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Teaching Qualitative Methods in Social Science: A Problem-based Learning Approach

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Abstract

Research methods are often seen as a tedious necessity by the students and teachers are often not helping in making these modules relevant for the students' learning process. This article compares two research method modules – a general first year module and a specialised graduate module – to demonstrate how alignment between learning objectives with other aspects of the degree programme can promote active learning and thereby create synergies which foster deep learning. This requires an active learning where the students own research skills and experiences need to be integrated into the research method module and assessment.

Keywords

Qualitative research methods; problem-based learning; active learning; alignment; teaching European studies

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> *It's methods so useful, but it's a hard topic to teach and not a lot of people are interested (feedback from one student)*

The quote is from a feedback form first year students filled in during their last lecture in qualitative method and it sums up most students' perception of research methods. Overall, everyone agree that research methods form the foundation of any good research project, most people would also claim that teaching research methods or being taught methods is not very exciting. The central question for anyone teaching research methods is how to make the module relevant to the students and enable them to apply the methods in their studies, in other words there should be alignment between modules on methods and the students' own research. Teaching qualitative methods to first year students is very different from teaching a research method module to MA students, here progression must be reflected in the teaching for example by developing more specialised MA research modules. This article provides a comparative study of two research modules - a first year and a MA module – to show how problem-based learning can enhance students learning.

The first year qualitative method is a compulsory module for all social science students on the International Social Science Bachelor programme, thus the content needs to provide a basis for research in political science, international development, sociology and geography. By comparison the MA research method module on EU Policy Analysis is an optional module for EU Studies and Public Administration students. The level of critical thinking one can expect from the students differs between the two modules. Students taking the MA module are expected to be able to discuss the ontological perspectives of different institutional theories and which implications these have for research questions and policy analysis. The first year students discuss more practical matters with regard to research methods, such as how to carry out different qualitative methods. Whilst the two modules are at each end of the students' education, both modules employ a problem-based learning pedagogy.

Problem-based learning and responsibility for own learning are core teaching principles at Roskilde University. In modules problem-based learning is guided by the teacher, who sits the parameter for the students' learning process by posing relevant questions which supports the module's learning objectives. The article discusses how problem-based learning can be useful for teaching social science

methods both at first year undergraduate level and graduate level. By comparing the two method courses this article demonstrates how linking methods to the students own research create a better potential for active learning Moreover, research methods give the students transferable skills they can use not only in other modules and their own research project but modules on research methods can also give the students skills they can use after graduation, such as writing policy briefs. Indeed transferable skills and the issue of employability have become increasingly important in higher education not only in Denmark where I am based but also in the UK and other European countries (Clark 2011: Maurer and Mawdsley 2014). The discussion of problem-based learning in the two research methods modules contributes towards this debate.

Overall, this article contributes to the literature on teaching methods, which according to Wagner et al (2011: 75) needs to develop a pedagogical culture, with an "exchange of ideas within a climate of systematic debate, investigation and evaluation surrounding all aspects of teaching methods". The article shows how a problem-based teaching approach to research methods can enhance student learning as methods become integral into the students' own research projects, simultaneously the modules are aligned with progression criteria to reflect the educational level of the students and the skills needed at those levels. Thus the article links into central debates in higher education such as transferable skills, progression and alignment between the different elements of a degree programme.

The article starts by discussing problem-based learning and places it in the context of Roskilde University. Secondly the article describes the two modules, the assessment and the students' feedback to the teaching approach. Thirdly the article makes a comparative analysis of the two different modules to identify similarities and relevance for other aspects of the students learning process more broadly. Finally the article concludes how alignment between research methods modules and the rest of the degree programme encourages deep learning.

PROBLEM-BASED LEARNING AND ALIGNMENT BETWEEN PROJECTS AND MODULES

Problem-based learning has become a popular teaching approach not only in European studies but also more broadly in social science. Overall, the "philosophy of a problem-based learning [module] must be to offer students a rich learning experience by embedding the learning in group work researching a problem and constructing new knowledge and gaining intellectual and transferable (or enterprise) skills accordingly" (Spronken-Smith 2005: 205). In other words, problem-based learning moves away from traditional lecturing towards more active learning with focus on the students. Modules applying problem-based learning vary from EU simulation games (Kraunert 2009; Usherwood 2014) and zombie simulations (Horn et al forthcoming), which focus on explaining complex institutional processes, through to more traditional group research projects, where the students are required to work independently on a topic which they either chose themselves or is linked to a module. Students' engagement with their own learning process is fundamental to problem-based learning and embedded in problem-based learning is active learning.

Both Williams (2006) and Winn (1995) apply an active learning approach to their modules, where the students are expected to carry out their own research as part of the modules. Williams' (2006) module on the cold war requires the students to adopt a pre-defined character and relate different events to the person's life history. Williams' approach allows the students to adopt their own approach, either using personal history, interviews or archives. In general Williams' cold war module requires more imagination from the students than a traditional research project, which primarily is based on descriptive statistics, document analysis and interviews. By comparison Winn (1995) uses a "learning by doing" approach where the students, who are taking a specific research method module, become part of a commissioned research project and become responsible for different aspects of the project,

which relates to the method module. However, the project is led by academic researchers who are also the teachers as such the students have less scope for developing their own projects compared to Williams' module or indeed the students at Roskilde University, where students are able to define their research questions more independently. These different types of projects also require different research skills, whilst Winn's commissioned research is much more defined in terms of methods. Crucially, the direct link between a module and a project, as can be seen in both Williams and Winn's articles, provides the students with more foundation and information than if they were to start from scratch, as many of the students at Roskilde University do especially at undergraduate level.

Problem-based learning is integral to Roskilde University and each semester the students have to write a group project (50-90 pages depending on the size of the group). Here the students need to identify a problem, a puzzle, carry out the research preferable using some empirical data, indeed the project account for half the ECTS points every semester. This constructivist approach emphasises what students have to do instead of focusing on the teacher, here knowledge is created by students own learning activities and their approaches to learning (Biggs 2003a: 12-3). Central to problem-based learning is that students have to take responsibility for all aspects of their learning including the formulation of the problem which the project will investigate (Qvist 2004: 78; Christensen 2004: 103). The project group will be assigned a supervisor, who ideally should be familiar with the research topic and who will support the group in terms of literature, methods and research questions, and research process. A central part of the project is for the students to identify their research question and write the method chapter, especially as students prefer to generate their own data. The students are responsible for their own learning, and the supervisor's role is more as a facilitator who supports the students' learning process. For example it is important that the supervisor supports the students in finding and using key academic literature, which they apply to their research project and thereby develop understanding of key theories (Krogh and Wiberg 2013: 224). Moreover, the project often stands alone and is not connected to a particular module and even in cases where the project is linked to a module the link can be weak, which in turn can be problematic for student learning outcomes especially if the supervisor does not teach on the module that is connected to the project. The strong emphasis on students' responsibility for their own learning, especially in relation to project work is one of the distinctive features of several universities, such as Roskilde University, Aalborg University and Maastricht University. Longmore et al (1996: 85) shows that "when students are allowed to choose their own topics, their desire to understand their chosen topics motivates hard work and improves the quality of the project". This freedom to choose a topic encourages the students' motivations to investigate a topic.

At the first supervision meeting students will often ask "how much method is required?" The question refers to how extensive the method chapter should be and as the undergraduate degree programme in social science is inter-disciplinary and covers economics, politics, sociology, and geography the students are exposed to different disciplinary research styles. For example, one semester a student might write a sociology project and will be supervised by a sociologist and the next semester the same student will do a politics project and be supervised by a political scientist. Whilst the research methods are the same, the disciplinary traditions vary, which can confuse the students. Thus it is important that the students understand a broad range of social science research methods. Here the compulsory modules in research methods are an essential part of the students learning, especially their ability to write a good research project. The four compulsory modules are 'methods in social science' (first semester), 'qualitative methods' (second semester), 'philosophy of social science' (third semester) and 'quantitative method' (fourth semester). The four modules, which are in year one and two, are part of a new degree programme structure. The programme has a strong emphasis on methods as building blocks for projects and compulsory disciplinary modules. The first module 'methods in social science' is mainly about 'learning how to do' research whereas the other three modules focus on 'learning about' research. At graduate level the modules in research methods are more specialised focusing on for example interviewing, fieldwork, writing a policy brief and gender analysis, as such the modules

tend to focus on either particular research methods or methodologies. Moreover, some of the graduate research method modules also incorporate employability skills, especially as these are the last modules the students take before their MA dissertation and thus graduation.

"The value of nurturing the link between research and teaching becomes particularly meaningful when students are able actively to experience this link; when students become the vehicle to develop research while learning" (Leston-Bandeira 2013: 209). The method chapter is the foundation of any research project, I tend to explain to the students that their project is like a house, where the research questions, theory and research methods are the foundation from which the analysis forms the bricks and the conclusion the roof, without a solid foundation the bricks and roof will not hold in stormy weather, i.e. the oral exam. Compared to students at more traditional universities, who predominately write essays, it is important for the students to be able to select and use appropriate research methods, which will help them answer the research questions they have formulated. This requires alignment not only within the qualitative methods module but especially in relation to the students' research projects.

Specifically, "constructive alignment starts with the notion that the learner constructs his or her own learning through relevant learning activities. The teachers' job is to create a learning environment that supports the learning activities appropriate to achieving the desired learning outcomes" (Biggs 2003b). Here constructivism focuses on what the students have to do, and how knowledge is created by the students' learning activities, which should generate deep learning (Biggs 2003a: 12-3). In other words the focus is on the students and how they learn. The components which need to be aligned to facilitate this learning process are the curriculum, teaching methods, assessment process and criteria plus the institutional setting at the department (Biggs 2003a: 26). Moreover, to facilitate the potential for deep learning the teacher need to make the alignments clear to the students, and by building on the students existing knowledge the teacher should elicit an active response from the students, whilst also confronting misconceptions (Biggs 2003a: 16-7). Whilst Biggs (2003a) discusses alignment within a module in relation to learning objectives, assessments and teaching methods, at Roskilde University it is also important to ensure alignment between the learning objectives in both research project and research methods module, thereby adding another element to constructive alignment, which then needs to be linked to problem-based learning. Especially as students tend to weigh their research projects more than classes and sometime struggle to see the link between their modules and their research projects, which is problematic especially as the modules are weighed equally to the project and are supposed to support the students learning in their project work. In short there is a clear synergy and alignment between projects and modules. Parker's (2010) survey of undergraduate research-method training highlights the importance of linking research training with the rest of the curriculum, and where there is this link "the purpose of methods is seen as enabling students to carry out such academic work, which is seen as incorporating very active and independent learning" (Parker 2010: 124). It is, therefore, important for teachers to make the connections between modules and projects clear to the students, especially in research method modules, which serve as the foundation for the students' own academic research, and without a proper understanding of research methods the students will not be able to successfully complete an independent research project.

FIRST YEAR COMPULSORY MODULE IN QUALITATIVE METHODS

The aim of the first year module in qualitative methods is to introduce different qualitative methods used in social sciences. The module covers everything from interviews, participant observation to focus groups and various document analysis techniques. This gives the students a 'taster' of possible methods they can apply in their own projects, and at graduate level they have to choose more specialised modules, as the one discussed later in this paper. Moreover the students only have to choose their degree discipline in year two; the module therefore has to include all standard social

science qualitative methods instead of pure political science methods. As such the examples used in the module come from different disciplines from politics, sociology, geography and international development. To ensure coherence in the teaching there is only one teacher assigned to the module.

The three hours lecture was interactive and required the students to participate in both class discussions and group work. This moved the students from passive learners who received information to active learners, who had to apply and discuss their readings and lecture material. The aim was to change the mode of interaction to ensure effective learning and change activity after 15-20 minutes to engage the students (Biggs 2003a: 103), thereby avoid declining attention levels, which tends to develop as the lecture proceeds (Revell and Wainwright 2009: 214). Overall, the three hours were structured as follow; the first hour, I gave an introduction to the topic which was interspersed with video clips and discussion questions. The lecture was more theoretical driven explaining the specific research method, how and when it is used thus providing the students with examples of how the specific method could be applied. During the second hour the students were required to discuss the specific research method in relation to their research projects. They would sit in their project group and I would walk around the class room to talk to as many groups as possible and discuss how the specific method might be applied to their project. The issues raised in the exercises were aspects the students had to discuss as part of their project work and discussing the issues in class provided the opportunity for the students to receive feedback from their peers and a teacher in addition to their project supervisor.

The aim of these discussions was not to construct an interview guide or how to carry out a focus group. Indeed these skills are covered by other research modules at higher level. Crucially, the first year second semester project does not require the students to carry out new empirical research or data collection. As such the aim of the exercises was for the students to consider how different the different types of qualitative methods could be used in their projects and the impact these different methods would have for the research design. The discussions aimed to identify benefits, pitfalls and limitations in these different methods ranging from interviews, ethnographic fieldwork, focus-groups and content analysis. In the previous semester the students were taught how to do research, i.e. finding a puzzle, finding data and solving the puzzle, and the subsequent semester would introduce the students to philosophy of social science. Overall, the module on qualitative methods is placed in a sequence which develops the students' research skills. Here the directional relationship between the building blocks of research are opposite of the interrelationship suggested by Hay (2002) and Grix (2002: 179-180), thus starting with sources, methods, methodology, epistemology and ontology. This reverse directional order is due to the degree learning progression, where the students from first semester has to carry out a research project and are taught how to do this, but only in the third semester has to incorporate theory and methodology.

The final hour was used for the students to present their group discussions and more actively talk about how the specific research method could be applied. The project groups were encouraged to share their discussions with the whole class. However, it tended to be the same groups and same people who would speak up. To facilitate a broader discussion I would bring in examples from the quiet groups I had spoken to during the previous hours and often ask them to elaborate on my interpretation of their discussions. This generally enabled the quiet groups to participate in the class discussion.

The end of module student feedback regarding the structure was varied; some students wanted more lecturing whilst others wanted more student discussions. Overall, the students were positive about the one exercise where they had to do extra work! For the classes on document analysis and discourse analysis I used an EU policy document, which we discussed in class and subsequently the students had to write a one page summary of the policy document. I commented on these summaries and in the next class I asked each group to write a one to two page policy brief based on the summaries and

comments. This policy brief had to be handed in to me and again they received feedback. The aim of the exercise was not for the students to demonstrate their knowledge of EU climate change policy instead the learning objective was for the students to be able to summarise documents. Interesting no student made negative comments about the extra course work instead one students wrote:

> *'Some of them [exercises] were really good – the ones with policy documents – and also a little bit fun – I might just be nerdy'*

Similar several students requested more assignments and course work,

> *'More assignments – make sure people read – maybe a group presentation of debates as well'*

> *'More course work like in economics'*

> *'More homework related to reading and the project'*

These comments were rather surprisingly, it is not often students ask for more homework! The compulsory core economic module required the students to hand in work on a regular basis and the groups would get feedback on their progress. Overall, the students value all the feedback they receive. Similar the students taking the EU Policy Analysis method module also said they valued the individual feedback, which they do not receive very often because most assessment is based on group projects or individual oral exams. It is not surprisingly that the students value and request individual feedback on their abilities. Indeed, I will incorporate more individual short assignments in the qualitative method course next year.

Compared to other modules with integrated research projects (Williams 2006; Winn 1995), the students taking the compulsory module in qualitative research methods were not required to apply the methods. This was raised as a criticism by some students, who did not see how the module could be useful for their specific project or who wanted more hands on experience. This criticism exemplifies how some students can be incremental and short-sighted in terms of their own learning. However this criticism was only voiced by a small number of students, most students liked the hands-on exercises. Whilst Bos and Schneider (2009) discusses students' anxiety about doing independent research, this is not the case at Roskilde University on the contrary students often collect their own data, for example one group went on a fieldtrip to Ghana. The students at Roskilde University are from their first semester confident in carrying out independent research but are less skilled in integrating the academic scholarship in their projects. Projects are therefore increasingly linked to core disciplinary modules, where the students still have freedom to define their research puzzle but are required to integrate 300 pages of the module curriculum (the overall reading list for a project must be 900-1200 pages depending on the level).

ASSESSMENT

The qualitative research module was assessed in three ways. The main criterion was 75 per cent attendance; this created an incentive for the students to turn up, especially as there were problems with attendance in other compulsory modules. The students who did not attend 75 per cent of the classes were required to sit an individual exam before they would be allowed to submit their project and sit the oral exam. However, only a handful of students had to sit the individual exam.

Secondly, the students were required to submit a group assignment (assessed as pass/fail), which they had to pass in order to be able to sit the exam for their project. The group assignment was set by me as the module convener, but was marked by the individual project supervisors, a decision which was made at a higher level and created some confusion amongst the teaching staff, and it has been changed for next year so that the module convener sets and marks the group assignment. The group assignment was given at the beginning of the module and was tied into the research method chapter the students had to write for their projects. Moreover, the class exercises and group assignment aimed to help the students write their method chapter. The assignment was explained in the first lecture so the students were able to see the link between the module and their project, and the group exercises were linked to the assignment. The alignment between the qualitative methods module and the project was made explicit in the class and several students commented on it in their feedback. The group assignment was a workbook (see box), which asked the students to consider which methods they would use in their project and how these methods would help them answer their research questions and apply the chosen theories. Essentially, the group assignment formed a part of the draft method chapter the students had to hand in shortly after the module ended.

Box One: Group assignment for qualitative methods

Group assignment: the method chapter for your project

It must be five standard pages incl. bibliography

You should:

> Outline the qualitative methods you are using in the project

> and explain why you have chosen these methods (the advantages and disadvantages)

> How the methods enable you to answer the research questions

> How the methods will be applied in the analysis

> How the methods are linked to the theoretical/analytical framework

Thirdly, part of the oral exam for the group project included an examination in research methods. The group assignments and oral exams were marked by the project supervisors and an internal examiner as part of the project exam. The oral examination on the project included questions about methods in line with those asked in the qualitative research methods group assignment. This mixed assessment with close ties to the group project required a constructive alignment between module objectives, content and the objectives of the project. The degree programme made these linkages clear but did not provide details of how to operationalise the objectives instead the details were filled out by the module convener and supervisors.

GRADUATE RESEARCH METHODS EU POLICY ANALYSIS

The MA method module on EU policy analysis uses institutional theories to analyse different stages of EU decision making processes and applies selected policy case studies. The module is short and intensive. It runs over one week with daily teaching from 9:00 am to 2:30 pm, except for Wednesday which is a study day. The underline teaching pedagogy is the same as the first year qualitative methods

course – problem-based learning – but more preparation is required with regard to activities and discussions, especially as the class is much smaller with an average of 10 students. The small number of students in the class also places more onuses on the students to actively participate in discussions. Specifically small group teaching "provides considerable opportunities for interaction, the demonstration of enthusiasm for a topic and an emphasis and relevance of material within the broader subject area" (Bogaard et al 2005: 114-7). Similar to the undergraduate qualitative research module, this module is also assessed by 75 per cent attendance and active participation, which is easier to monitor in a small class than in a large class room.

The module is based on central aspects of my research interests – EU policy analysis – as such the module is research-led teaching (for a discussion on research-led teaching see Lightfoot and Piotukh 2014). Moreover, some of the students who take the modules are students who I previously have supervised on projects which are closely related to my own research. Generally the level of knowledge of EU policy making is high, and although the public administration students are not necessarily familiar with EU decision-making, all the students are all familiar with institutional theories. Most of the students choose the module because they are interested in using the methods in their MA dissertations, as such the level of critical analysis is high and the module requires the student to engage with the scholarship. At undergraduate level the students tend to apply methodologies in relation to their own understanding of the world, especially in terms of their personal biases towards the chosen research area, but at graduate level the students are expected to discuss ontology in relation to theories and apply these to their empirical analysis. In other words the students must reflect on the interrelationship between the building blocks of their research project.

The day starts with theoretical discussions based the reading and then later move to policy oriented discussing using a case study to bring together one institutional theoretical approach to analyse EU decision-making in details. This enables a discussion about what kind of research questions the specific institutional approach generate; how these questions help us understand the policy case and which aspects of the EU policy cycle the subsequent analysis would emphasis. This brings in a methodological discussion about what the different institutional approaches can tell us about EU policy-making and a specific policy case. In short, "the point is to see how *different* starting points of research lead to *different* research strategies" (Grix 2002: 184). Overall, the EU policy analysis module aims to give the students deeper insights into institutional theories and EU decision-making, where they are able to apply the theoretical framework to specific EU policies, thereby provide them with analytical tools and thorough understanding of EU policy-making, which enable the students to write a MA dissertation. However, there is no direct alignment with the students' research projects instead the students are able to draw on their previous projects, modules and often the students have had internships in Brussels or have student jobs in a Danish ministry, they are encouraged to use these experiences in the class. Compared to the first year module the graduate students all have experience in carrying out research projects and often they have (had) student jobs, which enable them to draw on their own experiences when discussing theoretical issues in relation to EU policy analysis. Similar to Ryan et al (2014: 90) the 'EU Policy Analysis Module' emphasises "research skills with utility beyond academia, of use, for example, in future careers".

The module has run twice. The first time the students tended just to turn up and had not done the reading, although the students were able to discuss the empirical cases the lack of reading was a problem as the discussions were intended to be based on theories. Consequently, the format was changed the following year, and requested the students to write a one page summary of the theoretical article, which they had to email me before the class. Although the one page summary is voluntary, the students are told it is part of the active attendance and they all submitted a daily literature review. I gave individual feedback and incorporated the summaries into the class discussions. The aim was threefold; firstly to make sure the students turned up prepared, secondly help them identify key arguments in the literature and any potential questions they would like to

discuss in class, and thirdly teach them to write short and concise papers. The students are generally good at writing long research projects but are not very good at writing short essays, literature reviews and policy briefs. In the module feedback, the students all made positive comments about receiving individual feedback on their literature review. Most of the feedback the students receive during their university education is based on group projects. As a result the students are not always aware of their own personal academic abilities. Thus individual feedback is valued highly by the students, especially so close to their final project – the MA dissertation which is often the first project they write independently, although a number of students choose to write their penultimate project alone to find out how good they are.

The last day of the module is formed as a role-play simulating EU legislative process and negotiations between the Parliament and the Council. The role-play is based a policy case from my own research on EU policy-making. Here the students are divided into two groups and are subsequently asked to choose which member states or political groups they represent. They are given a brief outlining the actors' policy preferences in the policy case and are asked to negotiate an agreement with a view of adopting the proposal. The simulation brings together the different elements covered over the previous three days. Overall, simulations and role-plays are popular teaching tools in EU studies they are often used to explain the complex negotiations which takes place within and between the central EU organisations (Kraunert 2009; Usherwood 2014; Zeff 2003). Explaining these complex and nested decision-making processes is challenging for any teacher of EU studies and asking the students to act parts of the policy process enables them to develop a deeper understanding of these processes. However, simulations should not stand alone, it needs to be part of the overall learning objectives and the game played "must pull the participants' reflection back into the rest of the teaching" (Usherwood 2014: 59). Indeed, the EU policy analysis simulation itself is only one element of the module and to be able to carry out a successful role-play the students need sufficient theoretical and conceptual understanding of EU politics, just as a post-simulation debriefing focuses on the students' experiences of the role-playing, the debriefing also links the role-playing to the rest of the module content as part of an evaluation of what the students have learnt.

ASSESSMENT

Most students take the EU Policy Analysis module as 2.5 ECTS point, which as mentioned above, is assessed through active participation and 75 per cent attendance. However, there are always one or two students who take the module as five ECTS points, which in addition to attendance requires the student to write a written assignment (assessed as pass/fail). The written assignment is often a policy brief (roughly 4 pages) based on one of the case studies used in the class, here the student can use his/her literature reviews to build a broader picture of a specific policy case. The policy brief helps the student to "address the complex relationship between researchers and policymakers, and build a clearer image of the constraints that policymakers face" (Boys and Keating 2009: 205). Although the assignment is pass/fail most students take the assignment serious and write a good policy brief, instead of just passing. One student said that he "wants to do my best, as it is the last assignment before the MA dissertation". To pass the written assignment the student only need to fulfil the minimum requirements, thus some students do not see the value in putting a lot of effort into a pass/fail assignment. Again the incentive to receive individual feedback often encourages the students to write a proper policy brief and subsequently use the feedback to improve their research projects, in particular their forthcoming MA dissertation.

COMPARATIVE REFLECTIONS IN TEACHING RESEARCH METHODS

The similarities between the two modules are not obvious. The Qualitative Research module is a compulsory first year module, which is taught to a large class of around 100 students, and there are three different assessments elements which are directly linked to the students' group project. By comparison the MA EU Policy Analysis module is an elective and, it is taught to a small class with around 10 students, and the student is assessed on active attendance. The delivery of the modules differ as well, the first year module is taught as three hours lectures over 10 weeks whereas the MA module is taught over one week with four full days of teaching. Indeed the only similarities are the 75 per cent attendance and pass/fail assessments.

Despite these differences both modules focus on developing the student's research skills through problem-based learning and by constructive alignment with the students' research project and educational progression towards their final degree. Research-led teaching often refers to the teacher creating a module around his/her current research (Lightfoot and Piotukh 2014). In the context of this article research-led teaching mainly refers to students own research interests and how they can use the method module as part of learning how to improve their own research skills and apply these in problem-orientated research projects. Moreover, the MA module also integrates employability skills. Overall this creates alignment between the teaching approaches used in the modules, the module learning objectives and broader degree programme to support the core teaching principles at the university.

Both modules applied problem-oriented and active learning teaching approaches, which require the students to actively engage in their own learning through different class activities. Naturally, the level of critical analysis and discussions varied between the two modules as the student cohort were at each end of the degree programme. Unsurprisingly the differences in analytical skills in the student discussions illustrate the students' learning progression. Both modules aimed to support and develop the students' research skills, but the learning objectives and the explicit alignment to project work differed. The constructive alignment between project and module was explicit in the first year module. Whereas the MA module did not have any explicit alignment to the students' research projects, instead it was up to me, as module convener, to create the link by asking the students to draw on their past projects or student work experiences, and through exercises encourage the students to explore how EU policy analysis could be used in their MA dissertations. The group exercises in the first year module were designed to support the student's project, for example by asking the students to consider how a specific method influence on their research design and empirical analysis whereas the graduate module would ask the students to discuss specific aspects of the EU policy process in relation to a policy case and applying one of the institutional theories to their analysis. The first year module activities asked the students to apply different methods to their project design. Moreover, the first year module did not require prior knowledge instead it aimed to build a foundation for the students' further learning, where they would be required to take responsibility for their own learning, for example by formulating research questions and explaining how they will answer those. By comparison the MA module explicitly built on the students' prior knowledge from projects, modules and student jobs, where the class activities asked the students to use their existing knowledge and understanding of the EU policy-making to specific institutional approaches, thus trying to collate their existing knowledge and challenge their analytical skills. Overall, both modules require the students to actively engage in the scholarship and their own project work, thereby encouraging deep learning. Indeed both active learning and problem-based learning approaches argues that by asking the students to focus on self-selected topics, the students are more likely to engage in deep-learning (Krogh and Wiberg 2013).

Whilst the modules are designed to encourage deep learning, the small number of students taking the MA module makes it easier for the teacher to engage in a dialogue with all the students. Indeed the

small group provided the students with incentives to be active learners and engage in discussions with each other and the teacher. This type of dialogue between all the students and the teacher were more difficult in the first year module, where there were around 100 students, instead there were more emphasis on group work to facilitate active learning leading to deep learning. Here the constructive alignment to the project played an important role, especially in the subsequent assessment.

Maurer and Mawdsley (2014: 32) cite a 2010 Eurobarometer survey where employers listed team-work as the most important skill required by graduates. Graduates, from universities where problem-orientated and group work are prioritised, are valued by employers for their ability to work as part of a team, acquire new knowledge and work across disciplines but are seen as less able to work autonomously (Krogh and Rasmussen 2004: 40-1). Thus, it is important for modules to strengthen the students' ability to work autonomously and here the individual assignments attempted to accommodate these concerns. Whilst the first year qualitative research methods taught the students how to become active learners, who can work as part of a team to gain new knowledge, thus becoming student researchers, the MA EU Policy Analysis module incorporated more independent work to support students' employability. Overall, both modules were aligned with the wider learning requirements at the specific level of the degree programme. As such constructive alignment combined with active learning provides a fruitful combination in an environment where the core teaching principle is problem-based learning, where students are responsible for their own learning.

CONCLUSION

Similar to existing literature (Ryan et al 2014; Williams 2006; Winn 1995) this article has demonstrated how research method modules should not be standalone modules which are separated from the rest of the degree programme. Instead research method modules work best when they are integrated into the students own research, which in turn facilitate deep-learning. The teaching pedagogy discussed in this article together with Roskilde University's overall strong emphasis on independent research enables the students to collect data and carry out research projects almost from day one of their degree.

Finally, active learning and alignment with wider degree programme learning objectives across modules makes it possible to create better alignment within the degree programme, and fosters better opportunities for students' learning, especially at an university where the students are responsible for large parts their own learning – through group projects. Here constructive alignment between the students' research project and the research methods modules aim to facilitate the students' learning process in relation to their degree programme and subsequent graduation. As such the research modules are designed as pieces in a puzzle, which makes up the students final degree and should provide them with some of the transferable skills requested by employers and highlighted in the wider discussion about the future of higher education.

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