

TEACHING AND TRAINING

developing a political science curriculum for non-traditional students

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Abstract

In keeping with practices elsewhere in Europe, Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) in Ireland have in recent decades adopted access policies for non-traditional students (not recent school leavers). This paper assesses a particular initiative to facilitate access to HEIs to non-traditional students. However, due to the initiative's origins as a non-accredited certificate for asylum seekers and refugees, specific attention will be paid to the immigrant community. This paper assesses the details of a new programme in Irish politics and political leadership for non-traditional students in Ireland. It will present the curriculum and document the teaching strategies that were selected while exploring the role for universities and political science departments, in particular in facilitating integration. Student-centred learning provides the overarching framework for the curriculum. Three teaching approaches – KWL, service learning, and enquiry- or problem-based learning – have been selected as the pedagogical underpinnings of this Certificate programme. The paper explores all three approaches and provides examples of how these will be employed. Finally, this paper concludes with a discussion of how the programme could be adapted in other jurisdictions and its uses in integrating citizens from new communities across European democracies.

Keywords curriculum design; non-traditional students; KWL; problem-based learning; service learning

INTRODUCTION

In keeping with practices elsewhere in Europe, Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) in Ireland have in recent

decades adopted access policies for non-traditional students (not recent school leavers). This cohort is not, however, a homogenous group with homogenous educational needs. This paper assesses

a particular initiative to facilitate access to HEIs to non-traditional students. However, due to the initiative's origins as a non-accredited certificate for asylum seekers and refugees, specific attention will be paid to the immigrant community.

Ireland is somewhat unique among European countries in having little experience of inward migration during the twentieth century. It was not until the 'Celtic Tiger' economy developed in the late 1990s that the country became a destination for migrants and it was only in 2007 that a Government Office with responsibility for integration was established. The late onset of inward migration allows Ireland to learn from the experiences of other countries, but it has also presented a number of challenges. This paper will refer to the role that universities can play in the integration process as it documents a custom-designed programme for non-traditional students. Subsequent sections explore the design of the political science curriculum for non-traditional students. Drawing on national and international examples of best practice in curriculum design it examines various aspects of curriculum design. First, it outlines the objectives and the structure of the curriculum. Second, the three pedagogical approaches employed in the teaching of this curriculum programme are described, applied and assessed. The approaches discussed are KWL,¹ service learning and problem-based learning (PBL). The paper includes a discussion on the opportunities and challenges of curriculum design for non-traditional students. The entire paper is located within the broad question of: what is the role for universities in promoting integration, and perhaps more specifically, what is the role of the political science discipline in this debate?

EMBRACING GOVERNMENT POLICY

Government policy on the issue of immigration and integration of foreign nationals in Ireland has largely been guided by the European Union. The European Commission's *First Annual Report on Migration and Integration* outlines the landscape for integration policies across Europe, which is a dichotomous reaction across the continent. Some states adopt a mainstreaming approach while others have adopted a more reactive and fragmented strategy (Boucher, 2008). Ireland fits into the latter category, which is unsurprising for a nation unfamiliar with net immigration. At the time of writing the Houses of the Oireachtas are processing the Immigration, Residence and Protection Bill (2008), which summarises the main immigration issues facing the country in current times. One of the key objectives in this legislative document, relevant to this educational endeavour, is the need for the social and economic needs of all members of Irish society to be fostered and encouraged.

The White Paper on Adult Education (2000: 13) advised of 'the need to frame educational policy and practice in the context of serving a diverse population as opposed to a uniform one, and the development of curricula, materials, training and in-service, modes of assessment and delivery methods which accept such diversity as the norm'. In October 2008, the Irish Minister for Integration, Conor Lenihan TD, outlined some of the principles that should be part of the development of an intercultural education strategy. These included the 'mainstreaming of education provision through inclusive practices by and for all involved in the education of both migrant and host community at national and at local level ... partnership and engagement

through dialogue with the wider education community, and a focus on the fact that rights and responsibilities, high aspirations and high expectations should be the same for all students' (speech to the NCCRI's Intercultural Education Conference Dublin: 1st October 2008).

UNIVERSITIES AND INTEGRATION

As public sector bodies funded by the public purse, Universities have a social responsibility. Indeed the Universities Act 1997 includes the following in the objects of a University: 'to promote learning in its student body and in society generally; to promote the cultural and social life of society, while fostering and respecting the diversity of the university's traditions'.

While the Irish Universities do not make explicit reference to integration, it is ultimately found in their emphasis on 'external engagement and contribution to society' and 'engagement with communities as a means of promoting social inclusion' in their strategic plans. Moreover, each University has an access office whose function is to promote and support access to non-traditional students.

Within UCC, the Strategic Plan (2009–2013) states that diversity and a globally oriented viewpoint of the world should be fostered within the learning boundaries of the college community. The goals of the University strategy is 'on meeting the needs of society' (UCC, 2009). The first of these goals is to enhance teaching and learning and the overall experience. This vision is embedded in the conceptual construction, planning and delivery of the political science curriculum outlined in this paper.

THE POLITICAL SCIENCE COMMUNITY

The contribution that the discipline of political science can and does make

outside of the academy has become a focus of considerable attention in the last decade in the Republic of Ireland. This discussion is more established in other jurisdictions and an extensive literature exists on the development and contribution of politics and citizenship education. Some recent contributions include Kisby and Sloam (2008) and Smith *et al* (2008).

To the extent that it introduces learners to the political system of the country in which they reside, political science contributes to the integration of the migrant community, playing a civic education role. This has been taken into consideration in the formulation of our curriculum, particularly in light of immigrant voting rights in Ireland.

Immigrants in Ireland do not have uniform voting rights. Under Irish electoral legislation EU citizens are entitled to vote in European Parliament and local government elections. Not EU residents (including asylum seekers and refugees) can vote in local government elections. Finally, British citizens can vote in general elections, European Parliament election and in local government contests.

The extent to which political science can provide civic education rests on a state/university/faculty/student definition of the same. Due to the political and ideological interests embedded in varied conceptions of citizenship there are competing interpretations of what is meant by civic education. Some describe it as the education of 'tolerant, rational political actors' while others claim it is one that gives students the 'organizational and participatory skills necessary to negotiate democracy' (Dale *et al*, 2007). Some suggest it teaches the 'critical and deliberative skills necessary to participate effectively in contentious public debates' yet others are uncomfortable with approaches that 'encourage dissent and critique of current policies' (Westheimer and Kahne, 2004). Westheimer and Kahne note that many programmes

emphasise the personally responsible citizen and identify three visions of citizenship that may be incorporated into programmes of civic education (2004):

1. Personally responsible citizen (citizens must have good character). For example this citizen will donate to a food drive.
2. Participatory citizen (citizen must actively participate and take leadership position in community structures). For example this citizen will organise a food drive.
3. Justice-oriented citizen (citizen must question and change established systems and structures when they produce patterns of injustice). For example this citizen will question why there is a need for a food drive and seek to change the root causes.

The curriculum developed takes a justice-oriented citizen approach as evidenced in the KWL, service learning and PBL pedagogical approaches.

CURRICULUM AND PROGRAMME DESIGN

In meeting the integration policy objectives, universities have responded with a variety of schemes, programmes and access mechanisms. The genesis for the Certificate in Government and Political leadership programme was an unaccredited evening course that was developed for refugees and asylum seekers, as part of a scheme targeted at extending education opportunities across society. This 16-week programme ran annually and was based upon a student-centred teaching philosophy that took account of multiple intelligences within the teaching setting (Gardner, 1995). The format consisted of a student-friendly class structure, weekly class agendas and interactive activities for each class. Class topics varied from year to year to reflect

student demand and ability. Topics ranged from Irish political culture to faith in contemporary Ireland. The programme married theory and practice and experiential learning was an integral feature of the programme with regular fieldtrips built into the course design.

The success and interest in the programme from the migrant community led to a second project with a core aim to design and develop a curriculum for an accredited Certificate in Government and Political Leadership. When embarking on the course design, the project team were cognisant of working within frameworks outlined by experts in the area of curriculum design. Lublin (2003: 2) has highlighted a number of key considerations when designing courses. These include establishing a demand for the course, determining its content and choosing teaching methods. The following sections outline how these considerations were regarded in the development of the Certificate programme.

PROGRAMME DESIGN AND DEVELOPMENT

The developmental phase of this programme spanned a 6-month period. From October 2008 to April 2009, past participants of the unaccredited programme were surveyed, a focus group was held, and meetings with curriculum specialists and community groups were convened.

The surveys provided detailed feedback on the non-accredited programme. A recurring theme of the surveys was the desire to see an accredited programme provided within the university. It was felt that such a course would allow students an opportunity to gain a recognised qualification that would provide a clear access and progression route into the mainstream university course offerings. Access to university facilities was also provided as a reason for having an

accredited course. As participants on a non-accredited programme, the students did not have access to facilities such as the university library. This was a significant impediment for many. Such problems would not arise with an accredited programme as students of these have full access to all university facilities.

The focus group reinforced many of the survey findings. The feedback received centred on how the non-accredited course had been used by the past students (tangible and intangible utilisation); how it could be improved (suggestions for future programmes); and opinions on a new course title. Similar to the survey findings, the focus group spoke positively of their experiences of the non-accredited programme. The participants strongly favoured the formalisation and expansion of the programme and again suggested the need for accredited courses that entailed progression routes towards the assimilation into mainstream higher education. While finding the non-accredited certificate a useful entry point to politics in Ireland, they stressed their desire for an accredited certificate that would have national and international recognition. Also formalisation would grant them student status and thereby access to the University's wider resources, for example library, computer services and so forth. They also recommended that the programme should be extended to members of the wider community as they wished to study with Irish students.

The next step in the curriculum design process was to engage with community groups, state agencies and curriculum specialists to draft the scope of the programme. Those met were either involved in the development of intercultural education in Ireland or experts in developing courses for non-traditional students generally. The information gathered and feedback received from

these meetings ranged from the theoretical to the practical. In particular, feedback was given on how to foster intercultural dialogue and how to introduce interactive methods of education to students that might feel more comfortable with traditional 'chalk and talk' methods. The advice was to design a programme that employed active learning strategies. However, the curriculum experts did warn of the additional supports required in the teaching of non-traditional students. In particular, resource implications were discussed. Having a dedicated source of funding as well as a committed and enthusiastic staff was seen as essential elements in the success of such courses.

As a result of these discussions it was decided to utilise pedagogical approaches that encouraged and promoted activity learning. The approaches – KWL, service learning and PBL – are particularly suitable to the teaching of political science as they are learner-centric and promote independent thinking. In the following sections we describe these approaches, their theoretical underpinnings and practical implementations.

THE CERTIFICATE IN GOVERNMENT AND POLITICAL LEADERSHIP

The resulting product of the various consultations, meetings and feedback gatherings was an accredited Certificate, the Certificate in Government and Political Leadership. It is offered through the university's Centre for Adult and Continuing Education in partnership with the Department of Government.

The certificate programme consists of thirty credits (ECTS) and is offered over a 1-year period (academic year). It introduces students to key concepts in political science, the politics of Ireland,

and political and community leadership, through modules entitled:

Introduction to Political Science (ten credits): Political Leadership (ten credits); and

Government and Politics in Ireland (ten credits).

The programme's learning outcomes are as follows:

On completion of this programme, students should be able to:

- discuss features of the Irish political system;
- explain key concepts in political science;
- display political leadership skills;
- demonstrate capacity for critical thinking;
- contribute to the discourse on active citizenship;
- prepare and present academic assignments using political science terminology and appropriate referencing conventions.

It expects participants to attend classes one night per week (for the 24-week academic term) and Saturdays (one per month) as well as partake in fieldtrips to political institutions in Cork and Dublin. Those who successfully complete the Certificate may apply for a ten-credit exemption in the first year of the BSc Government. This provision was made in direct response to feedback from the focus group and surveys. It is also in keeping with Government and university policy on widening access to third-level education.

TEACHING APPROACHES

The certificate embraces a number of teaching strategies – KWL, service learning and PBL. These approaches were deliberately chosen to suit the needs of adult learners, some of whom will be re-engaging with the learning environment after some time away from formal

education while also accommodating a culturally diverse classroom environment. These approaches facilitate integration, contribute to active learning, stimulate the minds of participants, and encourage the sharing of experiences and knowledge.

KWL

Drawing from the main tenets of interculturalism, with a specific focus upon the pedagogical approaches endorsed by Tanaka (2002), the non-accredited Certificate programme used the KWL tool for curriculum development. KWL is an acronym for 'what we *know*', 'what we *want to know*' and 'what we have *learned*'. It was created by Donna Ogle in 1986 and has been used ever since in research projects. It was developed to enable better organisation of student self-learning and self-reflection (Ogle, 1986). The KWL chart may be used in small or larger groups and can be used in a variety of subjects. It allows for an intersubjective space to be created as it simultaneously captures prior student learning in an area and encourages reflection on new knowledge in the classroom.

The KWL findings gathered over the years informed the curriculum design for the new accredited Certificate programme. This novel technique was appropriate for the development and delivery of this programme as it promotes interaction and exchange of ideas and experiences, a principle endorsed by the White Paper on Adult Education (2000).

As a pedagogy it is student-focused and maps student learning in a particular field of study (Allington and Cunningham, 2003). It ensures that curriculum development is bottom-up leading to student-centred learning (O'Mullane, 2007). It also allows for an inclusive and egalitarian approach to student learning in education (Freire, 1970). In the case of this project

of curriculum development in an intercultural context, it plays a central role in supporting the nurturing of a supportive learning space. It promotes the dialogue between participants and tutors that is essential to Freire's approach and provides one forum among many in the programme for students to have a voice.

The results of KWL exercises in the non-accredited certificate were used to inform the design of the 'Introduction to Political Science' module. KWL will be used as part of this module as it provides the necessary reflective opportunity to students in reflecting upon their knowledge and expectations of the subject area. It will also be employed by those students in the 'Introduction to Political Leadership' module as it facilitates the reflection required for service learning.

SERVICE LEARNING

Service learning is a *powerful medium for teaching intercultural literacy, knowledge and sensitivity* (Sternberger *et al*, 2005: 78). It offers students an opportunity to integrate and relate theory to practice and is recognised as a powerful vehicle for advancing civic engagement. It is embedded in the module on political leadership.²

Service learning, sometimes referred to as community service learning, has been defined as 'a form of experiential education that combines structured opportunities for learning academic skills, reflection on the normative dimensions of civic life, and experiential activity that addresses community needs or assists individuals, families, and communities in need' (Hunter and Brisbin, 2000: 623). It incorporates a civic awareness dimension unlike other forms of experiential education, such as work placements/professional internships. Yet it is neither charitable nor philanthropic work as it does not view community

engagement as a form of personal generosity.

Redlawsk and Wilson highlight the three main goals of service learning: partner with the community to determine and fulfil a need of the community or community organisation; engage the student in the community immediately and increase the potential for future engagement; assignments that connect with and enhance theories students are learning in the classroom (2006: 5).

Service learning has been described as the teaching dimension of Boyer's scholarship of engagement. It is also the 'clearest pedagogical model that takes seriously Freire's challenge about education' (Doorley, 2007: 135). It is argued that service learning has transformative potential for the scholarship of teaching and plays a part in creating civic space and strengthening civil society (Barber in Zlotkowski, 2007: 45) and in the 'deliberate reconnecting' (*ibid.*: 50) of citizens with the public sphere.

According to Redlawsk and Wilson (2006: 4) typical elements of service learning are: working in the community, reflecting on the work and connecting the work to the course content. Academic critique and self-reflection for course credit are essential to ensuring the academic credibility and integrity of a service learning programme. Advocates of service learning emphasise its capacity for 'creating and reinforcing civic minded citizens and generating democratic responsibility among our students while serving and empowering communities' and refer to its transformative potential for students as it has been linked with 'changing or at least rethinking political attitudes and behaviour and political efficacy' (Mathews-Gardner *et al*, 2005: 424).

Within service learning programme's dialogue journals, or other group-oriented written reflections, group projects, presentations are encouraged to

enhance students' critical thinking and deliberative skills.

Service learning is one of the pedagogies embedded in the curriculum and is concentrated in the module on political leadership in particular. In keeping with best practice it will not be a compulsory component but will be an option for students (Harris and McIlrath, 2008). It involves training students as trainers in community education programmes such as the internationally renowned VPSJ Active Citizenship/Voter Education Programme and organising and delivering these programmes in partnership with community organisations for academic credit.

PROBLEM-BASED LEARNING

PBL is an approach to learning where the process is driven by enquiry. The learning is driven by open-ended questions. Students begin with a problem and the problem guides the learning. It is experiential learning that is organised around the solution of real world problems. Activity is organised around collaborative work in small groups. The approach of PBL has its origins in the work of Cooper and Sweller (1985 and 1987) on cognitive load theory. PBL is embedded in the certificate curriculum in the module on the Government and Politics of Ireland. Enthusiasts of the approach have outlined many benefits of embracing PBL. These have been listed by Kiely *et al* (2000) as follows:

- It encourages students to self-direct their learning.
- To be both independent and interdependent in their learning.
- It creates an environment for peer teaching.
- It encourages reflection.
- It leads to a research-oriented curriculum.

Although all of the points above are worthy of further discussion, the first and final points stand out. A self-directed learning process is ideal for students returning to education. They have the structure of a formal education programme but the opportunity to pace and direct their own learning around critical questions in the subject they are taking. The final point underlines the skills-oriented aspect of the approach. As universities become more competitive environments and research dominates the agenda, many teachers are now looking at methods of integrating their own research into their teaching, to open students to the most up to date research in the field. Second, staff are challenged to create new generations of researchers. There is an increasing sense that students must see themselves as 'developing' researchers during their education. Curricula should be designed with explicit research skills content. PBL can make a significant contribution to the development of students as researchers. Reidy (2007 and 2008) discusses this point in more detail and concluded that the 'whole PBL approach moves students towards a research led learning process from the very start of their university careers. Students are initially presented with an open ended problem and both the "teaching" and "learning" of the module is student research driven'.

The Certificate in Government and Political Leadership uses PBL. Students are presented with key questions of political science and the problems will guide them to the theories and methods of the discipline which will enable them to 'answer' the questions. The questions include what Wood (2003) describes as 'triggers'. These are the pointers in the questions which direct students towards material or literature to help them. This approach has the advantage of combining theory and empirical evidence at the same time as developing the research

skills of the students. This approach has especial merits for political science which has a theory and evidence approach at its core. Questions can be drawn from the 'real' world giving students a clear sense of how their skills might be employed in the workplace. Finally, the PBL approach is flexible and creative and allows for questions to be driven by current research questions or question of national political significance.

CONCLUSION

Broadening access to third-level education is a core objective in most countries. In the Irish context, specific access routes for non-school leavers have been given priority. Broader participation is welcomed in general and in the political science area, the increased benefits in relation to citizenship and participation are highlighted. This paper has documented the development of one such course. It has been designed with a specific focus on 'non-traditional' students. To this end, it employs three different pedagogical approaches. The motivation for pedagogical diversity is to create a student-centred learning environment and experience. All three approaches have the student at the centre. The curriculum is designed to introduce students to core principles in political science, especially political leadership and Irish politics. However, there is a flexibility that allows

students to select and focus on aspects that interest them.

The three approaches are the greatest strength of the programme, but they could also be a challenge for participants. Extensive resources are required to support students on a programme that is so diverse in its approaches to learning. All three stray far from the traditional 'chalk and talk' model and in this regard, student support is essential for the programme to be successful. The challenge lies in ensuring appropriate institutional and departmental supports for those returning to education and for the faculty involved. A dedicated programme coordinator and the detailed programme handbook with module outlines, sample lectures, sample assignments and recommended reading list are essential to successful delivery.³

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Notes

1 Educator's elicit what the students already know about the study of politics; then students outline what they want to learn; and then after completing the module/course, students describe what they have learned (Ogle, 1986).

2 For further information on how service learning has been incorporated into a UCC module on participation see Harris (2010).

3 The handbook is available on request from the authors.

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