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Teaching EU Foreign Policy via Problem-Based Learning

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Abstract

In this contribution I showcase my experience of integrating an active learning element in my teaching of EU foreign policy, by experimenting with Problem-Based Learning (PBL). I document how I went about my ambition of adding a PBL aspect to my EU foreign policy course for 86 students, and how my students and I experienced this first attempt. I also illustrate how I took my first experience and student feedback into account to fine-tune my application of PBL, before concluding on the lessons that I took away for integrating an active learning element in my traditional course of EU foreign policy. By sharing my own experience, doubts and critical reflections I aim to contribute to this special issue´s objective to provide honest and hands-on insights and reflection on how this innovation in the learning approach via PBL has been put into practice.

Keywords

Teaching; Learning; Problem-Based Learning; EU foreign policy, European foreign policy

INTRODUCTION: THE AMBITION AND STARTING POINT

A classic model of teaching EU foreign policy might entail lectures covering the historical development of EU foreign policy from the European Defence Community through European Political Cooperation (EPC) to the Lisbon Treaty and the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), the (contested) nature and definition of the Union as an international actor, its legal base, and any number of lectures on specific policy areas such as trade, development, relations with key global partners (US, China, Russia, African Union et al), human rights, security/defence and/or conflict resolution. At graduate level this content might be delivered through seminar formats in which students take the lead in presenting empirical material and arguments, and class time then revolves around moderated discussion of associated key issues and questions. A variety of mechanisms designed to increase students' engagement in the subject matter; mini simulations, debates, team projects and so on can then supplement this basic format. At root, however, it is difficult to remove the lecturer from the centre of the room and even more difficult to ensure that the students take responsibility for their own learning. Frequently one finds advanced students capable of making this leap, but for the majority, the sense remains that the exercise is one in which students are presented with facts, with arguments about those facts and finally the means by which such facts/arguments can be assessed and measured. Too often, such students seek direction on what is the 'correct' interpretation of facts such that they can effectively present the same in final essays or exams.

The issue which is core, therefore, is how – for the average student – to maximise their engagement with the subject such that they begin to take ownership of their own learning and rely on the lecturer not as the director of the learning enterprise but as a support to it. In this regard, a quote from Confucius is perhaps apposite 'I will not instruct my students until they have really tried hard but failed to understand'.

Despite many innovations over several years with this traditional model (at both graduate and undergraduate levels) - and very positive teaching evaluations associated therewith – I found that there was a substantive challenge that remained: engaging students more directly in their own learning and a 'leaning out' from that process by me as the lecturer. To be frank, a personal ambition was also to reinvigorate my own engagement in pedagogy and to stimulate a more creative approach to teaching. Through engagement with the ANTERO ERASMUS Jean Monnet Network, I became directly aware of the Problem Based Learning approach (PBL). This was being applied by colleagues at graduate and undergraduate level at Maastricht University (Maurer 2015; Maurer and Neuhold 2012) and appeared to address my own core concern with learning ownership.

The key issue for me was how to make the learning process an active rather than a passive one. Here the work of Gijselaers (1996) is crucial where he identifies this aspect as being critical to the overall utility of PBL as a teaching approach or 'a process in which the learner actively constructs knowledge' (Gijselaers 1996:13). This for me was the key innovation that I wished to introduce to my teaching – even within the context of an institution that was – at least in my disciplinary and cognate areas – overwhelming reproducing a very traditional pedagogy.

The challenge was that the underlying logic of PBL is very different to traditional approaches and requires what has been described as a 'paradigm change' in approach (Birenbaum 2003) moving away from an 'empiricist (positivist) epistemological stance' (Birenbaum 2003). Ultimately, if somewhat ironically, I found resistance to this paradigm shift far more entrenched among students while the institution – at least through its teaching and learning supports, was not just supportive but at times even evangelical. This is also in line with the often-reported need to not only prepare and train academics in thinking differently about learning, but to also consider that students might feel overwhelmed or unsuited for this different kind of learning pedagogy (Maurer 2015: 381).

A subsidiary advantage was also to make a clearer link between scholarly knowledge and applied knowledge. Without subscribing to a notion that the purpose of the neo-liberal university is to provide high-quality inputs to a growing economy, I was anxious to give students real-world context for what could be perceived to be abstract concepts and/or lots of simple empirical detail. This might also be then usefully mapped onto some of the professional ambitions of students – some pay-off as it were for the paradigm shift with which they would struggle. This too is something that Gijselaers (1996: 14-16) underlines – signifying the importance of linking acquired knowledge with its translation into a real-work context. As Maurer and Neuhold (2012: 3) state; the main focus must be 'Educating students towards independent, reflective and sustainable learners.' They also warn however, that 'Students might be overwhelmed at the beginning, and also need some guidance in how to approach new topics, especially when suddenly working in a group.' This is a point that came back to haunt me in my own endeavours.

GETTING STARTED: DESIGNING THE 'EU FOREIGN POLICY' COURSE WITH PBL

My ambitions crystallised at a workshop directed by Dr Heidi Maurer, from Maastricht University, and Dr Terry Barrett of the UCD Dublin Centre for Teaching and Learning in 2016. The approaches applied (Barrett and Moore 2011 and Barrett 2017) opened new vistas in trying to address this goal through PBL. The attraction of this approach was rooted for me in the foundational understanding that knowledge is constructed rather than simply transmitted. Through such construction, students discover the antecedents of knowledge in that area but also its contestants and reinforcing commonalties. Through that awareness they then begin to build for themselves an understanding of the world that they inhabit. This 'deep learning' promised much by way of increasing student engagement and ownership, redefining the lecturer's role as one of support and facilitator and profoundly restructuring the learning experience (Barrett and Cashman 2010).

A key element during the training workshop was to structure active learning elements according to 'knowledge problems', 'puzzles' or 'threshold concepts', rather than according to topics as we often do as academic instructors. The focus therefore would be upon the critical concepts that we want our students to understand, rather than what kind of descriptive knowledge we aim to cover during the course. During the workshop we also concluded that as instructors we have a tendency to add new aspects to the course each year, while actually a refocus on the few essential learning objectives would give more room for students to engage with those objectives in more depth.

Thus, I began by (re)defining the learning objectives for my Level Three undergraduate module INRL30030 EU in the World. These were not hugely dissimilar to those previously defined in earlier very different iterations of the module, but the ambition was less to seek out new objectives than to better achieve those which I had previously defined. These were that students would be able to:

- Demonstrate a detailed knowledge of the evolution, formation and implementation of EU foreign policy.

- Debate and discuss these policies as they relate to a number of significant contemporary challenges.

- Evaluate and apply the major theoretical approaches in International Relations to EU policies.

- Understand the construction of the European Union's foreign, security and defence policy.

- Critically analyse EU foreign policy through contrasting perspectives and utilising detailed empirical material.

Students were advised in the published syllabus that the module would be taught in a PBL format with a mix of 24 twice-weekly seminars of 50 minutes each. The seminars would be based on PBL small-group work interspersed with traditional lectures. This alternation was built into the structure of the module from the start. Students were to read the specified material for each lecture/seminar, to undertake active learning as part of the PBL framework, and to reflect critically on that reading and research. The university's VLE system (Blackboard) was designated as a support to the module.

I also relied on a template shamelessly borrowed – but clearly credited – to Maastricht University which was applying a '7-step' approach to the application of PBL (Maurer 2015: 381). This mimicked each group project as a discrete research exercise that effectively guided students through a self-directed process of thought, reflection and execution, with specific and well-defined roles assigned to each group member and processes for addressing group management. Derived from Gijselaers work (1996: 15), this template had the added advantage of providing direct skills development germane to the research process.

Assessment for the revised module was then structured by engagement (10%), x 3 team PBL assignments (30%) and a traditional examination (60%). Originally, student engagement and participation were to be assessed through records of attendance, my professional assessment of contributions to group work and by self and peer review within each student's team. These latter elements of self and peer review were not fully operationalised. A series of three group assignments were to be undertaken by each team of approximately 8-10 students and these were to comprise a 2,000-word written submission with a live group presentation. Each of those three assignments would then account for 10 percent of the final grade (making a total of 30 percent). The final assessment piece was a traditional final two-hour essay-type examination. The three written team assignments were required to be submitted online through the university VLE and 'SafeAssign' software as well as in hard copy.

The assessment strategy and structure of the module was a deliberate compromise. Never having deployed PBL, I was anxious not to experiment too far, and in the event of the abject failure of the PBL component, I wanted to ensure that I had a traditional lecture component and exam to fall back on.

FIRST EXPERIENCES AND IMMEDIATE CHALLENGES

An immediate delivery challenge for the module was students' unfamiliarity with PBL methods. While the evangelical enthusiasm of our colleagues in the UCD Centre for Teaching and Learning had made significant inroads across the natural sciences, exposure of students in the social sciences and humanities to this approach were limited. INRL30300 was a Level Three undergraduate module, with registrations from 83 students across the College of Social Sciences and Law and the College of Arts and Humanities. The cohort comprised 37 students of single or joint honours politics, 24 joint honours students from other social science disciplines (primarily law and economics), with a further 18 joint honours from arts and humanities subjects (English, Italian, French and history) and the balance of ERASMUS, US JYA and occasional students. When asked via a show of hands at the outset of the module, none of these students had had previous experience of PBL teaching methods.

As a result, the first seminar hour was devoted to an explanation and exploration of PBL methods and its application in this module. Emphasis was placed on its utility to students; transferable skills development, professional relevance and the opportunity for deep learning - as outlined in the associated research literature on the subject. Student anxiety – as expressed in Q&A session which immediately followed – was focused on the 'performance' aspect of the group presentations, how to govern/regulate group dynamics and intra-group communications. By and large, students were open and to some degree enthusiastic about the approach.

Another immediate challenge was the drafting of the three problem triggers. The function of these was to introduce a role-play element which would facilitate engagement, but which also spoke to the development of transferable skills and links to professional opportunities. Thus, the triggers were designed as:

- Acting as a civil service team presenting an analysis of the implications of EU membership for Ukrainian foreign policy,
- Presenting a proposal for a broadcast documentary on an EU foreign policy issue/challenge and
- Presenting a case for EU foreign policy action to HRVP Mogherini as a justice-inspired NGO.

In the latter case, a specific link was made to a major real-world H2020 research programme on which I was the local PI (GLOBUS). Linked to this, students were invited (for extra credit) to submit images related to justice in EU foreign policy to the GLOBUS web site and/or via social media (#globusjustice). These were later used to inspire a subsequent piece of project artwork (GLOBUS).[1]

MIDTERM CHALLENGES

The first problem trigger was delivered to students and the initial seminar session went very well. Students were visibly engaged, asking questions and teasing out concepts. Shared group reflections also went well. In final presentations and submitted assignments, however, several groups presented less on the implications for Ukrainian 'foreign policy' of EU membership than on the broader economic and political implications for Ukraine of EU membership per se. This issue was raised in the immediate feedback to the oral presentations and featured in the written comments to students. A brief session

on 'lessons learned' from the first problem trigger – in advance of the second problem trigger – generated a frank classroom discussion. Therein, a number of students felt that in the absence of more directive leadership from me as the lecturer, their groups had been led into something of a cul de sac of their own enthusiasm. In the initial stages of research for the second problem trigger it is noted that the groups were much more assertive in defining the problem at hand and asking for feedback on project design. As noted below, I also took a more proactive role in sitting down with each group rather than passively offering them opportunities to ask questions.

A second issue arose with respect to group dynamics and group composition. Initial group composition had been based on random selection and assignment. I had originally envisaged that groups would remain constant over the course of the semester. However, UCD regulations and practice allows for a two-week window at the start of the semester during which students may deregister and register for new modules. Thus, up to one dozen students left the module and up to 10 joined over the first two weeks of the module. Additionally, a further four ERASMUS and overseas visiting students arrived late – but according to agreed timetables. This meant that some groups had increased from the original 8-9 up to 12 students while others had shrunk to below 5-6 students. Thus, following the first problem trigger I had to consider how best to equalise group size. In the event I proposed a wholesale random reassignment of groups. The logic was twofold: first that this would underline real-world professional circumstances where different project groups would be composed and work together and second to ensure that the pain/disequilibrium of the adjustment would be shared equally rather than limited to those groups whose memberships would have had to be adjusted in isolation.

This decision generated significant student opposition and disquiet. I had underestimated the extent to which the groups had taken on a life of their own. Students had constructed social media platforms to communicate and had negotiated sometimes complex meeting arrangements outside of formal class hours. This latter came as a complete surprise and foreshadowed a subsequent issue of workload which was to be raised. Several groups also insisted that they had managed to create very positive sets of group dynamics and had allocated work load across the semester based on the original group assignments. These advantages would be lost and their work disrupted as a result of reallocation.

A full and frank discussion ensued online and at open session in one of the seminars. Students appreciated the need to address the situation that had arisen and the logic that I presented for equal treatment but were profoundly dissatisfied with that resolution and what they saw as a lack of consultation on my part. The outcome was that the reallocation of groups proceeded, but I gave a guarantee that they would not be changed again over the course of the semester i.e. they would be constant from problem trigger two through problem trigger three. Strikingly, in the second round of group formation, group dynamics were visibly weaker. Whereas in the first round the groups had devised occasionally witty names and identities for themselves, in the second and subsequent round they did not – relying only on the group number to which they had been assigned – clearly underlining the importance of group dynamics and perhaps underscoring the student's dissatisfaction that their 'ownership' of the groups had been traduced.

Another issue which was spontaneously raised by students was workload and credit allocation. As has been noted, for each problem trigger students were meeting extensively outside formal teaching hours and communicating via various shared media platforms. Formal representations were made that this level of effort was not well reflected in assignment credit allocation and that the 60 percent final exam, based on the lectures, was not a valid reflection of their overall effort in the module. Students also feared that in the absence of formal lectures – and their associated notes – they would be less able to perform well in the associated exam. In response, I agreed to structure the exam in such a way as would give students a visible opportunity to deploy the specific knowledge generated in the group work. In the event, I divided the exam into two parts; with students required to answer at least one

question from each. Part one would be based on the problem triggers while part two would be based more on the lectures and associated readings.

INITIAL STUDENT EVALUATION

At the close of the module in 2017 I devoted a seminar to student evaluation. This was conducted within the groups and narrated by a group spokesperson, giving some degree of anonymity to the results. The formal university system of student evaluation and feedback reinforced many of these issues. Meanwhile. unbeknownst to me, at least two other colleagues in my school, offering Level Three modules (all optional), had introduced PBL elements to their teaching. Among final year students in particular, this had raised anxiety as they were – across the board – faced with a new learning method in their final year. Their not unreasonable request was that such innovations should be better coordinated and communicated to students. This issue was raised by student representatives at School Board level. In general, wider student feedback centred on the utility of PBL in principle, workload issues, assessment and the structure of the module.

On PBL as a practice, feedback was certainly mixed to negative. For some students it provided a new and welcome learning environment - one which they had not experienced before and which they appreciated. For one student it was a 'great way to really be interactive with a topic and take interest - ability to share views & learn' while for another 'The interactive nature and PBL structure of this module were hugely beneficial.' The balance, however, was negative. One student complained that

> 'I attended every session, yet I struggled to understand the coherence of what the module was actually supposed to be teaching me about… I was required to essentially teach myself about the role of the EU and all of the different bodies that make up EU governance.'

For another the plea was

> 'Please teach more, for most of us we are new to learning about EU foreign policy. While the projects enhanced understanding of a specific area, I feel I did not learn the broad concepts as well as multiple specific policy areas.'

In sum, the balance of opinion on the PBL methodology was '(We) need more content-based lectures and problem-based learning does not help you learn effectively.' This was reflected in satisfaction ratings for the module with a 26.51 percent response rate.

Workload issues were especially problematic, and students remained unhappy with credit allocation across the assessment elements, highlighting again the disproportionate effort placed in the group work as opposed to the lectures/exam. This also raised issues as regards the 'fairness' of workloads within groups and the issue of 'free-riders'. At its most stark this was expressed as:

> 'The group work gives freeloaders freedom to not participate which in turn increases the workload of the other more conscientious members of the group. No one wants to tackle them. Perhaps more individual accountability within the assignments would work better.'

The assessment 'mix' between group work and traditional exam was not a success. Students lacked confidence in their exam preparation based on the work that they did in the PBL framework and what they saw as the paucity of notes from traditional lectures. Comments centred on the evident mismatch between levels of effort and the grade 'return'. They included the following:

> 'Considering the exam for this is 60% I feel not enough time was dedicated to lectures and too much was wasted on group projects. I feel unprepared going into this exam and unsure where to begin my studies. As a final year student this is highly stressful as I wish to obtain a high grade.'

Also,

> 'I think the module would have been a lot more beneficial if we had more of a foundation on lectures regarding historical and contemporary background on EU foreign policy to begin with instead of having to solve assignments without any prior knowledge on the EU.'

Table 1: Student evaluations 2017-18

		Likert[1]		% of Total				
Question Text	**Times Answered**	**Mean**	**Standard Deviation**	**Strongly Agree**	**Agree**	**Not Sure**	**Dis-agree**	**Strongly Disagree**
I have a better understanding of the subject after completing this module	23	3.04	1.15	4.3	39.1	26.1	17.4	13.0
The assessments to date were relevant to the work of the module.	23	3.57	1.20	17.4	52.2	8.7	13.0	8.7
I achieved the learning outcomes for this module	23	2.96	1.11	8.7	21.7	34.8	26.1	8.7
The teaching on this module supported my learning	23	2.91	1.16	8.7	21.7	34.8	21.7	13.0
Overall I am satisfied with this module	23	2.39	1.08	4.3	13.0	17.4	47.8	17.4

Note: [1] 5-point Likert Scale: (1) Strongly disagree; (2) Disagree; (3) Neither agree nor disagree; (4) Agree; (5) Strongly agree.

Finally, 'I think the assignments for the amount of work required should carry more weight.' and 'The group work is too much for how little it is worth for the assessment, this needs to be more balanced.' Critically, one more positively orientated comment was that 'I would suggest no exam - I feel the Group presentations were a great way of learning. Maybe larger projects with groups with slightly more work involved instead of an exam would be more beneficial'.

On structure, students had some very specific preferences. They widely insisted that the groups – once assigned - should not be adjusted as working relationships were too important. For one student 'groups should be set up and run with from the start, mixing disciplines of students, to mirror the workplace etc. if there are to be changes to groups, consultation with students as opposed to a decree', while for another 'The changing of groups after we had completed the first assignment was a terrible idea.' Students also concluded that the structure of twice-weekly 50-minute seminar/lecture sessions did not allow for sufficient depth of engagement with the problem triggers and a weekly 'double' seminar slot was suggested. Students also felt that they were somewhat cut adrift at the start of the module - suggesting that a higher lecture content at the start of the module – shifting to a higher seminar/group work content towards the close of the module would give students a firmer grounding from which to engage with the material. Finally, there was some dissatisfaction with the role-play aspect of the problem triggers. Students evinced concern that it was not always clear to them whether

they were writing an 'academic' paper or something else, where (for example) the normal conventions of citation, scholarly objectivity etc. should or should not apply.

MODIFICATIONS AND SUBSEQUENT FEEDBACK

In light of the above feedback I made a number of changes to the structure, delivery, and assessment of the module, while maintaining the overall content – and specifically the associated triggers. This was also a response to overall student performance on the module - including the exam component. Performance in the exam was not in fact any lower than in roughly comparable modules in previous years – but students' anxiety in advance of same and their dissatisfaction with their performance was marked.

When the module was then run for the second time in the 2018-2019 cycle a number of revisions were made. Groups were first randomly assigned (through a new VLE system) for the entirety of the modules and changes (as students entered/left the modules over the first two weeks) were handled on an ad hoc basis. Assessment was wholly revised. The exam component was eliminated. The assessment structure was revised as engagement (10%), team assignments (60%) and a reflective learning journal (30%). Student engagement and participation was assessed through records of attendance, my professional assessment and by self and peer review through questionnaires at the end of each of the group exercises. This allowed students to reflect on and score their own performance as well as that of colleagues. The series of three team assignments, based on the aforementioned problem triggers was repeated and again comprised a 2,500-word written submission and oral/visual presentation.

Finally, I introduced as the final assessment mechanism a fortnightly 200-300-word learning journal through the new VLE system. These entries were not themselves graded but formative feedback was provided on a selection thereof. Students were then required to submit a final Reflective Learning Journal Essay which was designed to encourage the student to reflect on both their own learning, their working experience in teams and how these impacted them. If all four fortnightly journal submissions were completed on time, the final essay would be graded at 100 percent, if only three were submitted the essay was graded at 75 percent and if only two of the required entries were submitted then the essay was to be graded at 50 percent.

The structure of module delivery was also adjusted. Accommodation in a dedicated open learning (ALE) facility was secured for a weekly two-hour session (rather than the bi-weekly 50-minute sessions. The balance between lectures and seminars was also revised so that a series of more traditional lecture/discussion sessions were scheduled at the start of the semester with a shift to more self-directed PBL sessions as the module progressed. I had also to adjust my own engagement in the PBL sessions. In the absence of TA support due to resourcing restrictions, and a student cohort of over 85 students, I had to more actively structure my own engagement with the individual groups over the course of the seminar sessions. This involved a 'live clinic' moving from group to group over the course of the seminar session and sitting with the group to tease out issues and address questions. This more proactive engagement also allowed me to intervene earlier where groups were moving off-topic or misinterpreting the key elements of the problem trigger(s).

Table 2: Student evaluations 2018-19

		Likert		% of Total				
Question Text	**Times Answered**	**Mean**	**Standard Deviation**	**Strongly Agree**	**Agree**	**Not Sure**	**Dis-agree**	**Strongly Disagree**
I have a better understanding of the subject after completing this module	15	3.80	.94	20.0	53.3	13.3	13.3	
The assessments to date were relevant to the work of the module	15	3.60	1.35	33.3	26.7	13.3	20.0	6.7
I achieved the learning outcomes for this module	15	3.87	.83	20.0	53.3	20.0	6.7	
The teaching on this module supported my learning	15	3.93	1.10	40.0	26.7	20.0	13.3	
Overall I am satisfied with this module	15	3.80	1.32	40.0	26.7	13.3	13.3	6.7

As noted in the table above, students' qualitative evaluation of the module shifted quite significantly under this second iteration of the module. These included statements that 'I love that there were projects and no final exam. Having to learn a policy paper is really interesting and I think it will help me achieve my goals in a career in the EU in the future', 'The by weekly [sic] learning journals were quite useful', 'The assignments were very relevant and interesting and greatly improved my research skills', 'The lectures which introduced EU foreign policy were very helpful and necessary', and 'Mix between group work and coursework was good'. Unfortunately, data from earlier comparable modules taught more traditionally is not available to contrast student satisfaction between the PBL and non-PBL frameworks.

As regards areas for improvement, the focus still settled on managing and evaluating group dynamics, the scale of effort needed for group projects and the balance between lectures and group work. On the management of groups, the comments centred on free-riders:

> 'Perhaps some more rules or structure to the group work - it happened that a majority of my group was willing to work, however I imagine others' groups might have had less positive dynamics. Some rules or even suggestions, such as to take attendance at group meetings, may help to mitigate issues of free-riding…to make such a suggestion on one's own might seem confrontational.'

Also, 'Nobody likes group work, that is clear, but I can see the merits of it.' For several students the scale of work put into the group projects remained problematic:

> 'I believe that two group projects would have sufficed for the continuous assessment of this module. Three projects on top of the other assignments I had to do in my other four modules made it hard for me to focus on this module'.

Others commented, 'having to do three group essays and a personal essay at the end is so much work that it just distracts from the course material', and 'Reduce the amount of group assignments, forcing large groups of students to produce high quality essays in the space of three weeks, on three separate occasions is too much'.

The final point of contention for some students is pretty much the core of the PBL framework, that is, they simply prefer a traditional lecture structure. One student commented:

> 'I was looking forward to this module but was very underwhelmed by it and feel let down as a whole. I found the first half of the module to be more structured and interesting, but the middle onwards but was disappointing; we had very few teaching classes as we were given time to do group work instead (at least one of the 2 hours although it was sometimes more, or even the 2 hours.) This meant that there was *very little time dedicated to actually teaching us* (author's emphasis), and therefore, I do not feel like I have an adequate knowledge on the topic, or that the learning outcomes have been achieved.'

Also,

> 'I would have appreciated more lectures. While I appreciated the lessons learned about group work and doing my own research, I did not feel like the few lectures we had supported what we did in our group projects and when there were lectures it just felt like contextualisation i.e. actors and their roles in EU foreign policy.'

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

In terms of concluding reflections there are a few notable issues. The first is that PBL visibly delivered greater student ownership of learning - but that this can also be problematic where students genuinely do not seek such ownership or find it unreasonably demanding. Within the highly structured Irish educational system a premium is given to acquisition and reproduction of received knowledge. In staff common rooms across the Irish university sector, conversations around the need to (re)educate Irish students into being critical thinkers and active learners predominate. There is no doubt therefore, that the easier path - and one which flows with the grain of traditional pedagogy – is the simple 'chalk and talk' model. At the same time, the rewards for both the student and lecturer of a transition to a successful PBL approach are significant and worth the additional front-loaded effort and challenges in application. The depth and passion of the students as they identified issues of foreign policy concern, their determination to make a successful case for EU foreign policy intervention (or to highlight significant EU foreign policy missteps) and their ambition to see change, were striking and memorable. They are also experiences which visibly deliver deep learning and which contribute substantially to higher levels of critical thinking and even professional development.

The key lesson for me deriving from this experience over two years is that the design and delivery of PBL as a teaching model has to be thought through exceptionally carefully. The linkages between learning objectives, course content, course delivery and means of assessment – while important regardless of methodology – are perhaps even more acutely intertwined with PBL. The balance between group and individual effort has also to be considered – alongside its relative weight and assessment. Opening avenues for assessment of individual work within the PBL framework is another issue that I would wish to carry forward. Moreover, within the PBL process, serious cognisance must be taken of student 'ownership'. This has broader implications for class dynamics than simply how we teach. It can – and should – provoke deeper reflection on classroom power dynamics and the respective roles of student and teacher. Thus, my own take way from this experience has been that the introduction of PBL has been a net positive, but that it requires serious and detailed preparation, that it demands positive student buy-in and that the effort is more than worth it.

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ENDNOTE

[1] https://www.globus.uio.no/news/2019/art-installation-launch-dublin-apr19.html

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