elements of the module fit together.

The weekly sessions are organised through a series of questions. These are developed in the lectures and guide the students in two exercises. First the questions present the students with questions to answer in their reading of the literature in the module guide, usually a chapter from a text book and two or three key articles. By reading the literature and assessing how it relates to the lecturer’s question (and any of their own) students are active in their engagement with the literature and come prepared for seminar discussions to discuss how the literature answers the question.

Second, the same lecture questions are used to organise web links. These are administered through an online “virtual learning environment” that students access in preparation for their seminars. The links will take them to empirical resources such as Minutes of Cabinet meetings in the National Archives digitised collection, key speeches of PMs on Europe (in text and video), procedures of the EU select committee homepage, Council Consillium monthly summaries, Commission Annual Work Programmes, archives, videos etc. Students can then try to answer the same questions by referring to the empirical material. In doing so they are encouraged to consider the quality of the data and what it means in relation to the literature they have read – ie how does it answer the question?

These three forms of learning are integrated under supervision in the seminars which are organised as follows. The first five minutes involves a discussion of current affairs and stories, usually led by a student, that are related to the issue of the week or the module more generally. Students are encouraged to offer their views and analysis. Next the lecture is discussed and clarifications of literature or lecture provided. Following this the structure is looser with students encouraged to bring what they have done to the discussion. This may be readings that offered an interpretation of the question or policy documents and speeches that provide information on the contingencies surrounding the event. In this way theories and concepts from the literature can be discussed alongside empirical material from the weblinks. This allows us to interrogate how effective the theories or concepts are, what their weaknesses may be and whether this is because of failings in the concepts or the quality of the data.

For example, in the session on sovereignty the lecture may conclude by asking “What does sovereignty mean in the UK and how is it defended in relation to the EU?” The literature explains how “de jure” and “de facto” sovereignty are organised and the web links take the students to the Parliament’s scrutiny system to explore “de jure” sovereignty in the procedures of the UK parliament. We can also discuss how this 2011 EU Act amended this process and what this tells us about the management of Parliamentary sovereignty by the core executive. To understand “de facto” sovereignty (or autonomy) we explore the Council Of Ministers (aka CONSILLIUM) “Monthly Summary of Council Acts”. This demonstrates how member states have voted in the Council of Ministers in the legislative process and offers brief explanations as to why these positions were held that can be explored further by

students or in the class⁴. In the seminars the conceptual and practical implications of the coexistence of these two forms of sovereignty can be discussed and illustrated through reference to the literature and committee reports. Through these discussions we are also able to discuss the research processes, why certain links were chosen and what makes the available material credible. Through this students are actively participating in research and dealing with empirical data in its rawest state. They are relying on their judgement and research skills to analyse the material and to draw effective conclusions.

Student reflection is encouraged as students have to consider how the material relates to what they have read, discovered and discussed. The skills developed here are assessed in the report. This evaluates students on the quality of the data that they accumulate, the synthesis and analysis that they undertake on that data and the efficacy of their presentation. Through this they demonstrate that they are able to make sense of the material in relation to its context. However reflection also requires reimagining how the world might be or in this case how the material that the students are analysing could be newly interpreted through an existing approach or a new perspective (Ryan 2013). This form of deeper reflection is realised through the development of the module in three sections – history, process and policy. The historical dimensions to UK EU relations are presented broadly at face value, with the focus being on trying tested approaches using archive material from the PRO’s digital collection or speeches. These relate a wide range of factors together but do not do seek systematic underpinning explanations that link them together. When we discuss the processes of UK scrutiny the political biases become evident in the institutional

⁴ Later in the module we may discuss how Euroscepticism has accompanied the rise of popular sovereignty through discussions of UKIP.

procedures that govern EU policy making. The core executive is preeminent in this for example raising questions as to the ways that EU is deployed by political leaders. The final section of the module addresses specific policy issues such as the economy, foreign policy and regional policies. These are all intended to reveal the imbalance of interests in EU policy making and the social and economic asymmetries that are the consequences of the UK's political system. By the end of the semester, and as students prepare their projects, there is much deeper reflection on the earlier sections of the module – the history and the processes – in the light of these discussions. Students are then able to explore and critique the concepts used in those earlier discussions by re-examining the concepts against the empirical material available for that week.

Student Motivation

FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE

As the module demands a lot of the students, some consideration has been made to how the module aims to motivate students. First there is a specific goal orientated commitment to teaching excellence with the specific focus on delivering results. The introductory lecture identifies how “teaching the students to get first” is one of the module's core organisational principles. The use of reports leading into projects builds on the fluency and confidence that the students have gained in the reports and allows them to make claim to delivering work that matches the descriptors for first class work. Specifically students are shown how testing concepts using empirical carefully selected data enables them to meet the marking criteria for a first

which require “the sophisticated selection, interpretation and analysis of evidence and a high level ability to relate this to theory”. The module has delivered very high levels of externally validated first class grades for the students (rising to 24% this past semester).

In addition to goal orientation students are also motivated by the importance of their research (both to themselves and to policy debates) and to ensure that students “realise that their judgements are respected” (Maclellan 2008: 417) (see exhibit 3). This is promoted through discussions of current affairs at the start of each seminar in which students express their views of relevant stories. This respect is reinforced in the trust placed in students to deliver work that is of quality for professional policy makers, who are usually identified by office.

Some of the students do find the experience of writing a report, often for the first time, anxiety inducing. Significant support is offered to students to acknowledge the emotional strain that this may place on students. Support is provided collectively (in the form of regular discussions of report writing in seminars, additional lectures outside the teaching calendar) so that students do not become dependent on the tutor. Once completed students become adept at taking on the new challenge of the project as the module presents different challenges or material through its progression (Maclellan 2008).

The role of Engagement

What does engagement with policy practitioners bring to the educational experience? Other teaching techniques like student research projects or problem based learning offer students the opportunity to develop their research skills. Political institutions offer a wide range of opportunities for students to access the decision making process both as an audience (most offer packages for students) and as participants (more irregularly through consultations like 5 Ideas for a Younger Europe”). Students can “pretend” to be policy makers in simulations that provide an alternative experience and can visit and view political actors through the press, public events and even biographies.

The main benefit of using engagement as an educational objective is that it helps to integrate the diversity of activities in the module. Students are pelted with learning support opportunities and competing forms of pedagogy and website that are intended to empower the student. But rarely are they give the opportunity to express their own views and to act on their own judgement and without the “benefit” of text books or authoritative articles, authors and concepts. Whereas Biggs focus on “constructive alignment“ was to communicate greater clarity of the module to students from different backgrounds, the focus on engagement as an objective enables students to use the range of resources available in relation to a specific task – the report.

The module is structured so that student practice engaging with empirical material from the first seminar. The historical archive is rich and when viewed in retrospect demonstrates the uncertainties and complexities that policy makers are forced to work under. As the students work through the different weeks they become

familiar with understanding the limits of political action and the factors constraining political actors and develop research skills to manage these uncertainties. Once the report has been completed the students are able to use these research skills and improved confidence to take on major debates in the literature, thereby generating new knowledge and high grades.

Central to the approach is the generation of cognitive disequilibrium. This is presented to the students as they grapple with the uncertainty of being a practitioner interpreting incomplete data. Rather than following perceived wisdom presented in textbooks they have to challenge assumptions and seek evidence. This uncertainty is compounded by the form of assessment that is not used elsewhere in the school.

The engagement with practitioner motivates students as it acknowledges their voice, develops a challenge they can overcome and improves their grades. Yet more work needs to be done if the interaction is to be genuinely political rather than pedagogic in value. Students are constrained by the nature of the report (which focuses on empirical collation and analysis) rather than for example the critical literatures valued in the project. The tutor moderates the submissions and there are issues relating to the dependence of the tutor on the policy elites for access and future engagements. So these are not the “true voices” of students and perhaps working with more specific groups speaking to power would improve this.

This could present an additional “teachable moment” in which students could reflect on why their reports were not influential in political debates allowing them to consider what the components of influence are likely to be in relation to European

policy. There a variety of mainstream political science approaches that explore advocacy coalitions, issue framing and agenda setting and policy learning which could offer insight here. In addition students could draw on critical political economy approaches that highlight hegemonic ideas and dominant societal interests in policy making. This would encourage further reflective consideration by students especially if the submission of their projects was timed to be able to reflect on the responses to their reports. Currently the reports and projects are o separate issues but if the report was considered by policy makers in late November, students could incorporate this as feedback into their projects submitted in January.

Practitioner involvements

At present the involvement of practitioners is seen as important in production of reports. Certainly there are benefits to this in terms of the recognition for students, currency of issues, the profile that their collaboration might bring to the exercise and the module. There will at least involve organising the exercise so that the timetable converges with the rhythms of the practitioners. It may also be beneficial to identify the main characteristics of evidence that they require (such as format, size (e.g. less than x pages, formal language etc) and many Parliamentary bodies offer guidance that can help there. While practitioners will probably not be able to offer gradings of papers under University regulations, they can indicate strengths that could be incorporated into future evaluation frameworks.

There are also costs to working to the interests and timeframes of policy makers. Frequently the timeframes do not coincide, or place additional pressure on

already tight University schedules. More importantly the potential for withdrawal (or explicit or implicit threat to do so) may limit the learning opportunities of the students. Students need to be able to submit work that is “critical” in its engagement, either to the practitioners or to other actors in the policy process in addition to those subject to their critiques.

This raises issues relating to the ethics of students practitioner engagement. Is it ethical for students to critique practitioners who are offering support in teaching outcomes? Is it ethical for practitioners to use student to legitimate policy decisions in which they do not have a formal “interest”? What, if any, understanding should there be between the users and producers of the reports and how should this be managed? Can critical work damage the reputation of the University or the practitioner institution perhaps fallaciously if students are less careful in their analysis than a peer reviewed article might be? If so at what point does the tutor block submission or edit sections? Furthermore there are issues relating to the amount of stress that students can be put under by this approach and should this be done by restricting the scope of the exercise or defining limits more clearly.

Conclusions

This paper has examined some of the pedagogic issues surrounding student engagement with real policy debates in a taught module format. By integrating the aims and objectives of the module towards practitioner engagement a number of advantages become clear. First the epistemic certainties of the average undergraduate can be challenged in a productive way. More research is required to test alternative

explanations (is the benefit acquired through the assessment - report and project - rather than essays or exams), as POLIS second highest scoring module does it “select” high performing students, is it the focus on teaching for firsts etc). Second student motivation could also benefit from the engagement focus of the module. Students seeking to score high marks may choose to select this module for its high scores and transparent method for delivering first class work. But in addition to goal oriented motivators students are repeatedly confirmed that their voice matters. This is repeated throughout the module as seminars all begin with a review of newspapers from a student’s perspective. There is also an implicit contract between the tutor and the student that if the student produces work of a good enough quality, the university will use its influence to give them access to high level policy makers. Finally the variety of assessment and learning methods may stimulate students by demonstrating the range of their ability and providing satisfying results. Finally the module encourages reflection. The topics covered are of current interest and presented often to contrast to the received wisdom in the media and common debate. But more importantly the module is structured to encourage deeper learning and reflection through the course of the module the first weeks focus on historical fact with only limited theoretical input. The second section of the module introduces the power asymmetries in the management of UK EU relations, and the last sections analysis of policy issues reveals power and interest in detail. When students turn to their projects for their final assessment they are then able to reflect on the earlier sections of the module and to reinterpret the data there in relation to more critical constructs and research questions.

There are also additional weaknesses in the module. At present the module is very much vanilla in its engagement with policy elites. With nine UK universities

offering “Britain and the EU” modules (and possible similar modules in other member state universities) there is scope for a far more extensive debate about the UK and the EU than present by an informed and young electorate. There is now an ambition to set up a discussion board between university students engaged with these modules in the politics departments of three UK universities. There is potential therefore for extending the range of students involved to include students from e.g. law, business for example. However as much EU legislation is technical in nature there could also be potential for cross engagement across faculties to scrutinise proposals and offer evidence at the regulatory impact assessment stage of the legislative process that the EU and many member states undertake (Radaelli et al 2013). With almost 2.5 million students studying at UK universities there is great scope for further elaboration of Engagement as an educational objective.

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FIGURE 1

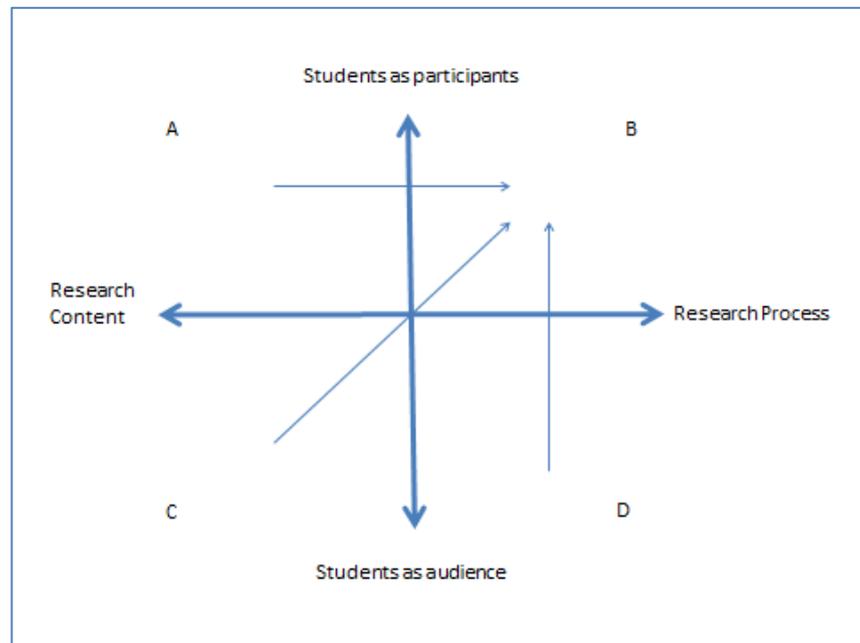


FIGURE 2

Figure two – the lenses of students and practitioners.

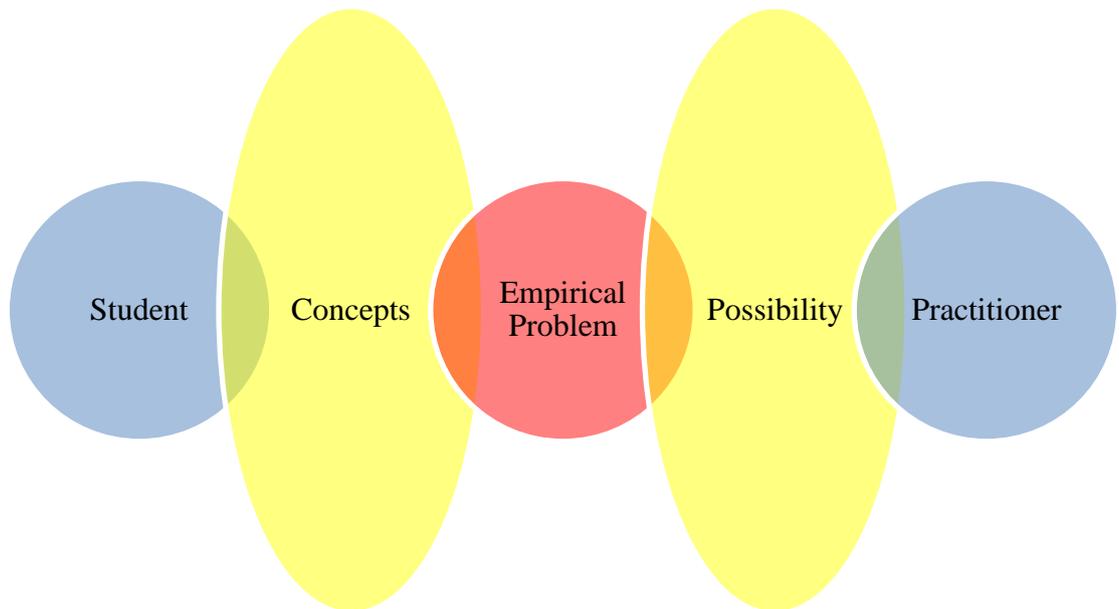


FIGURE 3

Module Objectives:

- To introduce the complexity of the UK's relationship with the EU;
- Study key periods, issues and phenomena of the UK's relationship with the EU, its impact on UK politics and on the EU;
- Develop skills in the gathering, analysis and presentation of empirical data
- To apply and critically engage with competing conceptual frameworks of Britain's relationship with the EU -
- Offer evidence to the FCO's ongoing "Review of the Balance of Competences"

FIGURE 4

Student motivation

“I was pleasantly surprised by how much real discussion took place between us students and the Lords over the various topics we had each covered in our reports. I left [the House of Lords] with a feeling of great satisfaction and achievement” Britain and the EU student 2013