

# Journal of Contemporary European Research

Volume 16, Issue 1 (2020)

Introduction

## Innovative Teaching on European (Foreign) Affairs

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### ***Citation***

Maurer, H., Niemann, A. and Plank, F. (2020). 'Innovative Teaching on European (Foreign) Affairs', *Journal of Contemporary European Research* 16(1): 4-12. <https://doi.org/10.30950/jcer.v16i1.1153>

First published at: [www.jcer.net](http://www.jcer.net)

## Abstract

This special section seeks to extend our knowledge on teaching innovative methods in European Union (EU) Foreign Affairs in time of challenges, politicisation, and digitalisation. It shares the experience of established and early career colleagues on how they designed, implemented, and applied specific innovations in their teaching. The section focuses on these experiences and aims to provide guidance on how specific ideas were put into practice in a hand-on and reflective manner. It seeks to tip into what works and why and how we as educators deal with challenges. Contributions engage with teaching EU foreign policy via Problem-based learning (Tonra 2020), research-led teaching by linking policy briefs and employability (Lightfoot 2020), responsive teaching in times of radical change (O'Mahony 2020), and synchronous teaching among 13 universities (Plank and Niemann 2020). They offer insights into increasing the ownership of students, raise awareness of their subjectivity, stimulate critical thinking, or enhance student's media skills as well as to foster their employability. All contributions showcase the added value of the applied innovations, but also discuss obstacles that need to be considered in the conceptualisation and implementation of the proposed active approaches.

## Keywords

Teaching; EU Foreign Affairs; Innovative Teaching; Learning

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### RATIONALE OF THIS SPECIAL SECTION

Innovating teaching and learning are high on the agenda of European universities in order to offer a better learning experience for students and to ensure universities remain internationally competitive. Moreover, multiple technological developments such as digitalisation and new learning spaces generate novel opportunities and challenges for teaching. Hence, university instructors are increasingly encouraged to apply innovative methods (Lieberman 2014; Mihai 2014; Lambeir and Ramaekers 2006). While teaching certificates and instructor training for academics are becoming increasingly the norm, the practical application of innovative ideas can feel challenging and overwhelming for any academic. Moreover, the traditionally complex and challenging character of European (Foreign) Affairs (Parker 2016) is increasingly confronted with growing politicisation of European Union policies, European (dis)integration, and contestation of its core values (de Wilde 2011, Börzel 2018, Vollaard 2018). Brexit, the rise of (right wing) populism and Euroscepticism, severe crises, the EU's increasing engagement abroad, or the rule of law crisis have fuelled debates on European (Foreign) Affairs and of course also found their way into the classroom.

There are only few analyses and insights on how to best adapt and implement innovative ideas in practice. While scholars have engaged in analysing methods such as simulations (Usherwood 2014, Niemann et al. 2015, Muno et al. 2017), web-seminars (Lieberman 2014), distance learning (Brühl and Henneberg 2016, Plank et al. 2019), or student engagement (Lightfoot and Maurer 2014), the

application of any teaching pedagogy or teaching method needs to be adjusted to the respective institutional requirements, lecturers' comfort zone and students' experiences and expectations. The pedagogical literature explains in detail the rationale for using particular methods but falls also often short in giving hands-on guidance on how those innovative aspects can now best be integrated in already existing syllabi, lesson plans and course modules.<sup>1</sup>

This special section seeks to extend our knowledge on teaching innovative methods, as it shares the experience of established and early career colleagues on how they designed, implemented, and experienced the application of a particular innovation in their teaching on European politics or European foreign affairs. Since innovation does not necessarily lead to effective learning and analyses often only refer to the popularity of methods among students (Middleton 2010), this special section instead focusses predominantly on the experiences made by the instructors. Hence, this section not only shares ideas of what kind of innovations we as educators can think about, but more importantly provides guidance on how those ideas were put into practice in a hands-on and reflective manner. In doing so it offers the start of a frank and open conversation of how we as educators (and not university administrators) deal with teaching challenges, innovate and also identify what works and what does not work.

In addition, the special section seeks to tip into the challenging character of teaching European (Foreign) Affairs in times of contestation and politicisation. It illustrates how teaching a complex subject like European politics or European foreign policy can make use of innovative teaching and learning processes. We can identify growing challenges for university teaching, which originate, for example, from increased demands for services of digital teaching (Garrison and Vaughan 2007). Moreover, diverse student backgrounds, heterogeneous learning environments, and flexible learning pathways shape teaching. The answer to these challenges is increasingly found in the application of innovative teaching methods such as e-learning, blended learning, the use of social networks, and EU simulations. In this regard, the goal of the special section is to focus and reflect on innovative teaching methods and forms in European Studies and EU foreign affairs.<sup>2</sup> The idea is to share best practices of colleagues, who in an informed manner show how their way of teaching and learning innovates and works better than what they have done before. The aim of the special section thus is to provide insights into why those innovations have been applied, and to show how objectives, instruments and assessment have been aligned within particular structural conditions (class size; background of students; formal constraints etc.) and individual preference of the course convenor.

#### **QUESTIONS ASKED AND SKILLS ADDRESSED**

Active learning pedagogy is at the core of this special section in showcasing the practice of innovating teaching European (foreign) affairs. We focus in particular on two objectives: (i) to activate students and increase student ownership of learning, and (ii) to train critical awareness and reflection of students by connecting and exposing learners to new perspectives. The contributions provide guidance on how we as educators can apply a variety of strategies and tools in order to increase the ownership, engagement, and critical awareness of our students of their own subjective self in the learning process.

In order to ensure that the shared experiences can be adapted to a variety of national, cultural and institutional contexts, all papers provide detailed descriptions of the selected innovation and the broader context that triggered the need for change. The contributions then explain the choices made and the rationale for such choices with regard to implementing and applying the teaching innovation, before they provide insights of how the added value of the innovated teaching practice has been

assessed. Each contribution in conclusion reflects critically on what elements of the innovation supported the attainment of the set objective, and which aspects would need further experimentation and improvement.

As guest editors we have selected papers according to their level of innovation for teaching EU (Foreign) Affairs and that at the same time cover a variety of teaching approaches as well as represent a diverse and multinational academic background of the authors. Our contributions talk about research-led teaching by linking policy briefs and employability (Lightfoot 2020), responsive teaching in times of radical change (O'Mahony 2020), synchronous teaching among 13 universities (Plank and Niemann 2020), and teaching EU foreign policy via Problem-based learning (Tonra 2020). We decided not to include a paper on EU simulations because there is now a relatively established body of literature on EU simulations and role-plays (Brunazzo and Settembri 2012, 2014; Muno et al. 2013; Muno et al. 2018; Niemann et al. 2015; Usherwood 2014; Van Dyke et al. 2000).

The contributions to this special section offer insights into a variety of best practices of how teaching European politics and European Foreign Affairs can apply active learning pedagogy with a particular focus on several important prerequisites for learning, i.e. (1) to increase the ownership of students as researchers (Tonra 2020, Mahoney 2020, Plank and Niemann 2020), (2) to raise awareness for their subjectivity in the learning process (esp. Mahoney 2020), (3) to stimulate critical thinking by exposing students to different views from either other students or disciplines (esp. Plank and Niemann 2020; Mahoney 2020), (4) to enhance student's technical and media skill in the digital age (Plank and Niemann 2020; Mahoney 2020), and (5) to foster student's employability (esp. Lightfoot 2020, but also Plank and Niemann 2020).

In order to ensure the coherence of the special section, we asked authors to include and reflect on the following questions in their contributions: What was the problem that you tried to tackle? Why is your selected teaching approach/method innovative? How did you go about? Where did you get ideas and support? How did you implement your teaching innovation? How did you know it worked? How does it compare to more conventional teaching methods? What recommendations for colleagues who would like to try it, too? All of the below contributions have addressed (most of) these questions and thus added to our practical, theoretical, and technical knowledge on how to conduct innovative teaching in European (Foreign) Affairs.

## **CONTRIBUTIONS TO THIS SPECIAL SECTION**

The contributions address the challenges of teaching European (Foreign) Affairs and seek to systematically reflect their own contribution to innovative teaching, best-practices and/or recommendations for colleagues. In his contribution, Tonra (2020) showcases his experience of integrating an active learning element in teaching EU foreign policy to 86 students, by experimenting with Problem-based learning (PBL). By structuring active learning elements according to "knowledge problems", "puzzles" or "threshold concepts", rather than according to topics, Tonra (re)defined the learning objectives for his course which was then based on PBL small group work interspersed with traditional lectures. The students' unfamiliarity with Problem-based learning methods or the drafting of role-play elements were immediate challenges. In the mid-term, the (perceived) absence of more directive leadership by the instructor or the reassignment of the groups after students had left and new students arrived on the course also posed challenges. The evaluation had mixed to negative

results. Subsequent modifications of randomly assigning groups and or restructuring the module delivery led to students' qualitative evaluation shifting quite significantly under this second iteration of the module. Tonra concludes that the rewards of Problem-based learning are significant and worth the additional front-loaded effort, and that the design and delivery of this method as a teaching model has to be thought through exceptionally carefully.

Connecting the foreign policy classroom with real-world and authentic tasks and raising students' awareness of how what they learn in the classroom matters for their next steps into the professional world was also the main objective of the second contribution. Lightfoot (2020) experiments with a different kind of assessment in the form of policy briefs about politics of foreign aid in his final year class of approximately 85 students, also in order to make students think explicitly in terms of skills and competences that they acquired during their learning for future employment. In contrast to Tonra, Lightfoot (2020) does not overhaul the whole of the course objectives and structure, but his innovation is focused on the final assessment. The underlying rationale to consider a different final assessment mode was for Lightfoot to choose an assessment form that would test new skills (compared to the other courses students had taken before with traditional research/term papers or exam assessments) as well as that would make the skill development process and the acquired skills more explicit for students, as feedback from previous graduates had suggested. The course set-up provides clear instructions, real-world examples and ample opportunity for students to discuss how this form of assessment is similar to, or different from, other forms of writings that they have done before. Most crucially, the design of the assessment tasks clearly showcases to students of how to apply the knowledge and concepts learnt during the course to their policy paper. Lightfoot reflects that the concise format of the policy brief as assessment emphasised some of the main academic skills even stronger than traditional research papers or student essays would do: the level of synthesis and analysis are much higher and students cannot hide behind long-winding literature description but realise that their tasks as researcher is to make sense of various arguments and sources and that they need to make hard choices about what to include and what not.

The third contribution to this special section departs from the question of how radical real-world events influence teaching and learning: O'Mahoney (2020) documents in her contribution on responsive teaching at a time of radical change of how Brexit changed her approach to teaching EU politics in a UK classroom. By applying an action research framework and self-reflective enquiry, she adjusted her EU politics course to become more responsive, more open to student agency, and more inclusive by engaging with (digital and social media) sources and discourses that students are exposed to on a daily basis. O'Mahoney emphasises the need to recognise the subjectivity in learning and researching for both instructors and students: we are embedded in a social and political world. By supporting students in developing and experimenting with sense-making tools that reach beyond the classroom they are able to develop their analytical and reflective skills and they see the added value of academic research processes for understanding societal and political developments.

Plank and Niemann (2020), in a similar manner to Tonra and O'Mahoney, aim at exposing students to the complexity of policy issues, while at the same time responding to the demand for an increased use of a digital teaching environment. They document their experience with two editions of a synchronous inter-university online-teaching course, which combined inverted lectures, online exchanges and a variety of local activities. First, 13 academic institutions took part in an interactive, synchronous and blended-learning course for 150 students on the inter-relations between crises in Europe and their

effects on European foreign affairs during the summer term 2017. Secondly, an adapted version of this course was run in 2018 with 15 academic institutions and 200 students on the security-development-migration nexus in Africa. The inter-university set-up created diversity among students with different disciplinary and knowledge backgrounds, but also allowed the instructors to tap into the expertise of participating colleagues and invited external experts. Despite the increased workload and time for coordinating with their peers from other universities, students reported their appreciation for the opportunity to actively contribute to the course with their own data gathering and analysis and by practicing the presentation of their findings in a concise and engaging manner. They also valued the ability to engage directly with experts and to be put in the situation to make use of academic knowledge for their analysis rather than just to read about it. This said, Plank and Niemann also critically demonstrate the challenges with using technology, the adapted role conception it takes from the side of the instructor, and the increased time and resources investment that their teaching innovation asked for.

## LESSONS LEARNT

The four contributions to this special section offer insights into a variety of best practices on how to innovate teaching European politics and European Foreign Affairs. They offer lessons learnt in terms of how to engage with the identified prerequisites for active learning: increased ownership of students as researchers, raised awareness for subjectivity in and self-responsibility for learning processes, the salience of developing critical thinking as a key academic skill, enhancing students technical and media skills in a digital age, and fostering students' employability and skills awareness. All contributions showcase the added value of the applied innovations, but also discuss challenges and obstacles that need to be considered in the conceptualisation and implementation of the proposed active teaching approaches.

Increasing **student ownership** and the role conception of the **student as an active researcher** and thus knowledge-creator instead of a passive knowledge-receiver runs as a key theme through all four contributions. Tonra (2020) showcases how an active learning approach in the form of Problem-based learning can become problematic if students do not seek such ownership or find it unreasonably demanding. Student ownership can be facilitated by explicit and clear communication of expectations, by discussing best practices with students, and by scaffolding the complexity of a task and by providing ample feedback opportunities (Lightfoot 2020). It is, however, not only students who might need to re-adjust their role expectations. Academics, too, need to re-consider their role as instructors (Plank and Niemann 2020), become more aware of their subjectivity (O'Mahoney 2020), be willing to be more responsive and more flexible (O'Mahoney 2020), and feel less in control at times (Plank and Niemann 2020).

The recognition for the "self" in the learning and research process is another key theme that all contributions alert to. Raised **awareness for subjectivity**, i.e. for where one comes from in terms of previous experience and knowledge but also for why one finds certain aspects more relevant than others is an essential starting point for acknowledging the **self-responsibility in the learning process**. Tonra (2020) reported his surprise "to see the amount of passion, depth and engagement of students with the topic" once he provided the space for students to discover the issue at hand in their own manner, and also Lightfoot (2020) demonstrates the added value of giving students the space (in this case during assessment) to apply their gained knowledge in a creative manner. In order to facilitate

students' self-responsibility, Plank and Niemann (2020) suggest considering different learning types and thus let students choose from a variety of tasks that they can contribute to. In their inter-university course students also valued the opportunity to not only read and digest research but that they could use interactions with experts for their own research. Emphasising the self-responsibility and ownership of students in active learning settings often comes hand-in-hand with two issues that instructors need to be aware of: (i) students at first might report increased anxiety due to the unfamiliarity of the new situation; (ii) tensions in regard of the relationship between individual and group contributions and possible occasional perceived free-riding (Tonra 2020; Plank and Niemann 2020) will be an concern of students. Both issues can be addressed and mitigated but will need a pro-active consideration from the instructor.

Actively re-educating students in understanding the need to take ownership in order to develop their **analytical and critical thinking skills** is an important consideration that can make an active teaching innovation success or fail, as Tonra (2020) concludes. Exposing students to peers with different disciplinary and knowledge backgrounds fostered those critical thinking skills, according to Plank and Niemann (2020), as these heterogeneous group setting encouraged students to synthesise their gained knowledge in explaining it to their peers (deep learning) and made them reflect more explicitly on what they know or do not know. It showed them their knowledge and understanding (which builds confidence) but also what they do not understand, yet (which builds motivation for further study).

In a similar manner, the aim to enhance **students' technical and media skills** in our digital age by bringing their daily online routines and technologically enhanced media consumption into the classroom fosters students' ownership, engagement and critical thinking skills. Plank and Niemann (2020) indicated that their students enjoyed the inverted classroom and synchronous online exchange that brought a different experience to their traditional university learning. O'Mahoney (2020) even encouraged their students actively to bring their technological world, often with its fake news and expert bashing, to their academic deliberations. Making students aware of how to integrate what they learn in the classroom with their everyday experience thus is a key element of innovative active learning.

Fostering students' **employability and skills awareness** is a good way to meet employability concerns but even more importantly helps students to consider more explicitly the added value of academic thinking skills. Lightfoot (2020) illustrated the importance of making students explicitly think about the similarities and differences of academic writing to other forms of writing, but his students also recognized the difference between descriptive summaries versus tight analysis in reckoning with the different kind of assessment that they were confronted with. O'Mahoney (2020) in her responsive and more flexible teaching also allowed students to recognize that academic thinking is not just about repeating the right answers, but about discovering, questioning, and analysing issues they encounter in the classroom but even more importantly in their daily social and political lives.

All contributions also point to the necessary understanding that all **innovation in teaching and learning is always an investment**: it needs increased efforts and necessary resources, and it will especially at the beginning not feel as easy as traditional methods (Tonra 2020, Plank and Niemann 2020). Experimenting with teaching innovations and implementing new active learning elements will need more time investment, and the general recommendation of all four contributions is to start innovations always in a small, simple and smart, thus considerate, manner. We hope that this special

section thus encourages colleagues to experiment with teaching innovation but also offers a good starting point about what kind of issues will need consideration.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to thank the editorial team of JCER and the reviewers of the contributions for their constructive and helpful comments, and for the excellent cooperation on this section. Moreover, we would like to thank the contributors for their interesting and relevant analyses of innovative teaching on European Foreign Affairs. Finally, we would like to thank the audience at our two Panels on Innovative Teaching at the 2018 EUIA for their helpful suggestions.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> As exception see the highly recommendable handbooks by Ishiyama et al. (2015) and Gormley-Hennan et al. (2012).

<sup>2</sup> For earlier works on that in EU Studies see Lightfoot and Maurer (2013); Baroncelli et al. (2014).

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