

Not what they want, but what they need: Teaching politics to journalism students

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Abstract

There is an issue around getting students engaged in subject matter about which they may have little interest. Often, such subject matter is essential to their studies. The module Essential Public Affairs is such a concern for students of journalism. It is essential for their professional qualification. This article explores a pilot project which developed ways to get students more engaged with the subject material. The consequences of such engagement could be seen in the assessment results and the future study choices of those students in the pilot.

Keywords

Politics, journalism, Essential Public Affairs, education, professional qualifications, student engagement, student learning

Introduction

For the vast majority of people studying in higher education (HE) and further education (FE), there is normally a definite interest in the subject matter. Why else would they have chosen that subject? Be it public administration or management, politics, history or sociology, engineering, technology or cyber-crime, there can be an expectation of at least a modicum of interest. Yet in all subject areas, there may well be a module, often a

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compulsory module, to which students take a dislike, or to which they do not comprehend its importance or relevance. It may be research methods or quantitative analysis for the politics students, or the writing of an extended essay or a dissertation for the nursing student. That one module may be viewed as too difficult, or not even seen as relevant. The engagement with the subject will often be minimal as well. Lack of engagement and lack of interest may even lead to academic failure.

On journalism courses, unsurprisingly, many students who take the course wish to become journalists. Students complete professional qualifications on accredited courses which will greatly enhance their employability. Within professional qualifications, many of the students take specialist option choices. These are the basis of their potential future careers. The problem is the core modules which form the baseline for every student. For many journalism students, that dreaded module is Essential Public Affairs (EPA). It is often seen as more difficult than that other great journalistic leveller, learning shorthand. For any student wanting the full National Council for the Training of Journalists (NCTJ) Diploma, still the only recognised UK journalism qualification, EPA must be passed. There is a single exam, with a 50% pass mark.

This article aims to set out aspects of good practice which have been utilised by the staff teaching on this one module – EPA – at one HE institution. The aim of the staff was to engage with the students in the learning materials, with the hope of raising the accredited qualification pass rate. Noting the difficulty of the subject matter, along with the breadth of materials which are part of the curriculum, this was a huge challenge.

Background

“The NCTJ was founded in 1951 to run the newspaper industry’s training scheme, following the findings of a Royal Commission on the Press” (National Council for the Training of Journalists, n.d.). For years after 1951 the old NCTJ Prof Test (as it was known) was the only way into employment as a journalist. Usually these trainee journalists started in the regional press and moved up from there. The history of professional UK journalism training is as long and interesting as the history of the sector it serves but beyond the scope of this article. Suffice to say by the 21st century NCTJ accredited provision was concentrated into four main sectors: FE colleges; private providers; postgraduate university courses; and undergraduate university courses.

The NCTJ provided a programme of study, a syllabus and an external exam, set by an exam board for each of its qualifications. FE colleges and private providers largely stuck to delivering the NCTJ syllabus but undergraduate and postgraduate courses had to deliver and assess qualification-appropriate material, as well as the NCTJ-stipulated content. EPA is one of five core subjects NCTJ students have to take, the other four being: Media Law; Reporting; Shorthand; and the Portfolio of Journalism.

Two optional modules make up the seven NCTJ preliminary qualifications. These include: Court Reporting; Production Journalism; Broadcast Journalism; Sports Journalism; and the Business of Magazines.

There is a problem in the teaching of EPA, and more broadly with regard to professional qualifications in journalism. The subject is taught in very different

institutions. Within such institutions, there are different demands placed upon the students. The traditional pedagogic approach to the qualification tends to emphasise acquiring the skills and the knowledge to pass the professional exam, with little emphasis upon the ability to reflect and be self-critical. As Jarvis (1983: 42) notes: “merely to acquire attitudes, knowledge and skills may not indicate that the learner has been educated, as opposed to trained, instructed, etc.”. In the not too distant past, many journalists were employed by their newspapers without qualifications and sent away on block-release courses to do their NCTJ prelims. In this situation, it made sense that the providers just delivered the NCTJ syllabus, as that is what the paper was paying for. The journalists would get their ‘context’ back in the newsroom. As Jarvis concluded: “since knowledge and skills change rapidly an aim of education is not to provide knowledge and skills sufficient for good practice, so much as to provide the learner with sufficient knowledge and skills for him [or her] to enter the profession and embark upon his [or her] career” (Jarvis, 1983: 43).

While the ‘rote-learning’ and the ‘training’ of the past approach may not be considered appropriate at HE level, the NCTJ deliberately offers no advice on pedagogic approaches to its courses. Over the years these approaches have proved effective in students acquiring knowledge in the short-term, but not so effective in long-term in-depth understanding. Rote learning does not lead to comprehension (Jarvis, 1983: 69). The result has often been students know enough to pass an exam but are not confident using the material they have learned, be it public affairs or media law, once working in the newsroom.

There is also a degree of inverted snobbery within parts of the journalism profession. Many established journalists do not see the need for journalism to be taught as a university degree. Their argument is the realities of the job need to be emphasised, rather than any theoretical underpinnings or need to reflect on practice (see Frith and Meech, 2007). Herein is a problem, not specific to journalism, which has been identified by Argyris and Schön (1974: 145): that of professional reform. If a profession will not reform itself “because it is too much the prisoner of its own world”, the question then arises as to how can a reform process be initiated? In the case of journalism, there is a clear need to integrate practice into the professional education, and for the value of the education to be acknowledged by the practitioners. The issue is around striking an appropriate balance.

The EPA syllabus

Essential Public Affairs is exactly what it says on the label. The NCTJ expects all qualified journalists to have a solid understanding of how central government, regional/devolved government and local government operate, not to mention the National Health Service (NHS), the European Union (EU) and Freedom of Information legislation. On top of this is a need to be aware of current issues and events, and to consider the practicalities of being a journalist: who does a journalist need to approach in a specific circumstance? Which questions should be asked of these sources?

This is a huge syllabus for one module. To say such a syllabus would be daunting to a student who has never previously studied politics, is something of an understatement. Much of the detail of this module would be unlikely to appear in a Politics or a Public Administration degree programme. The broad-brush material of cabinet, prime minister, and parliament is pretty standard across the board. Yet the EPA syllabus delves into the benefits system, NHS reform, the *modus operandi* of council meetings, and planning rules – and such things are unlikely to be covered in Politics or Public Administration degrees, unless there is a very specialised module option choice. Even then, such specialist modules are most unlikely to be oversubscribed. For the students undertaking EPA such minutiae are part of the curriculum. For some instructors, faced with this daunting syllabus, falling back upon rote learning may be the only way in which to deliver the syllabus.

A final and vital aspect of the study of Public Affairs is an awareness of all the current issues surrounding the particular topic. This could include, for example, the postcode lottery for cancer drugs in the NHS. Yet added to this is an ability to knowledgeably question key actors around the subject areas and the issues current in those areas.

So, the issue for journalism educators is how to teach this module. For some institutions, it is simply about memorising information, specifically from the core textbook: James Morrison's *Essential Public Affairs for Journalists* (2015, 4th edition). A problem here is students might not engage sufficiently with the material. It is memorised, regurgitated, and, once the exam is passed, forgotten. The caveat here is the assumption of a student achieving a pass grade.

Analysing the teaching of EPA

A trial has been run for the last four years, focusing on alternative ways of teaching EPA to achieve three ends: the passing of the NCTJ EPA exam; the passing of the institutional undergraduate module; and engagement with and deep understanding of the material so it can be applied, reconsidered, updated and reapplied throughout a journalistic career.

Jarvis (1983: 69) notes six levels of knowledge. These are:

- to have knowledge
- comprehension
- application
- analysis
- synthesis
- evaluation

While we do not intend to go into detail on these terms, it is important to note that 'comprehension' is described as "the lowest level of understanding so that the learner can make use of the knowledge learned" (Jarvis, 1983: 69). To pass the NCTJ EPA exam, having knowledge may be sufficient. Our objective in our trial was to move much further down the list, to some form of analysis – the breaking down of knowledge into its

component parts to enhance clarity – or even evaluation, which is all about judging the value of the knowledge.

This trial teaching has been done in the second year of the students' degree programme in journalism. While the clear objective must be for the students to pass the module, there was an underpinning belief that students needed to engage with the material. A better engagement with the material ought to lead to a better understanding and, consequently, better grades (Biggs, 2005; Race, 2007) and hopefully lifelong understanding. Kolb (1984) has noted how learning is best conceived as a process, rather than in terms of outcomes (see also Jarvis, 1983). The professional qualification may be about achieving that grade; a better engagement with the material has the potential to enhance that grade. Masterman has examined such approaches into the teaching of journalism. Not only is it about this engagement, but also the idea of promoting "reflection and critical thinking whilst being as lively, democratic, group-focused and action-orientated as the teacher can make it" (Masterman, 1985: 27).

There is a related issue here, around what is termed 'effective learning'. This can be carried through in a number of different ways (developed from Argyris and Schön, 1974: 98–109):

- personally-caused experience
- expressing and examining dilemmas
- the value of individuality and the expression of conflicts
- guidance from an instructor who has more faith in the abilities of the learners than the learners themselves
- an acknowledgement of the limits of the participants' learning methodologies
- the instructor's ideas of rationality integrate feelings and ideas
- the encouraging of spontaneity

Each of these points highlights an important aspect to the teaching of any subject. In the case of our journalism students, it was about finding different contexts for the students to develop appropriate skills as part of their professional qualification.

It must, however, be noted opinion is divided on the approaches to the specific pedagogy of journalism education. Tumber and Prentoulis (2005) have examined this divide, and noted the "market considerations" – that is, the practical skills needed; the professional training. The alternative is the more theoretical approach. Yet even this approach is divided: is journalism a subject in the social sciences or in the humanities? Either way, a background in academic fields such as politics, philosophy or sociology, with a non-vocational agenda, provides a range of research skills which may be considered essential for a modern-day journalism course. Our approach was to strike a balance between the market considerations – the professional qualification – and the need for research and intellectual endeavour.

What is important in the teaching of journalism is the extent to which former journalists have turned into those educating the journalism students. These 'hackademics' (Harcup, 2012) have had different experiences in their profession, and this influences how the subject matter is taught by them. Their academic backgrounds may

also be varied, which may have a significant impact upon which specialist skills may be emphasised. As Harcup (2012: 31) notes, these ‘hackademics “have a range of differing perspectives on the place of scholarship and critical inquiry within journalism education”. Thus, a teaching team which included a former-journalist would present perspectives and emphasise skills which a non-journalist might not prioritise. The role of the instructor in effective learning is very important (see Argyris and Schön, 1974: 110–113).

The teaching team, therefore, had to work out how best to deliver what the students needed. From the research or knowledge about subject matter perspective, the syllabus was broken down into bite-sized chunks. This breakdown was constricted a little by timetabling issues within the university, by class size in relation to computer labs, and by staff availability. In effect, there were ten weeks to focus on aspects of central government, devolved government and the EU, and ten weeks to focus on local government, social welfare and the NHS. Within all of these areas, almost anything could appear in the exam. It was at this point the realisation as to the size and diversity of the syllabus truly dawned on the staff involved.

Previous approaches to the teaching of EPA at our institution had involved a one hour lecture followed by a one-hour seminar every week. That was changed into a two-hour workshop format. But neither was satisfactory at promoting engagement, understanding or application. Noting the near total lack of knowledge on the subject matter among the majority of students, a lecture was added before the workshop. While accepting lectures are not the most engaging way of teaching (Biggs, 2005), the plan was to cover the key aspects of the topic under discussion (in effect, the basic knowledge), which would be discussed, tested, debated and applied in the workshop. The study of each topic would need to be supplemented by the students reading the appropriate chapter from the core Morrison text (2015). Additional chapters from textbooks (Cocker and Jones, 2015; Jones, 2016) which were being written by a member of the teaching team at this time were also made available to the students, to supplement the core text.

Lectures

Importantly, the way in which the lectures were delivered was a priority. As has already been noted, a lecturer who is enthused and energetic can generate a degree of interest. Both staff members involved in this project are University Teacher Fellows and recipients of Distinguished Teaching Awards. Academically, they have a Politics background, and one member of the team has a journalism background. Thus, there was an awareness of the need for the professional qualification, and the importance of that professional marketability. Both staff members appear on local radio frequently, including all-night performances in both the 2010 and 2015 general elections, as well as local elections. Thus, enthusiasm and energy was not lacking, and it rubbed off on the students. There were often vociferous and well-informed debates over a wide range of issues, including abolition of the monarchy, British membership of the EU, and especially rights of access to state benefits.

Yet this does not always work. In the second year of running this project, in a very early lecture, a hand was raised and a student said: “Excuse me, I don’t understand any of this”. Here was a situation of a student who believed they had no knowledge about the subject and feared they were drowning – and this was early in the first term. Part of the problem here was a simple fear of the unknown. This particular student had never knowingly studied Politics before, although there was an acknowledgement of attending Citizenship classes while at school. But the fear created a barrier, and one that needed to be overcome. Thus, there was a review of these basic building blocks of the module, to examine the extent to which they were fit for purpose. This student would probably have drowned under the rote- learning emphasis of many FE colleges (and those HE institutions that follow a similar model). A tutorial approach was taken in this instance, individually preparing this student for each week’s lecture topic with contextual background and some initial hand-holding through the textbook. Other students joined the extra tutorials and soon all students were enthusiastically preparing themselves for the lecture using the textbook and supplementary reading. The initially wary student ended up asking questions about EU fisheries quotas, easily passing the NCTJ exam and getting a good overall degree, including a 2:1 grade in this module. As a part of effective learning, there is a clear need to be aware of student strengths and weaknesses and to be able to respond to them. This is but one example of how such responsiveness can enhance the student learning experience.

The trick in the lectures has been to find a hook – something to which the students will respond and remember. This could be anecdotal tales of the inaction of a minister of state and problems in his constituency, or the use of Eurovision analogies to explain voting in the Council of Ministers under Qualified Majority Voting, or shining a light on the relationships between ministers and civil servants using clips from a popular UK television programme from the 1980s, *Yes, Minister*. This hook is phenomenally important. Experience has found the same hook does not necessarily work with every student. Hence there will be a number of different hooks in each lecture. Each potential hook becomes a prompt from which the students can recall information and utilise it to address an exam question. Such a hook may also prompt the ability to recall information long after the students have left university.

Workshops

The second part of the teaching is as a workshop. There are a number of different methods that can be, and are, used here. They can be boiled down as follows. Firstly, a general discussion takes place around the issue and its relevance pointed up by reference to contemporary events, for example a discussion of the economy and the Treasury might coincide with the Chancellor’s Autumn Statement. Questions are posed by the students and issues explored. Next the students are given a question or an issue for which they have to prepare. This could be controversial: abolition of the monarchy; electoral reform; or British withdrawal from the EU – to name but three. It could also be the mundane –issues around planning, or council tax bands. Students do not know

which side of the debate they will be arguing so need to prepare themselves with knowledge of all the key arguments.

They are then broken down into debating groups arbitrarily – alphabetically, or by eye colour, for example. These groups are then presented with the parameters of their debate. They need to construct a defence of their position, respond to points made by their adversaries and raise questions to ask of the opposing side. This is an important skill, as they may need to consider the political outlook of their media outlet when compiling a story. Such an activity will almost always raise all the controversies and issues surrounding the topic under debate. Importantly these issues and controversies will arise out of group discussion and active debate between the protagonists. Sometimes knowledge and understanding will be developed by these students amongst themselves as they prepare for and take part in these debates. It is the most active of learning environments and knowledge gained this way often sticks for the students who enjoy the adrenaline of the debate.

A second part to this workshop is to get them into the mode of thinking about their story. An important part of the exam is to identify sources that could be asked for comment – normally an exam question may ask for five sources. Added to this, the students are asked to prepare questions for each source, and to justify why they are asking that question of a particular source. Again, these are the transferable skills, from the workshop into the workplace. While this may seem a little mundane, consider the various newspaper stories or radio or television news items. Various experts or practitioners may be questioned, or the standard *vox pop* of members of the public. What questions could be asked of this expert? How different would these questions be to those posed to members of the general public? It is all essential for the professional life of a journalist.

Throughout these workshops, there is a continual reinforcement of these five sources and five questions. There is also the need to justify why such sources are being accessed, and why such questions are being asked. Running through these skills locks the practice in the students' minds and is perhaps one of the greatest transferable skills they learn in preparation for the workplace. This is not about rote learning; it is about integrating different forms of practice into what is professional education (see Argyris and Schön, 1974: 182–196).

One-to-one tutorials

Because students had often never studied Politics before, let alone studied for a professional qualification in the subject, another innovation was regular one-to-one tutorials for students. The main value of these tutorials was in allowing students to 'confess' their concerns over studying Politics for the first time and to develop, with tutor support, effective strategies for engaging with the material. Because the students were used to studying effectively at a high level, once they had strategies for engaging effectively with the new subject matter, they often made progress without tutor support; in some instances (see the specific example cited above) the one-to-one tutorials were used to offer contextual background, for example, on voting procedure, to help students gain confidence with the general area. In whatever way students used the tutorials, they were effective in all instances in helping students learn their own preferred way through

individual support from their tutor. This fits in with a number of different aspects of the ‘effective learning’ cited above.

Assessment of EPA

The assessments in the module helped support the overall goal of cultivating a deep understanding, while fulfilling the needs of HE-level study. Students were required to apply their new political knowledge in three practical assignments and also to engage with critical debates around the key issues being studied in two formal, traditional academic essays. The essay topics reflected the subject areas covered (for example the role and powers of the Prime Minister or the impact of the EU on UK parliamentary sovereignty) but the level of critical engagement obviously was much greater than the NCTJ demanded. Exposure to critical discussion of NCTJ syllabus subject areas not only locked in knowledge and understanding, but also helped fix interaction with debates and issues in those areas, which are hugely current in political journalism, for example the extent to which the EU governed the UK in relation to the EU membership referendum, which was a focus for much journalistic coverage in 2016.

It could be argued that placing the emphasis solely upon one exam does not test the full abilities of any student. The issue of pass/fail may arise because students do not conform to the attitudes laid down in the curriculum (see Jarvis, 1983: 33), or the attitudes and beliefs of those setting the assessment. Many of those involved in teaching this module would agree whole-heartedly. Yet those setting the professional qualification benchmark standard have deemed this to be the sole mode of assessment. Arguably, this narrow form of assessment encourages much rote learning as opposed to an in-depth understanding and comprehension of material. Yet the professional accreditation of the course is clearly attractive to prospective students for any college or university. The rules of assessment are not set by those delivering the material; we have to work within those guidelines. And, as noted earlier, professional reform is a mightily slow process, should reform to the assessment process ever be re-examined.

While the content is delivered in a range of different methods, those students who wish to achieve the professional qualification need to pass this exam – and to pass it above 50%. Much of the exam contains compulsory questions; there are very few optional questions. As with any exam, the basic exam techniques are needed. Yet there is a specific skill needed in these EPA exams. It is much more about demonstrating knowledge and understanding of the subject matter rather than presenting a critical analysis of a subject. The questions are quite prescriptive. For example, part one of a question may ask the students to present a fact file on a particular issue. More specifically, the students could be asked to list five points in favour of a particular perspective on the issue, and five points against – for example, on reform of the House of Lords – as part of the fact file. They could also be asked to explain each point, briefly. Part two of the question may ask the students to list five sources they would contact as part of their research into the fact file, and to list five questions to be asked of the sources. Again, these types of questions appear to encourage this rote learning approach: the regurgitation of lists.

The marking of said paper is even more prescriptive. For the first part of the question, there will be a mark for each accurate point on the reform of the House of Lords, in this particular hypothetical example, and one for each clear explanation. Ten marks available in favour of House of Lords reform, and ten marks against. For part two of the question, one mark is available for each valid source, and one mark for each reasonable question. This part of the question will be marked out of a total of ten, and the whole question will be marked out of thirty. Mark schemes are provided by the NCTJ which will include a list of bullet points in favour of and against House of Lords reform, and a brief explanation of each. There will also be a list of prospective sources and appropriate subjects through which questions could be developed. It is always noted that the material in the mark scheme is not exhaustive.

As can be seen from the type of questions that could be asked, and the way in which they are marked, there can be a degree of second-guessing as to the content of the exam. The students need to consider topical issues in the news, and how stories may develop around such issues.

A further point about the pilot was an attempt to build-in some critical thinking. While the students need to demonstrate they 'know' the material, there was a need to consider the 'why'. Harcup (2012: 33) has questioned the extent to which current journalism education is moving "towards a more reflective curriculum that builds bridges between theory, practice, research and teaching". While the EPA exam appears to encourage little more than the regurgitation of material, we have tried to encourage the students to move beyond that mindset. The problem is the extent to which the curriculum and the professional assessment are geared to little more than this mindset. By engaging with the students in the academic material, they started to pursue the 'why' as a result of their engagement in the material and curiosity takes hold. This pursuit of information – trying to address the 'why' – has led to a greater engagement by the students, and improved pass rates in the professional examination.

Learning can occur through a range of different processes. These include: "self-direction; facilitation; being taught; being instructed; being trained; discussion; living; being socialised; being influenced; being conditioned; being indoctrinated" (Jarvis, 1983: 83). For self-direction, motivation is paramount. Yet our objective through many of the methods on the above list, with the exception of 'indoctrination', was to engage with the motivation, to encourage the students to enquire, and for them to develop a higher degree of interest in the subject matter as opposed to rote learning for an exam.

Conclusion

When examining the success of the way in which EPA has been taught, it is not unqualified. Yet this approach has been successful. When examining pass rates, the numbers are up: in 2011, before the trial began, about 35 per cent of undergraduates would pass their EPA exam first time with the figure rising to around 50 per cent after retakes. By the end of the third year of this new approach 72 per cent were passing EPA and in 2015 a record 88 per cent of the students who studied for the exam passed it. Yet the success should not be judged solely on the pass rate. We have seen a far higher degree

of engagement by the students in the EPA module. The students are pursuing more political stories in their portfolios. They are also engaging in political affairs and events outside of the classroom environment, including attending trips to parliament which had previously only been taken up by Politics students. Formal feedback from students noted the trip to parliament as being one of the most enjoyable and useful highlights of the course. The same students added that they were able to make the link between the reading and the class work as a direct result of the trip.

When other opportunities arose, such as to attend a by-election count, the number of those desiring to attend far outstripped the number of press passes available. At the Corby by-election count, after the resignation of Louise Mensch in 2012, the students were able to interview Nigel Farage, the then-leader of the UK Independence Party. Not only was Farage happy to be interviewed by the students who were there, he spent a considerable amount of time with them and answered their questions in full. The students used his views as original, accurately referenced contributions to their academic essays. Such opportunities are rare, but the students grasped this one fully. It may not have directly contributed to their ability to pass an exam, but it further whetted an interest in the subject matter, the knock-on effect of which could be a better grade.

Students of EPA have gone on to study very politically-focused university modules in their third year and even decided to pursue careers in political communication on graduation as a result of the development of their political awareness in this module.

Yet there are caveats. The largest of these, acknowledged by the staff teaching on the module, is the investment of time. The literature on journalism education, on effective learning, and on professional education highlights the importance of both innovation and engagement. The problem is the extent to which these approaches are labour-intensive. It was only through the running of this pilot that an extra hour of contact time each week was made available to the teaching team. This extra hour has been utilised successfully, and the students are appreciative of this in their module feedback comments. The extra availability of staff for one-on-one tutorials to supplement the classroom contact time has also been valuable. This has enabled the team to identify weaknesses in the student profiles, and to help in addressing them.

Essential Public Affairs was once the dreaded module for most journalism students. The approach adopted here has tried to reduce that fear, and to engage with the students. The aim is to make them feel more comfortable with the material, and to have the ability to apply this knowledge and understanding to the exam. Education is a process; a series of events rather than a one-off occurrence (Jarvis, 1983). If pass rates are to be the sole method of judgement – that one-off occurrence – then our approach is phenomenally successful. The teaching team, however, looked beyond simple pass rates, and saw an engagement with the subject matter. Graduates of the course were applying successfully for political reporting posts on local newspapers. For many of the students, no longer was it the case of suffer the module, scrape a pass and then move on.

But the caveats need to be borne in mind. This is a time-consuming method. It does not fit into the standard model of lectures and tutorials as utilised at most colleges and universities. With students paying £9000 per year of study in England, maybe universities and colleges have to re-examine their approach to delivering their academic

service. Arguably, the NCTJ should revisit not just the syllabus but also the assessment and issues around modes of delivery in accredited institutions. Our approach seems to be working; but we are not the ones who decide if this is value for money.

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