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Engagement as an Educational Objective

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Abstract

Few politics modules encourage research based learning to generate research and evidence for policy debate. This example draws from a final year undergraduate module that explores Britain's relationship with the EU to assess the pedagogic role of policy engagement on student learning, motivation and reflection. It argues that engagement with practitioners creates a cognitive disequilibrium within students that enables them to learn. In practical terms this means that applying concepts to empirical problems in seminars, lectures, offline resources and assessments allows students to demonstrate originality and rigour in their work that is more easily rewarded with higher grades. Furthermore practitioner engagement offers motivational factors such as achievement, recognition and employability. The costs to this approach include the preparation of additional teaching resources and additional teaching to provide high levels of support to the students.

Keywords

Pedagogy; Cognitive Disequilibrium; motivation; practitioner engagement; Britain and the EU; teaching European studies

While there may be good democratic reasons for political institutions to engage with young people, these engagements can also have considerable educational value for research based learning in political science. Specifically by introducing a standard political science curriculum as a set of policy problems students are forced to reconsider their interpretations of academic literature and concepts. Rather than validating these literature and concepts against more literature and concepts, they have to consider how well the literature and concepts apply in practice to real life problems. This is described as a "cognitive disequilibrium" that triggers learning (MacLellan & Soden 2004). This paper reviews some of the issues of the above strategy and describes how they have been applied in a standard level three module on Britain and the EU at the University of Leeds. The aim of the paper is to describe the approach in relation to the literature on Higher Education (HE) pedagogy, to demonstrate how the module works to create and exploit this cognitive disequilibrium in the students and goes on to discuss the kinds of support that enable students to thrive in response to these challenges. Throughout the paper the emphasis is on identifying lessons that are transferable and applicable to other social science modules.

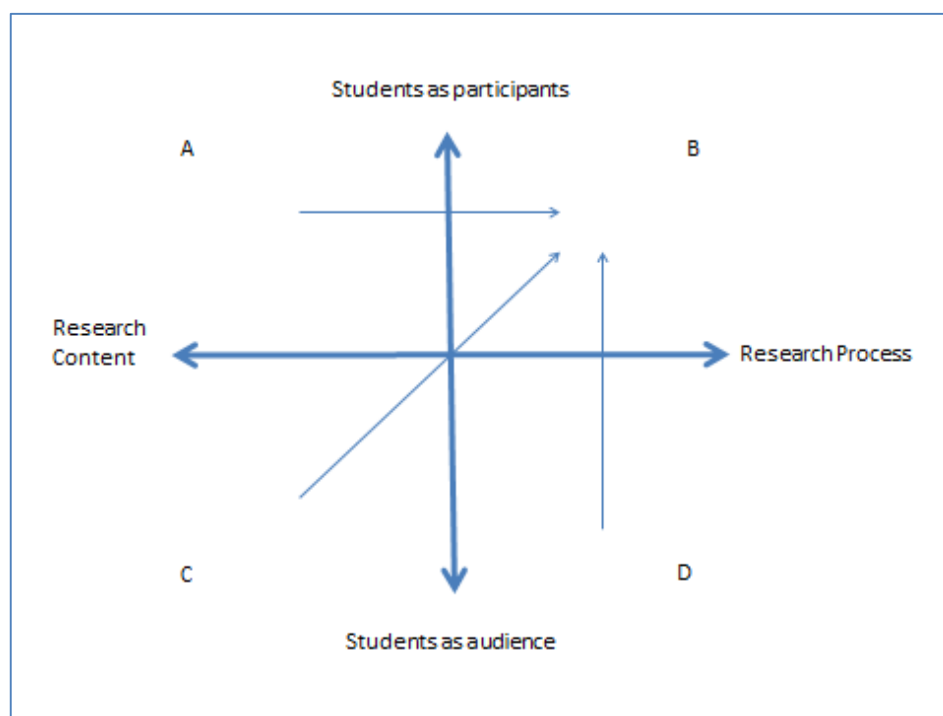
THE PEDAGOGIC RATIONALE FOR STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

Changes in the higher education sector have affected how we teach politics. The pressure to teach fee paying students from diverse social backgrounds in ways that make them both critical and employable (eg Hale 2008) has challenged politics' pedagogic footprint of lectures and seminars and focused more on the students themselves, a focus long practiced and debated in other disciplines (Rachman 1987; Bates & Rowland 1988). More recent work has reflected on the balance between student, teacher and topic and focused less on the individual than the moment of interaction. Rather than seeing HE tutors as constrained by the demands of the marketised HE Sector, tutors should let go of traditional practices and become entangled with students in the pursuit of knowledge about their subject or even

to realise radical political change (Mcabe & O'Connor 2014; Hobson & Morrison-Saunders 2013; Giroux 2004).

One particularly interesting development has been the rise in research based learning for students (eg Healey et al. 2010). This assumes that we want students to be active participants in the generation of knowledge rather than passive audiences who receive it. This shift in teaching is illustrated graphically in the Healey matrix beneath. In the bottom left hand corner (C) of fig. 1 students receive research content passively as an audience, for example by listening to a lecture that reviews the main literature on a subject. Students critically engage with published research content by reviewing literature (A). They also discuss methodology and theories of knowledge (D). All of these forms of learning are brought to bear when they actively research empirical material (B).

Figure 1: Healey's Research Teaching Nexus



Delivering student research skills is therefore a combination of increasing the student, rather than teacher, centredness of the teaching and of developing the practice of research, rather than the incorporation of knowledge. Redefining "student vs teacher", "learning vs knowledge" dichotomies has generated long standing debate over the relationship between teachers and students in HE (Rachman 1987; Kember 1997). A wide range of literature now exists that describes a suite of practices for student engagement including inquiry led teaching (Justice et al. 2009; Levy & Petrulis 2009) and the use of placements in politics programmes (Curtis et al. 2009). At Warwick University a study of politics placements demonstrated that treating placements as research led, rather than as work experience (Curtis 2012) had dramatic effects on student motivation and final performance (Sherrington et al. 2008).

In University College Cork tutors went to considerable lengths to present an engaging, relevant and politically significant opportunity for students to engage with (Buckley & Reidy 2014). Their engagement with politics programme had three primary aims:

1. “Train students directly in policy research and writing skills.
2. Enable students to participate in a national debate on the choice of electoral system, demonstrating their mastery of the subject area.
3. Provide a forum in which students, politicians, academics and citizens could engage collectively in policy discussion.” (2014:5)

Against the backdrop of one of the worst economic crises in Irish history students were invited to present 5 minute contributions to national political elites on how future political leaders would be selected. This would allow them to demonstrate their technical knowledge of the single transferrable voting system and of the operation of the parliamentary system as a whole. In addition they were also encouraged to draft an article for publication in a new peer reviewed journal designed for undergraduates and by undergraduates in conjunction with staff. For those who participated in the project it was a career high at the University. However the evaluation of the project indicated concern that only 8 students responded to the challenge, despite the quality of the interaction offered and the staff resources dedicated to the project (ibid). The authors suggest that the low take up may have been on account of a number of issues. First there was an understandable lack of confidence in students who were concerned about presenting their work to a committee or professional politicians. There was also a tight time line for students to produce reports in order to make a timely submission given the deadlines that the committee was following. Finally the additional workload that students face both as undergraduates and often as employees needing to generate income to fund their studies (ibid).

Clearly there are great opportunities for using engagement to create spaces in which students and tutors can embrace the excitement of exploring and discovering new ideas through research led teaching. They also offer opportunities for new dialogues and even radical pedagogy. The Cork example demonstrates that elite level political practitioners were capable of and interested in finding out what students think about issues of great constitutional significance. Perhaps the low take up could have been addressed if the project was delivered in a module whose objectives were aligned to the student and teacher interests in policy engagement (Biggs 1999; Larkin & Richardson 2013)? Module aims could be designed to focus on building student confidence and research skills, engagement could be integrated into the workload of the module and student assessments could be submitted and marked in line with the practitioners’ timeframe.

But how can we be sure that such activities are no more than a gimmick? Could this form of activity be little more than a public relations opportunity to excite the Vice Chancellor and plump up CVs? Does it not just distract star struck students from learning critical material and offer them up as the youth vote to an ambivalent political elite interested only in consulting students to shore up their tenuous positions? Let us retain some of these questions to the end of the paper. But before we do we can at least discuss the pedagogic value of policy engagement that both flattens the student teacher hierarchy and motivates them both to attack difficult challenges that raise the likelihood of them increasing their final scores. The next section examines how practitioner engagement creates an unfamiliarity in students that offers great opportunities for teaching, learning and enjoyment in the political studies.

COGNITIVE DISEQUILIBRIUM AND CONSTRUCTIVE ALIGNMENT THROUGH PRACTITIONER PERSPECTIVES

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

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

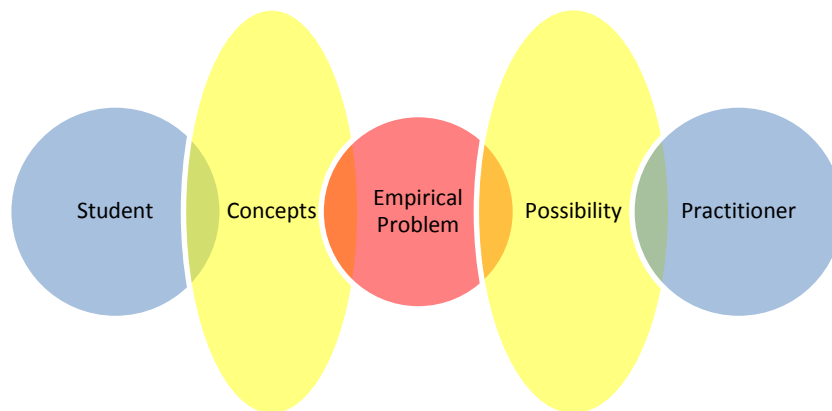
In other words, shaking students from their comfort zones by presenting them with a different perspective is a valuable teaching resource because it forces students to reflect on the challenge, adapt and so learn. Traditionally we might do this by presenting a competing normative framework to critically engage with mainstream approaches. So while we begin our modules with mainstream approaches to European integration, such as liberal intergovernmental approaches, we may try and risk more critical perspectives later on in the module by presenting new lenses based on Marxism or feminism. This uses literature to critically engage literature and so reflects and can easily sustain the pedagogic signature of political science: it can be taught in lecture halls and seminar (Murphy & Reid 2006).

By pure chance the author of this paper had 10 years experience training pre EU accession candidate country officials on the EU. These training sessions involved delegates from a wide range of professional backgrounds¹. In some ways their syllabus was similar to that of University students as they were taught about similar policies (eg Economic and Monetary Union, Single Market, Common Agricultural Policy etc) and issues (accountability, democracy etc) typically covered in an EU politics module.

However there were also important differences. First the practitioners were interested in the policies of the EU to do different things. They needed knowledge to resolve specific practical and institutional problems, rather than test theoretically informed puzzles. Second practitioners required different sorts of information to students. While some conceptual frameworks were helpful, both for context and for clarity, the priority was for succinct, accurate and credible information that could be used to inform effective decision making. Usually this was in the form of policy documents, formal decision making procedures and legal or quasi- legal texts. These materials did not offer interpretation nor were they organised conceptually.

Finally in making their decisions policy officials would be rewarded for their expediency, strategy and immediacy rather than the intellectual apparatus behind their answers. Students, would be rewarded for methodological rigour and theoretical clarity. Students and policy practitioners therefore would observe an empirical policy problem through different lenses: the former through concepts the latter through the limits of possibility². See figure two.

In this module the aim is to present the material from, as far as possible, "both sides" of the problem. The pedagogic aim of this is to create cognitive disequilibrium that the students will learn to overcome through the use of concepts and research skills taught on the module. This problem based method is therefore different to one that uses case studies to illustrate contemporary issues (eg Craig & Hale 2008). The focus here is on using problem based approaches to provide opportunities "... to explore potentially daunting theoretical and philosophical questions in an accessible way" (Craig & Hale 2008:166). The development of inductive and deductive case studies, with the former based on stories from practitioners and the latter identifying issues from concepts assumes a causality between the material and the concepts which structures the interactions between case materials and student in a way that may limit the cognitive disequilibrium so important to the learning process.

Figure 2: The lenses of students and practitioners

The module beneath also selected materials on an inductive and deductive basis. The themes of the module address concepts like sovereignty and empirically pertinent themes like euroscepticism. But it stops short of providing case studies. Rather the themes and materials were linked by questions that propose a relationship for the students to investigate. For example the lecture on the UK's accession discusses Dell's idea of a foreign office mistake (Dell 1995) and introduces a question that the students must answer through reading core texts. But it also directs students to answer the same question by reading empirical documents from the National Archive website and suggests that they supplement their research using historical newspaper archives like *The Times Gale Digital Archive*. These are not case studies but open questions and so do not offer the cognitive certainty of a steer by the tutor or a limited range of documentation. The questions are left open for discussion in the seminars.

The cognitive disequilibrium comes from trying to answer the same question from the two perspectives. Stephen George's assertion that the UK is an Awkward Partner is hard to see in evidence from, for example, minutes of the Council of Ministers because even abstentions from agreement are seldom recorded for the UK. It does not make sense and this creates a disequilibrium between how we understand an enduring relationship between the UK and the EU and the evidence in front of us. This forces us to think more critically and so presents a useful opportunity to explore the methodological weaknesses of George's Awkward Partner thesis or to consider why, despite these weaknesses, the idea has had such an enduring influence on the discipline.

Biggs' concept of "constructive alignment" was used to link the various parts of the module around this tension. Initially developed to show how linking clearly stated learning objectives with learning and assessment activities could help to integrate students from diverse backgrounds (Biggs 1999) this approach also focuses teaching onto the actions of the student, encouraging them to construct their own knowledge inside and outside the classroom (Wang et al. 2013). Constructive alignment identifies learning outcomes and designs learning resources and assessments that focus on delivering these outcomes explicitly. If engaging with policy practitioners is a module aim it therefore needs to be integrated into other objectives, like skills development and assessment. If the module is designed to create cognitive disequilibrium then there need to be resources in place to support the students through these challenges and a strong incentive structure to encourage them to go through with it.

In the following section we demonstrate how the concepts of cognitive disequilibria and constructive alignment inform the organisation and delivery of the module in question.

INTRODUCING THE MODULE

“Britain and the EU” (PIED 3310) is a final year undergraduate module at the University of Leeds. The module aims include developing research skills and offering evidence to policy makers. Last year, for example, ten students submitted reports to the Foreign and Commonwealth Offices (FCO) Review of the Balance of Competence in a range of policy areas and their submissions will be formally considered and acknowledged in the final reports. The year before four students presented their reports to the House of Lords Select Committee on EU Affairs, one of the UK’s most reputable venues for discussing Britain’s relationship. Their reports all addressed a question similar to that which the Committee had been addressing: “Is EU Enlargement in the British Interest?” These students discussed their reports with Lord Boswell, Lord Trimble, Lord Hannay and Baron MacLennan in the House of Lords in May 2013. In both cases the students were informed at the beginning of the module of the expectation that their work would be submitted to an elite policy audience.

Figure 3: Module Objectives

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

This presented a “high challenge” environment for students to work in that was alien to their previous experiences. In order to make this a constructive experience high levels of support were therefore required (Larkin and Richardson 2013). The module used a range of learning support to deliver skills to the students that were in addition to the standard 11 lectures and 11 seminars of the one semester length module. Blended learning and problem solving were used throughout the module to develop the familiarity of students with the challenges of interpreting empirical information in the classroom.

There were two forms of assessment. The first of these was a 1500 word report that required students to collate, analyse and present data on a specific policy related topic. Usually only one question was offered and was designed with policy makers in mind or in consultation with them, with the work submitted after the midterm reading week in accordance with the practitioner’s timeframe. The aim of this assessment is to baptise the students in the use of empirical data in its many forms (speeches, archives, statistics etc).

The other 50% of the final mark was awarded to a project submitted at the end of the semester. This 3500 words project assessed the students’ ability to contextualise a research question and test it using empirical information. Students were encouraged to consider how this was done in journal articles and to mimick some of the presentational and organisational characteristics of a journal article. This pair of assessments were specifically designed to build on the research skills and analytical confidence that the students acquired through the mid term report.

ALIGNING THE STUDENT WITH THE MODULE

The module alignment began with the students. In order to demonstrate why the aims and outcomes related to each other it was important that a connection was first made between the teaching structure and the students themselves. In addition to the usual informal kick off discussions about Britain and its relationship with the EU, the first seminar session with the students invited them to reflect on what kind of learner they are. This was done by asking students to explain to their partners how they would assemble a piece of flat pack furniture (the “IKEA test”): would they follow the instructions, call a friend or “have a go”. This enabled students to identify with their different strengths (as “readers” (who follow the instructions), “talkers” (who call a friend) and “doers” (who jump straight in)) and thereby encouraged them to reflect on the skills they have and/or need. As well as encouraging them to think about their strengths and weaknesses this exercise also explains to the students how the different elements of the module fit together. There were three parts: a “reading element”, a “doing” element and a “discussion” element each organised around a set of questions.

The weekly questions were developed in the lectures to guide the students in two key exercises. First the questions directed students on what answers to find in the literature from the module guide, which often included a chapter from a textbook and two or three key articles. By reading the literature and assessing how it related to the lecturer’s question (and any of their own) students actively engaged with the literature and came prepared for seminar discussions to discuss how the literature answers the question.

For the second exercise, the same lecture questions were used to organise web links. These were administered through an online “virtual learning environment” that students accessed in preparation for their seminars. The links took them to empirical resources such as Minutes of Cabinet meetings in the National Archives digitised collection, key speeches of PMs on Europe (in text and video), procedures of the EU select committee homepage, Council Consilium monthly summaries, Commission Annual Work Programmes, archives, videos etc. Students could then try to answer the same questions by referring to the empirical material. In doing so they were encouraged to consider the quality of the data and what it meant in relation to the literature they had read. The intention of the links to empirical information was to enable students to identify how (if at all) the empirical information answered the questions of the week.

The third dimension of learning – the discussion - integrated the doing and the reading under tutor supervision in the seminars. These were organised as follows. The first five minutes involved a discussion of current affairs and stories, usually led by a student, and related to the issue of the week or the module more generally. Students were encouraged to offer their views and analysis. Next the lecture was discussed and clarifications of literature or the lecture provided. Following this the structure was looser with students encouraged to bring what they have done to the discussion. This may be readings that offered an interpretation of the question or policy documents and speeches that provided information on the contingencies surrounding the event. In this way theories and concepts from the literature could be discussed alongside empirical material printed from the weblinks. This allowed the class to interrogate how effective the theories or concepts were, what their weaknesses may have been and whether this was because of failings in the concepts or the quality of the data.

For example, in the session on sovereignty the lecture concluded by asking “What does sovereignty mean in the UK and how is it defended in relation to the EU?” The literature explained how “de jure” and “de facto” sovereignty are organised and the web links take the students to the Parliament’s scrutiny system to explore “de jure” sovereignty in the procedures of the UK parliament. We could also discuss how this 2011 EU Act amended this process and what this told us about the management of Parliamentary sovereignty by the core executive. To understand “de facto” sovereignty (or autonomy) we explored the Council Of Ministers (aka CONSILLIUM) “Monthly Summary of Council Acts”. This data recorded how member states voted in the Council of Ministers in the legislative

process and offered brief explanations as to why these positions were held that could be explored further by students or in the class³. In the seminars the conceptual and practical implications of the coexistence of these two forms of sovereignty were discussed and illustrated through reference to the literature and committee reports. Through these discussions we were also able to discuss the research processes, why certain links were chosen and what makes the available material credible.

Students were therefore actively participating in research and dealing with empirical data in its most raw state. They were relying on their judgement and research skills to analyse the material and to draw effective conclusions. This would all help to develop their confidence in handling data and interpreting it in relation to the assessment questions. These were skills assessed in the report. This evaluated the students on the quality of the data that they accumulated, the synthesis and analysis that they undertook on that data and the efficacy of their presentation. Through this they demonstrated that they are able to make sense of the material in relation to its context.

PROMOTING DEEP REFLECTION

Reflection was encouraged as students considered how the material related to what they had read, discovered and discussed. But by privileging the empirical reality of the practitioner perspective there was a danger that the understanding would remain shallow. In order to encourage deeper reflection students needed to be required to reimagine how the world might be or in this case how the material that the students were analysing could be newly interpreted through an alternative analytical approach or a new perspective (Ryan 2013). This form of deeper reflection was developed through splitting the module into three sections – history, process and policy. The historical dimensions to UK/EU relations were presented broadly at face value, with the focus being on trying tested approaches using archive material from the Public Record Office's digital collection or speeches. These related a wide range of factors together but did not do seek systematic underpinning explanations that linked them together. When we discussed the processes of UK scrutiny the political biases become evident in the institutional procedures that govern EU policy making. The core executive was clearly preeminent in this process, for example, raising questions as to the ways that the EU was deployed by political leaders. The final section of the module addressed specific policy issues such as the economy, foreign policy and regional policies. These were all intended to reveal the imbalance of interests in EU policy making and the social and economic asymmetries that are the consequences of the UK's political system. Later lectures on UK and EU foreign policy for example, introduced the idea of structure by demonstrating how changes in the international system contributed to new EU agendas and influenced the position that the UK took on them. The lecture on the economic dimension of the UK/EU relationship built on the previous lesson of structure to place far greater emphasis on class relations and the role of the EU in redefining and confirming new class compromise in the UK.

By the end of the semester, and as students prepared their projects, there was much deeper reflection on the earlier sections of the module – the history and the processes – in the light of these discussions. Students were then able to explore and critique the concepts used in those earlier discussions by re-examining the concepts against the empirical material available for that week.

STUDENT MOTIVATION

Figure 4: Student motivation

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

As the module demanded a lot of the students, some consideration has been made to how the module aims motivate students. As observed in the Cork project, motivation is key if students are to benefit from the opportunities presented to them. The students were therefore motivated in three distinct ways.

First there is a specific goal orientated commitment to teaching excellence with the specific focus on delivering results. The introductory lecture identified how "teaching to get firsts" was one of the module's organisational principles. Students were shown how testing concepts and using carefully selected data enabled them to comply with the marking criteria for a first class grade which, the marking schedule identified would require "the sophisticated selection, interpretation and analysis of evidence and a high level ability to relate this to theory" (POLIS 2014:26). The use of reports leading into projects would build on the fluency and confidence that the students gained allowing them to make claims in the delivery of their work that matched the descriptors for first class work. The students were also informed that the module had delivered very high levels of externally validated first class grades for the students (in excess of 20% for the past three years).

However not all students are motivated or interested in first class results so in addition to goal orientation students were also motivated by the potential of the module to acknowledge the importance of their research (both to themselves and to policy debates). This would ensure that students "realise that their judgements are respected" (MacLellan 2008: 417) (see figure 4). This was promoted through discussions of current affairs at the start of each seminar in which students expressed their views of relevant stories. These discussions would sometimes drift into the main part of the seminar as the students and tutor became entangled in the issues of the topic. In a formal sense the students recognised that a significant amount of trust was placed in them to deliver work that was of quality for professional policy makers. Almost without exception they have risen to this challenge.

Some of the students did find the experience of writing a report, often for the first time, anxiety inducing. Indeed the cognitive disequilibrium would require this. But this anxiety was discussed in a number of seminars, and the strain that this placed on students discussed and countered with encouragement and an explanation of how this related to their learning process. Support was provided collectively (in the form of regular discussions of report writing in seminars, additional lectures outside the teaching calendar). Once students had completed the report they became adept at taking on the new challenge of the project as the module progressed to present different challenges (MacLellan 2008).

THE ROLE OF ENGAGEMENT

What does engagement with policy practitioners bring to the educational experience? Other teaching techniques like student research projects or problem based learning offer students the opportunity to

develop their research skills. Political institutions offer a wide range of opportunities for students to access the decision making process both as an audience (most offer packages for students) and as participants (more irregularly as through consultations like the EU's "5 Ideas for a Younger Europe" (EESC 2013)). Students can "pretend" to be policy makers in simulations that provide an alternative experience and can visit and view political actors through the press, public events and even biographies.

The main benefit of using engagement as an educational objective is that it helped to integrate the diversity of activities in the module. Students are pelted with learning support opportunities and competing forms of pedagogy and websites that are intended to empower the student. But rarely are they given the opportunity to express their own views and to act on their own judgement without the "benefit" of text books, authoritative articles or case studies, authors and concepts. The focus on engagement as an objective enabled students to use the range of resources available in relation to their specific tasks of writing the report and project.

The module was designed to normalise and exploit the cognitive disequilibrium that students experienced when presented with empirical information by engaging with new materials from the first seminar. The historical archive demonstrates the uncertainties and complexities that policy makers were forced to work under. As the students worked through the different weeks they become familiar with understanding the limits of both political action as well as the limitations of academic interpretations of events and developed their own research skills to manage the uncertainties these produced. Once the report was completed the students were able to use these research skills and improved confidence to take on major debates in the literature, thereby generating new knowledge and higher grades in their projects.

Central to the approach was the generation of cognitive disequilibrium by incorporating the lens of the practitioner in the interpretation of the literature. Rather than following perceived wisdom presented in textbooks they were forced to challenge assumptions and seek new evidence. The different form of assessment also forced them to rethink how they would structure and undertake their work.

The engagement with practitioners motivated students by acknowledging their voice, developing a challenge they could overcome and improving their grades. Yet more work needs to be done if the interaction is to be genuinely political rather than pedagogic in value. Students were constrained by the nature of the report (which focused on empirical collation and analysis) rather than for example the critical literatures valued in the project. The tutor moderates the submissions and there were issues relating to the dependence of the tutor on the policy elites for access and future engagements. So these are not the "true voices" of students and perhaps working with more specific groups speaking to power would improve this.

The dependence on the cooperation of the policy elites could present an additional "teachable moment" in which students could reflect on why their reports were not influential in political debates. This would allow them to consider what the components of influence might be in relation to European policy and explore a wide range of political science approaches on advocacy coalitions, issue framing, agenda setting, policy learning etc. In addition students could draw on critical political economy approaches to highlight hegemonic ideas and dominant societal interests in policy making. This would encourage further reflective consideration by students especially. Currently the reports and projects are on separate issues but the reports could build directly into projects with exam board approval.

At this stage there is insufficient data to evaluate the effect of the methods on student performance generally. As mentioned above, students score a high level of firsts in relation to other final year students in POLIS. They also give positive feedback on the module and offer positive quotes (see fig 4?). However a better test would be to see better performance in other final year work by students

who have taken the module. Future research could expand on this through an examination of the performance of the PIED 3310 cohort of student dissertations with their peers.

THE PRACTICAL DIMENSION OF PRACTITIONER INVOLVEMENT

A final word is necessary on managing practitioner engagement. In the model outlined in this paper the involvement of practitioners is seen as important in the production of reports. Certainly there are benefits to this in terms of the recognition for students, currency of issues, and the profile that their collaboration might bring to the exercise and to the module. Organising the entire module so that the timetable converges with the rhythms of the practitioners will always therefore present a challenge. There are also practical issues in the presentation of evidence to policy makers. They will prefer evidence in a particular style (e.g. less than x pages, formal language etc.) and certainly value clarity, brevity and synthesis. Parliamentary bodies offer guidance that can help here. But the take up of ideas by practitioners is likely to be influenced by who they are coming from rather than the quality of the argument alone. Practitioners cannot grade papers under University regulations, but they can indicate strengths that could be incorporated into future evaluation frameworks.

There are also costs to working to the interests and timeframes of policy makers. Frequently the timeframes do not coincide, or place additional pressure on already tight University schedules. More importantly the potential for withdrawal (or explicit or implicit threat to do so) may limit the learning opportunities of the students. Students need to be able to submit work that is “critical” in its engagement, either to the practitioners or to other actors in the policy process in addition to those subject to their critiques.

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

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has examined some of the pedagogic issues surrounding student engagement with real policy debates in a taught module format. By integrating the aims and objectives of the module towards practitioner engagement a number of advantages become clear. First the epistemic certainties of the average undergraduate can be challenged in a productive way. More research is required to test alternative explanations. For example: is the benefit acquired through just using a different form of assessment to traditional essays or exams, do the high marks of the module “select” high performing students, does the focus on teaching for firsts make a difference?

Second student motivation could also benefit from the engagement focus of the module. In addition to goal oriented motivators students are also experiencing confirmation that their voice matters. This is repeated throughout the module from chats about the news in the seminars to the potential to present to the House of Lords. Finally the module encourages reflection. The topics covered are of current interest and presented often to contrast to the received wisdom in the media and common debate. But more importantly the module is structured to encourage deeper learning and reflection

through the course of the module as the first weeks' presentation of historical fact gives way to more nuanced theoretically informed analysis. When students turn to their projects for their final assessment they are then able to reflect on the earlier sections of the module and to reinterpret the data there in relation to more critical constructs and research questions.

There are also additional weaknesses in the module. At present the module is very much problem solving in its engagement with policy elites rather than critical. With nine UK universities offering "Britain and the EU" modules (and possible similar modules in other member state universities) there is scope for a far more extensive debate about the UK and the EU in an informed and younger electorate. There is also potential to extend the range of students involved to include students from other disciplines such as law and business. However as much EU legislation is technical in nature there could also be potential for cross engagement across faculties to scrutinise proposals and offer evidence at the regulatory impact assessment stage of the legislative process that the EU and many member states undertake (Radaelli et al. 2013). With almost 2.5 million students studying at UK universities there is great scope for further elaboration of Engagement as an educational objective.

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¹These included Ministries of European Integration, the United Nations, World Bank Group, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, EU institutions and a wide range of other NGOs.

² There are other very important issues that also separate undergraduate teaching from the policy world, not least the importance of a concrete reality with sanctions and consequences, which a constructivist pedagogy, like "constructive alignment", would avoid. These issues and specifically the issue of the material or ideological nature of policy making presents many "teachable moments" not discussed here.

³ Later in the module we may discuss how Euroscepticism has accompanied the rise of popular sovereignty through discussions of UK Independence Party (UKIP).

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