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Enhancing delivery and assessment: A case study in module redesign for improved transition into Higher Education

Abstract

Understanding student transition into higher education is an important aspect of module design, linking content, delivery and assessment with student's prior educational experience and knowledge bases. However, reflections on how modules designed choices are, generally, not widely disseminated. Here, we document the reflections of a junior lecturer responsible for redesigning a Level-4 Political Systems module and analyse the intentions of change via a transition pedagogy perspective, presenting a programme renewal that establishes connected curriculum as an enabling infrastructure for students to actively engage with learning. First-year experience is considered as a major impacting factor of a student's subsequent success on a programme of higher education and the diversification of student cohorts requires teaching staff to consider a wider number of intersectional factors that may impact on a student's opportunity to succeed in their studies. With a focus on simulations and active-learning, by providing examples of the thinking behind the resultant activities and assessment realignment we hope to provide an example of how a transition approach to a first-year module can be explored.

Keywords: Module Design, Transition Pedagogy, Simulations, Active Learning, Diversity.

Introduction

Understanding issues relating to student transition into the higher education context is an important aspect of module design, linking content, delivery and assessment with student's prior educational experience and knowledge bases. The first-year experience is considered as the major impacting factor of a student's subsequent success on a

programme of higher education (Upcraft, Gardner and Barefoot 2005). Changes made within the case study presented as an example of what Kift and Nelson (2005) suggests can support student transition: programme renewal that establishes connected curriculum as an enabling infrastructure for students to actively engage with learning. First-year modules need to respond to contextual pressures including decreasing resources and in many contexts, increasing cohort sizes that can limit innovation in delivery approaches. Most importantly, the diversification of student cohorts requires teaching staff to consider a wider number of intersectional factors that may impact on a student's opportunity to succeed in their studies.

Here, we offer an example of an approach to redesigning a first-year module by a junior lecturer within a research-led university within the UK. Documenting the considerations made when the module was acquired, we position the review of the pre-existing module alongside an outline and rationale for the decision-making process in enhancing elements of delivery, content, and assessment with a view to ensuring that the module functioned as an engaging transitional conduit for students. By making visible a junior lecturer's reflection on their first module redesign activity we intend to 1. explore the pedagogical considerations, particularly in relation to environmental constraints; 2. the resulting content and approach to delivery. By providing examples of the thinking behind the resultant activities and assessment realignment we hope to provide an example of how a transition approach to a first-year module can be explored, with a focus on simulations and active-learning.

We explore the environmental constraints of increasingly large cohorts, with diverse student populations and how this influences both the delivery and content construction and considerations of how to align the assessment with what has been delivered. By

focusing on the content and delivery of a seminar series and the use of team tasks to build towards an appropriately aligned assessment, the case study presents one pedagogically grounded way in which a core first-year module can support students in engaging with critical topics, enact research orientations that will prepare them for their programme more effectively, and to learn from multiple sources, including their peers, in developing content knowledge and skills in critique.

Pre-existing module overview

Political Systems is a core Single Honours first-year, first semester undergraduate module¹ – or ‘course unit’ – within a Politics and International Relations department at a research-led university in the UK with an original cohort size of c.120. Joint Honours students whose degrees include Politics are also required to take the module and, as within the US system, it is also available as an elective module to students on other programmes. As such, whilst primarily made up of Single Honours Politics students, there is a diversity of students from across different programmes, but, unlike in the US system in which students can take different sections of the same class, all students under this model receive the same standardised course. The module aims to introduce students to key concepts for how different political systems function, their implication on citizen representation and engagement, ways of categorising and analysing different political systems as well as introducing students to comparative methods. It is not a prerequisite for students to have previously studied politics to be accepted onto the programme, and as noted above, not only Politics programme students can take the course. Consequently,

¹ The term ‘module’ used herein represents a semester long (12wks) teaching unit worth a total of 15 CATS / 7.5 ECTS points at Level 4 in which successfully completing a full academic year of credit requires gaining 120 CATS / 60 points. Typically, within the UK HE system a ‘module’ refers to a unit of teaching equivalent to a ‘course’ or ‘course unit’ in the US and European systems. Contrastingly, a ‘course’ in the UK systems tends to refer to an entire degree programme. In relation the US credit system, the module represented 150 hours of study made up of 29 hours of contact/teaching hours – 24 x 1hr lectures and 5 x 1hr seminars – with a total of 121 independent learning hours.

there is a diverse range of academic backgrounds in any cohort in terms of previous study of the subject. The module was delivered with a combination of lectures (24x1hr) and seminars (5x1hr) divided into three themes: Methods, Theories and Concepts; Comparative Political Institutions; Comparative Political Behaviour. The original mode of assessment was three, 1250-word essays each representing 25% of the total module mark, and a final 25% for group presentations during seminars.

Identifying areas for change

There were two inter-related areas identified as benefiting from redesign: 1. content and assessment alignment and 2. pedagogical approaches generally employed.

The first section of the lecture series focused on research methods but provided no direct interaction with the processes being taught to students, many for the first time. Instead, research methods were predominantly assessed via essays and were only presented on and discussed in the seminar series, rather than being *applied* to foster student engagement. This focus on the science rather than the politics of political science could have been problematic for some learners as for many it represented a steep learning curve having not previously studied politics or related social sciences that would have introduced them to key concepts (Bergbower 2017). Whilst not a research methods course per se, the module utilised a compact theoretical and methods based approach not necessarily suited for a diverse student population (Olsen and Statham 2006; Glover and Tagliarina 2011).

The teaching style was predominantly information transmission and did not differentiate for a large cohort of diverse students, and the module's implicit orientation towards

research methods did not fully support the vast range of prior knowledge and different levels of experience of studying politics (Ernst and Ernst 2011). Consequently, in a standard constructivist sense (Jervis and Jervis 2005) the module's alignment of learning outcomes to assessment was potentially problematic within the broader context of the module design as it assumed too much prior knowledge and relied too heavily on extensive independent reading to fill potential gaps in knowledge. This approach did not sufficiently address issues regarding prior experience of studying politics or build criticality (Glover and Tagliarina 2011) and missed opportunities to provide formative feedback.

Constraints and limitations

There were certain constraints that limited alterations to the module, specifically in terms of the learning outcomes and module aims, which needed to remain the same, and assignments being set at an equivalent level and load. Additionally, the original cohort size increased to almost 300 students, all with varying experiences of the subject matter and diverse educational backgrounds, which would affect modes of interaction within the lecture setting (see, for example, Pollock, Hamann and Wilson, 2011). This increased cohort size meant rethinking some of the techniques and student interactions previously employed within lecture settings whereby it was much easier to directly communicate with students and get feedback from them following short group tasks: this helped focus attention towards a more significant redesign of the much smaller-sized seminar series (c.30 students per seminar group).

Considerations for change

Enhancements were underpinned by an ethos of an active learning approach (Powner 2006; Broscheid 2012) in an introductory context that better reflected the diverse nature of the cohort and to build knowledge rather than assume prior experience. All three aspects of the module needed to interlink: *lecture series*, identified as the platform for delivery of key information that included simple student interactions, manageable with the size cohort and setting for delivery; *seminar series*, 45 minute sessions with smaller groups of around 30 students that utilized team tasks for active learning through experimentation and simulation on the theme established in the lecture series, and *assessments modes aligned with content and delivery choices* that combined in a way that would help evidence learning, accumulate knowledge through activities, peer-learning, and formative feedback that would then feed into a final aligned assessment (Damron and Mott 2005; Dickovick 2009; Junisbai 2014; Young, Cartwright and Rudy 2014). The new assessment focused on three interlinked methods: one 1500-word individual essay (40%), a 3000-word group project in the form of a policy paper on a country's transition to democracy (40%), and contribute to seminars presentations/debates in their project groups (20%).

The expansion of peer-learning (Boud, Cohen and Sampson 2001) and formative feedback opportunities were identified in order to create layers of knowledge accumulation that fed into the final assessment (Latimer and Hempson 2012; Lusk 2016). This approach builds on conceptions of constructivist knowledge whereby facilitating deep and critical learning requires repeatedly building on existing or prior knowledge over time and in turn using the lectures to inform seminar work and seminar work to inform the policy paper (Smith, DiSessa, and Jeremy Roschelle 1994; Richardson 1997; Grennon Brooks and Brooks 1999). It also further links to transition approaches to curriculum development (Kift and Nelson 2005) in order to engage students and provide

a learning environment where success necessitated the application of such approaches in simulated real-world scenarios (Hosticka 1980; Asal and Blake, 2006; Ryan, Saunders, Rainsford, and Thompson 2014) and political simulations in the form of policy briefings, real-time negotiations, research skills and policy papers (Usherwood 2015). This also embedded a number of formative feedback opportunities, including peer critique, to monitor student progress throughout the module, primarily through the interactions between teams in seminar groups, thereby fostering a 'learning through doing approach' (Deardorff and Folger. 2005; Elman, Kapiszewski and Kirilova 2015) and a development of assessment literacy (Kift 2008).

Lecture Series, Seminar Series and Policy Paper Assessment Alignment

In this section, we outline the alignment between lecture content, seminars, and the design of the Policy Paper element of the assessment. Depending on size, each seminar group was split into four-six randomly picked five-person teams, for both the seminar tasks and the final group project. Team tasks within seminars two and five formed part of the summative assessment process, whilst tasks within seminars one, three and four, contributed to the monitoring of student progress. Each seminar topic was framed by the lecture content from the previous two weeks and corresponded to requirements for the final assessment. The final part of the assessment was the development of a group Policy Paper, designed to align with the seminar simulation of a political faction within a currently undemocratic or authoritarian regime tasked with transitioning the country to democracy. The democratic transition represented a plan attempting to best address transitional problems rather than guarantee success. Marking criteria was based on demonstrable engagement with the theoretical literature and demonstrations of analysis and reasoning behind choices that were specific to their regime. An overview of the sorts

of issues they needed to address with critical prompts was also provided including: Constitution; Which political system will you set up and why? How will you ensure free and fair elections? How are you going to engage the population to participate in elections? Disenfranchisement/inclusivity; Post-elections; What measure of success are you using?; What role for the military and police force? Similarly, a structural template was provided that showed how the lecture series content related to the sorts of questions and issues the transition needed to address. Presented as a briefing/policy paper rather than an essay, students were also encouraged to think about how they were setting out their document structurally and visually to communicate information.

Illustrating the alignment across all three strands of the module is perhaps easiest by focusing on the first substantive seminar.² Seminar 2 followed lectures in week 2 on concepts and measurements of democracy and, in week 3, on classifying non-democratic regimes – totalitarian and authoritarian – and their survival in the 21st century. The task in Seminar 2 – detailed below – required students to outline the current governance structure of their regime and highlight related opportunities and likely hurdles to a move towards democracy. Doing so required understanding and applying key concepts addressed in the previous four lectures and also helped create the basis for the Introduction to their Policy Paper (see Table 1).

As part of a summative assessment (10% of total module mark), teams were tasked the role of social science researchers commissioned to explore the political systems of their chosen regime and brief the newly appointed UK ambassador to the country (the

² Seminar 1 acted as an overview to the seminar series and assignments and how these would build towards the summative Policy Paper assessment. Teams were also tasked to pick from one of the eight regimes listed in the module handbook (China; Equatorial Guinea; Eritrea; Laos; North Korea; Oman; Saudi Arabia; Syria) and had 15 minutes to make their decision and then each provide a 3-4 minute initial rationale. No two teams in the same seminar group could pick the same regime and where there was duplication these teams had to negotiate for their pick.

seminar leader). This required teams to deliver a 5-7 minute pre-prepared presentation on their chosen regimes' current political systems and identify initial challenges to a future transition to democracy. Presentations needed to consider their target audience as ambassadors are busy and not specialists on the subject being briefed on, thus students needed to provide accurate and well-researched information but that was clearly articulated in a way that was readily accessible. After each presentation, the seminar leader and other teams had the opportunity to ask questions, seek clarifications or additional details. This simulated real-world scenarios for students to act as political scientists and provided an early opportunity to gain feedback on their initial research, which could (in)form the basis of the introduction to their policy paper. The session also provided opportunities for developing transferable presentational skills.

Table 1: Lecture, Seminar, Policy Paper Alignment

Week	Lectures	Seminar	Policy Paper
2	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The Concept of Democracy: Varieties of democracy 2. Measuring the level of democracy 		
3	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Defining totalitarian and authoritarian regimes 2. Totalitarian and authoritarian regimes in the 21st Century 		
4		<p><u>S2 Presenting your regimes:</u> group presentations must outline and define their regime's current governance structures and highlight related opportunities and hurdles these structures might have to the process of democratisation.</p>	<p>The seminar presentation, related research, and seminar feedback should form the basis of your Policy Paper's Introduction</p>

Adopting different tasks, and without summative assessment, seminars 3 and 4 had a similar approach of linking the tasks to the previous two-weeks lecture series content and actively building content and skills useful for the final Policy Paper assessment.

Seminar 5 adopted a roundtable approach that acted as the final seminar summative assessment (10%). Relating to the Policy Paper, rather than building on the previous two-weeks lecture series, this task instead built on the whole lecture series to date to give teams the opportunity to test their central ideas developing in their Policy Paper and receive critical feedback from their peers and seminar leader. The session was also designed to allow teams to engage with alternative approaches and ideas that they may not have previously considered through the interactions with the other teams prior to the submission of their policy paper (due a few weeks later). To this end, the roundtable task's rapid-fire nature was also intended to help students identify their transition plan's central thesis and the best way to present it.

Teams represented their regime at a roundtable discussion along with a State Department delegate from the US (the seminar leader). The initial setup was somewhat tongue-in-cheek, that a newly elected US President had declared a revised 'Axis of Evil' that includes all of the regimes the seminar teams represent and was intent militarily overthrowing them. Unable to do so simultaneously, the State Department saw an opportunity to modify the President's position to instead allocate funds to help one of the countries to transition to democracy. The team's task was, based on the viability of their transition plan and critiques of the other teams' plans, to convince the delegate why they, over other teams, should receive the funds to help their transition.

Prior to the session, each team had to prepare a two-minute opening statement about their regime's intended transition to democracy and outline the viability of their plan. Once all the teams had presented, they had two minutes to regroup and think of an initial 'rapid response' to the key points of the other team's presentations to be delivered in a one-minute statement. For the next 25 minutes, there was an open discussion before a brief closing statement by each team. During this discussion, each team had one lead envoy at the roundtable accompanied by an envoy assistant whilst the remaining team members acted as researchers. During this discussion phase only the lead envoy could make comments to the room, the researchers could only talk to the envoy assistant, the envoy assistant could talk to both the researchers and the lead envoy, and the lead envoy can only talk to the envoy assistant. Communications could be verbal, handwritten, or via online technologies. The researchers were tasked with providing counterarguments in real-time against those being presented by the other team's lead envoy whilst also revising a prepared closing statement. Following the discussion, lead envoys and their assistants went back to their researchers and as a team, they had 3-minutes to produce a final 1-minute closing statement to be presented to the room.

Comparison between module iterations

The redesign of the module was such that to successfully complete seminar tasks required applying knowledge from the lecture series in a way that also built towards the group project policy paper assessment whilst offering formative feedback opportunities throughout the module. This interconnection between the lecture series, seminar series, and major assessments better aligned the module in a standard constructivist sense but also moved away from assuming too much prior knowledge and relying too heavily on extensive independent learning to fill potential knowledge gaps and instead. Crucially,

this built on conceptions of constructivist knowledge by creating a process of varied teaching methods, active learning, and simulations that helped the accumulation of layers of knowledge that also fed into the final assessment. The advantages of this approach for aiding transition include reducing the potential barriers to success and active engagement: by applying methods through simulations that students could actively engage with had the potential to reduce what would have otherwise been a steep learning curve for those students who had not previously been exposed to key concepts through prior study. Similarly, doing so avoided the previously compact theoretical and methods based approach that was identified as not being suited for a diverse student group and moved away from the predominantly didactic approach that offered little differentiation for a large cohort of diverse students with vastly different levels of prior knowledge and experience of studying politics. The redesign was to also link to transition approaches to curriculum development in order to engage students and provide a learning environment where success necessitated engaging in simulated real-world scenarios and political simulations in the form of policy briefings, real-time negotiations, research skills and policy papers. Unlike in the previous iteration of the module, this also embedded a number of formative feedback opportunities that made it easier to monitor student progress across the entire module (rather than just during summative assessments) as well as including peer critique and learning through inter-team and intra-team seminar interactions.

Preliminary quantitative results show that comparatively the average student mark increased significantly and student feedback scores highlighted the engaging and enjoyable nature of the module's content, delivery and assessments as a particular positive of the module. Using categorical marking, the percentage of students reaching the highest grade bracket (74% and over) was significantly higher than usual, at over

18%, with a normal distribution usually between 2-6% of students. Over 54% of students gained marks in the top two highest grade brackets, around double what would usually be expected (see Table 2).³

Table 2: Policy Paper Results

<u>Final Mark</u>	<u>No. Groups</u>	<u>Percentage of Groups</u>
74-81%	11	18.6%
62-68%	21	35.6%
52-58%	20	33.9%
42-48%	6	10.2%
Fail	1	1.6%

In practical terms, the additional time required to initially setup and revise the module might be viewed as a potential inhibitor for time-poor educators to change existing modules along similar lines. However, in the experience of those undertaking the teaching, once teaching began the reduced seminar planning and ease of seminar delivery more than made up for the initial time investment. A by-product of the seminar guides produced for students and educators and the overall content and assessment alignment was that students expressed that they had a clear understanding of what the course was and what was expected of them, but also how the theoretical elements corresponded to real-world applications. Also, the specific assessments and seminar tasks outlined below are just one illustration of the how this transition and alignment approach could be applied, meaning different tasks and assessments could be employed to meet the same end.

Conclusion

This case study in module redesign is an example of what Kift and Nelson (2005) suggests can support student transition: a programme renewal that establishes connected

³ The only 'team' that failed was actually a single student who had failed to participate in seminar group tasks, so, consequently was put into their own 'team' required to produce a proportionately reduced word-count policy paper.

curriculum as an enabling infrastructure for students to actively engage with learning. In setting out this case, we also framed it within ideas of transition pedagogy and whereby the decision-making process is considered not only from an immediate environmental perspective of expanding cohort sizes that can potentially limit innovative approaches to delivery, but the wider issues relating to increasingly diverse student cohorts who may have different social and learning needs. In providing this case study, we illustrate the thinking behind the resultant activities and assessment realignment and in doing so provide an example of how a transitional approach, particularly to a first-year module, that respects diversity that can be explored using simulations and active-learning pedagogical techniques. We believe that in detailing the case broadly, it is an approach that is transferable to HE contexts around the globe.

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