Higher Education Academy

TRANSFORMING TEACHING
INSPIRING LEARNING

# Innovative pedagogies series: From learning by transmission to learning by doing

## Engaging students in research-led teaching and learning practices

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# Contents

# Introduction

This account provides a personal reflection of my experience in teaching and learning, with particular reference to innovative pedagogical practice. The account is divided into four sections, providing an introduction, a review of the manner by which my practice has developed and evolved, a discussion of the way in which my practice is grounded within the wider teaching and learning literature, and a reflection about how my approach can be adapted and adopted within the higher education (HE) community. The report is based upon my own experience as an academic working at a variety of different universities and academic practice communities that have included the University of Leicester (1993-8), University of North London (1998), Nottingham Trent University (1998-9), Loughborough University (1999-2000), Coventry University (2000-8), Open University (2002-present), Higher Education Academy Subject Centre for Sociology, Anthropology and Politics (2007-8), and De Montfort University (2008-present). The report also draws upon my experience in broader academic communities such as the European Commission Jean Monnet Chair network and external academic appointments that include Review Editor of *European Foreign Affairs Review*, Co-Editor of European Political Science, Honorary Treasurer of the UK *Political Studies Association* (PSA) and a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society.

My personal philosophy of pedagogic practice is one that is based upon creating research-informed and research-led teaching and learning practices that are shaped by a desire and willingness to get students to understand the subject matter in a manner that is not purely based on their engagement in classroom and library settings. To this end I endeavour, wherever possible, to bring the subject matter to life by positioning students in a research environment which gives them hands-on experiences. It is an approach that has been conveyed through a number of innovative practices that have included real-world learning through exposure to and engagement with policymakers, the adoption and adaptation of research-led placements, the development of the student body as producers of knowledge through the creation of a policy commission, and the reshaping of assessment and feedback practices.

My commitment to creating innovative and research-led teaching and learning approaches has also extended to my involvement and participation in teaching and learning research communities. As such, I have developed a twin-track approach to my own research in the form of (a) my work in the area of international relations, British foreign policy and European integration, and (b) my work in the area of teaching and learning. The combination of publications in both fields is quite unique in the academic context where colleagues tend to specialise in a narrow field of enquiry. However, from my perspective this has provided an opportunity to make a contribution not only to the student learning experience through subject-orientated publications, but also to influence and shape debates on teaching and learning through relevant publications. This broader perspective has provided a platform from where I am able to take a holistic approach across the university learning environment and has also enabled me to be shaped by and to influence a wider group of colleagues that cut across disciplinary boundaries.

# Three models of research-led teaching and learning

In this section I set out the three core pillars that shape my approach to creating research-led teaching and learning environments. These are, namely, a focus on creating real-world learning environments, the development of research-led work placements, and a focus on students as the producers of knowledge and agents of change through the creation of a policy commission.

## Real-world learning

The first area of practice represents a belief that the student learning experience is enriched through the incorporation of a real-world context into curriculum design. This is something that I developed from the very outset of my teaching experience as a PhD student and was based upon a conclusion that students learn better through participation and where possible engagement with policymakers, for example through visiting speakers and study trips. It is a view that was in every sense a gut instinct that something had to be done to create a more active learning environment and to bring the research material that I was engaging with as a PhD student into my own teaching. To this end, I adopted role plays, made use of small group work, helped to organise field trips and ran simulation exercises. In those early years of my career back in the mid-1990s I utilised a mock cabinet government role play to reconstruct the decision-making process on Britain's entry to the Exchange Rate Mechanism, introduced a simulation exercise on the European Union (EU), and used document reviews to engage students with primary source materials. These activities were shaped by a desire to create a research-based learning environment that was set in an imaginative and thought-provoking framework.

As my career progressed I made greater use of field trips to provide students with an opportunity to inform the subjects that they studied through a hands-on experience. This has included trips to the Houses of Parliament, Cabinet Office War Rooms, Imperial War Museum, EU, and North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). Apart from the practical benefit of providing students with an opportunity to relate their studies to real experiences, they have enabled engagement with policymakers, particularly in the EU and NATO settings. These activities are pivotal in getting students to work together and have had lasting benefits in terms of fostering a climate of student engagement with the subject matter.

Related to this, I have extended the use of simulation exercises and refashioned patterns of assessment. This has resulted in a move away from examinations on my second year undergraduate European Politics module, with students being assessed through a mixture of an essay, reflective diary of an EU study trip (or a document review for those students unable to undertake the study trip), and simulation exercise. The introduction of a reflective diary from the study trip has proved to be particularly helpful in developing students' reflective writing as well as building their analytical skills for the simulation exercise. This was emphasised by the reflective accounts that students produced after a study trip to Brussels in April 2015, where three members of the group took it upon themselves to arrange an interview with an official within one of the EU institutions. As one of the students wrote:

> **On the first day we used our initiative and emailed the office of Cecilia Malmström, commissioner for trade, in an attempt to arrange a meeting for our free day on the Friday. Fortunately, we received an email that stated that we could meet with Ms Nele Eichhorn, member of the cabinet in the Directorate General for Trade. While Ms Eichhorn explained the internal workings of the DGs and operational relationships they have with one another and other institutions, the main themes of the meeting orbited around *bilateral and future potential multilateral trade agreements, for example TTIP.* *(Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership).***

The strength of this approach has been echoed by external examiner feedback, of which the latest report for 2015 comments:

> **I think this is an excellent, well thought out module. It is clear that a lot of effort goes into the teaching (especially setting up the simulation exercise which I know can be a time-consuming and difficult task). The many first class marks bear testament to the way in which the module's design really engages the students [and] encourages them to link the academic literature to practical everyday politics and policy. I think the highest praise I can give is that I read the student's work with genuine interest and indeed gleaned some new and interesting facts (I suspect most people do not know the EU employs fewer people than Birmingham City Council - but thanks to reading these essays and reflections I now do!). I thought the reflective pieces also revealed the students' enjoyment of the module. Indeed it was great to see the students reflecting on their learning and how this challenged some of their preconceptions about the EU.**

Providing students with an opportunity to learn in non-traditional settings is an approach that I have championed elsewhere in our curriculum at De Montfort University (DMU). My department is fortunate enough to have a collaborative partnership with City University in Hong Kong where we run a BA degree in Public Administration and Management that mirrors our own offering at De Montfort. While the degree has operated in Hong Kong for some 20 years, the students in both settings had essentially been taught separately. This was something that I changed in 2014-15 by providing the opportunity for the UK students to undertake a piece of assessment in Hong Kong through partaking in an experiential workshop. This led to me taking a group of nine students to Hong Kong in February 2015, an initiative that was praised by the external examiner at the assessment board where he:

> **...praised staff on the good practice of organising a DMU student visit because this was reflected in the students' work. He commented that this was an excellent example of an educational partnership, not only with the institutions but with the students too.**

Elsewhere, my commitment to innovation in teaching and learning has been further evidenced by the fact that in 2006 I organised a European Parliament to Campus programme. Modelled on the US Congress to Campus programme, Coventry was the first University to organise such an event, with the feedback being extremely positive. Such innovations reflected my desire to enhance the curriculum in and beyond the disciplines of Politics and International Relations (IR) by getting students to engage directly with policymakers. This innovation led to me presenting a report at a seminar discussing the future working of the European Parliament to Campus programme at the European University Institute in Florence on 28 April 2006, which has in turn influenced greater promotion and use of the programme across European universities. I have continued the European Parliament to Campus programme at De Montfort University, most recently organising an event in December 2014, when I hosted former Members of the European Parliament Malcolm Harbour (UK) and Olle Schmidt (Sweden). Among UK Departments of Politics, De Montfort University is unique in hosting both a Congress to Campus Programme and European Parliament to Campus programme. The interaction with former and existing policymakers provides an opportunity to debunk myths and challenge and debate policies in a way that cannot be possible from reading a textbook or watching a documentary. It is a point that Olle Schmidt and Malcolm Harbour succinctly made in the evaluation of their visit to the University:

> **My conclusion when leaving the De Montfort University and "EP to Campus" programme is very clear. For me these meetings and discussions and debates with school children, students, teachers and the public were extremely interesting and valuable. I would like to recommend my friends in the Former Members to participate in the upcoming "EP to Campus" events. For the universities and their students it is an added value to discuss these issues with politicians and lawmakers. The same goes for us, former MEPs, we can use our experiences and also get to grips with the current debate about Europe among the students.** ***(Olle Schmidt, personal correspondence)***

> As it was close to my 'home' region, it was very valuable to get the views of citizens and young people about the work of the European Parliament. We were able to challenge many false perceptions, especially the view that the UK has no influence in the EU. Olle was very helpful in providing a different viewpoint – "as others see us".
>
> We also found that there was much interest in the economic and single market aspects of the EU. These are not always central in EP to Campus programmes and we hope there will be more interest in this crucial policy area.
>
> I encourage more colleagues to take part in future events. De Montfort is already advertising its 2015 programme, which will take place from 1st to 3rd December. Be there! *(Malcolm Harbour)*

## Research-led placements

The second area of innovation has been a commitment to enhance student employability skills through work placements. This initiative arose out of a project with the University of Warwick and Oxford Brookes University that was funded between 2004 and 2008 through the Fund for the Development of Teaching and Learning (FDTL) Phase 5 tranche of awards. Under the title of the Scholarship of Engagement in Politics, the project undertook research on the value of placement learning and made the case for the importance of creating research-informed placement learning in the Politics and IR curriculum (Curtis and Blair, 2010a and b). This work was both significant and innovative because it raised the importance of work placements in the Politics discipline at a time when there had been very little in the way of discussion about and use of placements in this discipline area, and also led to the first book to be published on placement pedagogic practice by Politics academics in the UK, *The Scholarship of Engagement for Politics: Placement Learning, Citizenship and Employability* (Curtis *et al*. 2010). The work that I undertook on placements and employability through the FDTL project has raised the profile of student learning outside the classroom and has helped to shape provision in other universities by providing the academic argument for placement learning. In my own department this has resulted in the introduction of a compulsory placement module in the second year of the single honours Politics and IR degree programmes. A direct benefit of this has been to improve the employability opportunities for students which has been reflected in *The Guardian* league table for Politics, where De Montfort University has improved from 56% of students being employed in a graduate career after six months in 2014 to 69% in the latest statistics for 2016. This compares very favourably with St Andrews University, which as the top-ranked university for the study of Politics, has an employability score of 73% (Guardian, 2015a)

## The practice of Politics: engaging students in a policy commission

A third area of distinctiveness has been the introduction of a Policy Commission at De Montfort University. In 2013-14 I developed the idea of creating a Policy Commission, which would create 100 ideas to change Britain that would be submitted to Members of Parliament (MPs) with a view to shaping debates in advance of the 2015 General Election. The Policy Commission engaged with more than 200 students from across the University, many of whom were from outside the Politics and IR degree programmes. The students grouped themselves into five different areas of investigation in response to key policy challenges that communities and government faced, namely: the future of our urban spaces and cities; citizenship and political participation, welfare reform and communities; young people and employment; migration and communities. These issues all represent 'wicked'[1] policy issues facing politicians. They were selected, and confirmed, after an engagement with academics and students. As the work of the Commission unfolded, it became very clear

[1] A 'wicked' issue or problem is a social or cultural problem that is difficult or impossible to sole due to incomplete knowledge/information or because of external factors. For more information see: **https://www.wickedproblems.com/1_wicked_problems.php**

that the boundaries of these themes were somewhat porous, with key policy challenges such as housing straddling more than one theme. Indeed, one of the challenges facing policymakers, as recognised by the Commission, was how to deal with policy issues that cut across more than one policy sector and which resist neat and narrow definitions. Importantly, the Policy Commission also provided an opportunity to engage students in new ways of learning as it sat outside of the formal curriculum with students acting as co-producers of knowledge, working in collaboration with academic staff to enhance the student learning experience.

The Policy Commission not only brought the teaching of Politics into the lives of students outside of the department's reach, but more importantly established a political community across the university. Such work engaged students in the act of doing Politics. This resulted in them having to compromise on their ideas and to negotiate among themselves. It also brought these ideas into a public environment and built resilience and self-confidence into the students. These skills are critical to the contemporary job market and tend to be difficult to teach. To this end, the Policy Commission was a means by which students were able to make and remake the political landscape and in so doing connect students to the political world through a process of change that is part of a critical pedagogy. Such an intervention marks a shift in the teaching of Politics by positioning it outside of the bounded nature of the classroom and what can often be a confined learning environment through structured regulations of what can and cannot be done because of the constraints of the likes of time and learning outcomes.

Drawing on an activist critical political pedagogy and being influenced by the work of Paulo Freire (1985), the project created a community of action that went beyond existing notions of the lone student as a producer of knowledge working in isolation with academic staff. The argument here is that the Policy Commission offered a new form of 'praxis', by which students were energised as a community of learners to enable them to maximise their learning outside of traditional curriculum boundaries. This praxis mixed subject disciplines and brought together students from all levels of study across the university. Through such an approach, the model of a Policy Commission reasserted the intellectual curiosity that is central to the mission of higher education and reinforces learning as a 'political act' that not only transforms the lives of those that it directly engages with, but crucially creates a dynamic process with outcomes that impact on the lives of others and places universities as forces for good. The success of the Policy Commission was recognised by *The Guardian* University Awards 2015 where it was a runner up in the student experience category, with the judges commenting:

> **The De Montfort University Policy Commission was established to engage students in new ways of learning, understanding and influencing politics. Students worked with academic staff to create 100 ideas to change Britain, giving them the opportunity to influence the future of the country and offering them a voice that would be heard by those in power.**
>
> **The project was open to all students at the university. Over the course of five months, the project solicited student ideas of how to change Britain. The project concluded at a reception in the House of Lords in which students presented the ideas to influential members of the three main political parties.**
>
> **The 100 ideas in the final document covered policy areas such as the future of urban spaces and cities; citizenship and political participation; welfare reform and communities; young people and employment; and migration and communities. The project gave students a valuable opportunity to engage with policymakers, fellow students and the wider public.**
> ***(The Guardian 2015b)***

# Engaging with and reflecting on teaching and learning

Having outlined the nature of my innovative approaches to teaching and learning, this section identifies the pedagogic literature that I have been influenced by and which I have drawn upon in my own research. In

particular, I have identified two areas that have shaped my own approaches, namely the scholarship of engagement and dialogic learning.

## The scholarship of engagement

In the course of my career I have been particularly influenced by the work undertaken in the US by the Boyer Foundation and the Carnegie Foundation's Political Engagement Project (Barber and Battistoni 1993; Boyer 1996 and 1998; Colby *et al*. 2003, 2007), as well as work undertaken by UK scholars in the area of employability and service learning (Annette 2005). This research has been particularly influential in shaping my own view that students learn better by doing and that students need to be given opportunities to learn outside of the formal classroom. This is, however, not so simple as just instructing students to engage in some sort of activity that is relevant to their learning outside of the classroom. For example, the philosopher of science Sir Karl Popper (1902-1994) once told his students to go out and "observe" (Popper 1974, p. 46). Their response was, "observe *what*?" In this context Popper was endeavouring to demonstrate to students the importance of theories as a means of guiding their observations, his lesson can equally be applied to approaches to teaching and learning in that there is a need for a central core and purpose to inform the teaching activity.

My approach has therefore been focused on getting students to engage with the research environment by drawing in particular on the work of Boyer, who in his report for the Carnegie Foundation put forward the argument that there was a need for a broader understanding of the significance of academic scholarship that represented the reality of staff activity which went beyond the somewhat simplistic division between research and teaching. Boyer's central argument was that universities in America had moved away from a commitment to public service and as such he articulated a need for a recommitment to service that could be best termed the "scholarship of engagement" (Boyer 1990; 1996). While Boyer's approach to service learning reflected a model of learning that was more reflective of the tradition of American universities, it is an approach which has taken greater hold in the UK in the second decade of the 21st century as universities have sought to establish closer engagement with their locality. This has been particularly evident in my own university where in 2011 it launched a significant Square Mile initiative that sought to maximise the institution's academic and student expertise to provide services and opportunities for the community of Leicester.

Although a focus on service learning and community engagement has come to the fore in the UK in more recent times, the lesson that I drew from the Boyer Commission was the focus that it attached to providing students with research-led opportunities. To this end "[C]arefully constructed internships" are cited as a key instrument in facilitating research-based learning on undergraduate programmes, as "the experience can provide learning that cannot be replicated in the classroom" (Boyer Commission 1998, pp. 18-19). This focus on research-led learning also chimed with arguments made by a number of UK academics (Jenkins *et al*. 2003; Jenkins and Healey 2005). This work has influenced my own approach to providing students with a variety of research learning environments, such as simulation exercises. It has also provided a pedagogical platform which informed a research project that I undertook with colleagues at Oxford Brookes University and the University of Warwick (in particular the late Philippa Sherrington) that examined the case for research-led placements in a UK setting. The project drew on Boyer's work, most evidently by providing the inspiration for the title of the research project, namely The Scholarship of Engagement of Politics. The project argued for a reconceptualising of placement learning from viewing it as work experience to instead positioning it as research-led learning (Sherrington *et al*. 2008). The argument here was that there was a need to move away from viewing work experience outside of the classroom as being something that is undertaken over extensive periods of time, for example during a traditional sandwich degree programme, to rather considering that such learning opportunities could be fashioned into short and intensive bursts of activity. This led to the conclusion:

> **Although current practice and studies tend to suggest the importance of extended placement activities (e.g. Hepburn, Niemi and Chapman 2000), we found that a week can be a long time in the teaching and learning of politics. Although most of the students suggested in their post-placement debriefings that longer placements would have further enhanced their understanding, nonetheless the impacts were still significant. In response to a follow-up questionnaire administered six months after their placements, 96% agreed that they had learned a lot from their placements. 75% responded that the experience had exceeded their expectations. In terms of enriching students' understanding of politics, 78% agreed that their experience had improved their grasp of the subject and 72% said they had drawn on their experiences in their subsequent course assignments.** ***(Curtis et al., 2009a, pp. 64-5).***

My research on placement learning highlighted the deficiencies of maintaining paper-based records in the form of a learning journal (Curtis *et al.* 2009b). This included the fact that such learning journals were often completed immediately before the submission of the deadline, that the material was often superficially reflective, and that there was little opportunity for formative assessment. To tackle this state of affairs the proposed solution was to advocate the use of blogging as a means of redressing the problems of paper-based journals. Importantly, this allowed students to feel somewhat unrestricted in their writing, with many demonstrating a greater degree of flair and creativity as they appreciated that they were writing for public consumption. This was a point that I made in a journal article:

> **So in a very real sense, not only were our students active researchers, they were also writing for publication by posting their reflections online at the end of each day. This freed up their writing considerably, as many of them adopted styles and wrote in a detail and length that would have been unthinkable with paper-based 'private' journals that students are required to submit to their tutors only at the end of their placements. The fact that students knew their tutors would be reading their blogs on a frequent basis provided an additional incentive to keep them up to date and prevented this from becoming a painful but necessary chore that could be put off until the submission deadline. The public nature of blogging also discouraged students from overly personalising their reflections by writing extensively about their feelings, which can be a problem with paper-based journals.** ***(Curtis et al. 2009a, p. 67).***

The work that I undertook in the area of placement learning extended to an article being published as part of a special issue by British academics on teaching and learning in the US-edited *Journal of Political Science Education* (Curtis and Blair 2010a). The article set out the importance of engaging students in research-based experiential learning, noting that "Our students were actively engaged in research in two ways: They were researching politics in action in real-world contexts through their engagement with their placement providers' activities; they were also engaged in specific research projects for their placement providers" (Curtis and Blair 2010a, p. 371). Such arguments also extended to, and drew upon, the US experience of community and participatory action research (Reardon 1998) and research service learning (Goss *et al*. 2010, p. 119; Porpora, 1999).

## The importance of dialogue

One of the lessons emerged from the research that I undertook on placement learning was the significant value that students gained from not only the practical side of learning outside of the classroom, but the dialogic feedback that they obtained from their mentors in the placement environment. At the time there was considerable debate in the literature and also in the academic press surrounding the value (or rather lack of) feedback provided to students. While the student learning process had been traditionally seen as one that took place in a transmission model within the classroom, feedback on student assessments was more often than not conveyed in a written manner.

A combination of my concern with feedback practices and my endeavours to utilise different assessment patterns (which themselves focused more on dialogic feedback through the process of doing), led me to a

successful bid to the Higher Education Academy (HEA) for a National Teaching Fellowship project from 2009-12, entitled "It's Good to Talk: Feedback, Dialogue and Learning". The collaborative project, which involved De Montfort University, the University of Warwick and London Metropolitan University, sought to establish the importance of dialogue in the provision of feedback (Blair and McGinty [Shields] 2012b; Blair *et al.* 2012; Blair *et al.* 2013). Drawing on a wide body of literature that stressed the importance of dialogue (e.g. Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick 2006; Gibbs and Simpson 2004; Nicol 2010; Black and Wiliam 1998; Rust *et al*. 2005) and my own understandings of both feedback and dialogue led me to define "feedback-dialogues" as "a collaborative discussion about feedback (between lecturer and student, or student and student) which enables shared understandings and subsequently provides opportunities for further development based on the exchange" (Blair and McGinty [Shields] 2013a, p. 466).

The crucial point of this work revolved around the importance that I attached to the notion of "shared understandings" that would in turn lead to "further development" and as such reflected my interest in developing student learning through an explanatory process of doing rather than merely a transmission model of learning. I regarded this as being a significant area because of a concern that students were not maximising their potential through a lack of engagement in the feedback cycle. At the same time they were not fully aware of how to engage with feedback (such as through gathering together the feedback that they had been provided with so as to look for certain learning patterns that required further investigation).

The research that I undertook on assessment and feedback resulted in a variety of articles that contributed to the literature through, for example, arguing for the importance of timely feedback (Blair, Curtis and Shields 2013) and the use of peer feedback as a means of developing students as critical learners (Blair, McGinty [Shields] and Curtis 2013b). This work extended into a broader critique of the nature of the feedback which students both wanted and needed (Blair, Curtis, Goodwin and McGinty [Shields] 2013), the research for which was recognised by the Political Studies Association's journal *Politics* as the best article published in the journal between 2012-13. The evidence from that research corresponded with a general concern that students have expressed on the issue of feedback, for example through the National Student Surveys (NSS). The findings also supported research that has been undertaken elsewhere which suggests that students do recognise feedback as being central to improving their own learning. Students reported that feedback was unhelpful when it was poorly constructed, vague and provided late. A number of students also noted that they found it difficult to obtain verbal feedback because of constraints on lecturers' availability. Such a position reinforces the notion of chasing tutorials that I have argued elsewhere is a particular cause for concern (Blair and McGinty [Shields] (2013a). It also gives further evidence to the fact that students increasingly view their educational experience in a professional and potentially transactional context.

This issue of professionalism extends into the fact that the evidence indicates that students want feedback that is meaningful for their studies and that can be acted upon in future work. This is not just about having a verbal dialogue with a tutor, but is also about feedback being provided in a timely manner and for that feedback to have a sense of where improvement can be made. A balanced approach also means that feedback needs to be provided across all assignment tasks, of which the most notable cause for concern is the lack of feedback provided on exams.

One of the areas where feedback has regularly been criticised has been in relation to exam feedback, an issue which I addressed in an article for *Studies in Higher Education* (Blair, Wyburn-Powell, Goodwin and Shields 2014). The significance of this work was that it argued for the importance of feedback as a collective activity, not only as a means of tackling issues of efficiency, but also as a means of ensuring that feedback does not just revert to a grade transmission model which is individually focused. To achieve this, I argued that focus should be attached to the use of exemplars and model answers as a means of providing feedforward as well as feedback. It is an approach which draws upon arguments relating to "scaffolding", as outlined by Carless *et al.* (2011, p. 405) who stress that dialogic feedback and the use of formative exemplar exercises can encourage students through practice to develop capacities to self-regulate their own learning. In this context, my argument that the enabling of students to become self-reliant, and independent learners that are capable

of evaluating their own performance must be a key goal of any assessment exercise and of the university experience in general is integral to the innovations that I have adopted such as in relation to the simulation exercise, engagement with policymakers, and the establishment of a Policy Commission.

## Reflection, outcomes and future direction

The argument that I have endeavoured to set out here centres on the importance of providing students with a research-led learning environment. This is, however, not as simple as just ensuring that students are exposed to great researchers. Indeed, as the literature has time and again highlighted, just because someone is a great researcher does not make them a great teacher. My argument is that students themselves need to be exposed to, as well as to undertake, research. It is an argument which centres on the process of students learning by doing rather than just receiving. The doing bit can include, among others, such activities as simulations, engagement with policymakers, undertaking field trips, and experiencing a research-led (as opposed to work) placement. In my experience students not only gain greater self-confidence and other personal skills, such as relating to motivation, but they also obtain a deeper knowledge of the subject matter. This has been evidenced in student reflections and in their own performance in module assessment, where the Politics degree at De Montfort was ranked top for "added value" in the 2016 *The Guardian* league table (2015a). Scoring a maximum 10/10, the added value ranking measured the performance achieved by students in the degree results when compared against the entry tariff.

The very process of engaging in such activities also provides students with a critical reference point that is invaluable for their future employment opportunities. For example, students who participated in the Policy Commission initiative were able to present to future employers not only a video that they participated in, but also a document that was akin to the sort of portfolio that an art student would have created. This in turn provides a speaking point or a point of reference from which a student is able to evidence their contribution as well as to demonstrate their creativity.

The very notion of a portfolio of work by a Social Science student is something that is for the most part absent in teaching and learning discussions. This is in itself hugely surprising given that students are themselves regularly informed about the need to think about their future careers as involving many jobs and the career literature as well as the management 'speak' is regularly peppered with references to "portfolio careers". Yet, within the higher education community we continue to see student education as one which is very much positioned in segmented silos that in my opinion does not provide the sort of creative environment that is essential to instilling in students the necessary skills that are relevant to their own future. Indeed, I personally find it rather strange that there is for the most part an absence of reference to creativity in the most recent Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) subject benchmark statement for Politics and International Relations that was published in September 2014. Creativity itself is not referred to at all in the document, with there being no expectation that students should be exposed to a creative learning environment. In a similar vein, innovation is equally not referred to in the context of the specific teaching and learning provision. Although this is quite a strange state of affairs, it is in part the result of a tendency for such reports to be somewhat dusted down versions of previous iterations.

Yet the problem is that the world has significantly changed and this is an issue that affects the teaching of Politics and International Relations more than other disciplines because of the need to keep abreast of changes in such matters as statehood. Yet, in the midst of these changes our curriculum continues to follow many of the similar lines as it has done in the past. What then, are the possible solutions?

The first issue, I believe, is the need to view changes to teaching and learning within a broader holistic perspective. Thus, as I have endeavoured to note, it is important to consider not only the method of innovation, such as in the form of a Policy Commission, but also the upstream and downstream impact in such areas as assessment. If the focus, as is the case in my innovations, is in getting students engaged, then

there is no point in overlooking the issue of feedback as students can in my opinion only learn through guidance and direction and this is best achieved through dialogue.

The second point that I consider to be important is the need to consider the value of research in a less isolated context than that of the Research Excellence Framework (REF). The REF is an important exercise, but, in my opinion, it is fundamentally one which is concentrated on disseminating a pot of money in a reduced funding environment. As such, a great deal of research will not be part of the REF and this is apart from the fact that many colleagues are deemed not to be even engaged in REF-focused work. The question that arises here then is that if a key dimension of research-informed teaching is one where colleagues are engaged in research themselves, there is a need for a reconceptualisation of how we understand research-led and research-informed teaching to one that engages and involves students (and staff) more actively in this process. This is particularly relevant at the undergraduate level of provision.

The third point that I would endeavour to stress is that universities themselves are part of a creative and stimulating community which in the UK has not benefited from the sort of reflection that the Boyer Commission provided in America. That is not to say that the US system is by any means a model to be emulated. However, I believe there is a requirement for a degree of reflection as per the Boyer Commission. The time is right in my view for a reflection on the nature of the university environment and this is something that I believe universities themselves need to take a lead on rather than being purely dependent on the whims and political landscape which has consistently proved to be far from benign. For this to happen universities themselves need to consider looking beyond their own mission groups to establish a more cohesive alliance in the face of what are considerable pressures and challenges in the years ahead. Yet this is an issue that is not without its difficulties given the pressure for universities to be ever more competitive and for them to differentiate their offering in a globalised HE environment.

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