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The Teaching of European Studies in Ireland

Time to Reconstruct the Classroom?

Mary C. Murphy
University College Cork
Context

- Strong tradition of educational excellence in Ireland
- Highly employable Irish graduates
- But, current and looming challenges ...
  - For universities
  - For students and graduates
  - For disciplines (including political science)
  - ‘Demise’ of European Studies in Ireland
    - But some embedding of EU modules in other programmes
  - [Impending shortage of Irish graduates working in EU institutions]
Challenges for Irish Universities

- Some marketisation of university sector
- Increasing reliance on non-exchequer funding models
- Some contracting out of key educational functions (e.g. training senior civil servants)
- Growth of private colleges
- Prescriptive research measurement and assessment exercises
- Limited (or perhaps skewed) investment in teaching, learning and pedagogy
- Under-engagement with EU lifelong learning programmes
Challenges for (Irish) Graduates/Students

- Finding jobs ...
- Identifying, addressing and resolving the needs and interests of a rapidly changing world
  - Globalisation; Economic volatility; Climate change and energy needs; Ageing populations; Changing patterns of migration; Poverty and inequality; International political volatility; and (Information) technology developments
- Note: Understanding the EU is an important context within which to address these challenges
- Demands the cultivation of specific skills and specialist knowledge
Challenges for European Studies

- Two dimensions:
  - intellectual capacity i.e. what we teach
  - skills i.e. how we teach
- 'The universities have a great challenge in the questions that are posed now, questions that are beyond ones of a narrow utility' (Higgins 2012)
- Key 21st century skills and competencies for most occupations (Burrus et al. 2013):
  - complex problem-solving
  - fluid intelligence (abstract thinking & mathematical reasoning)
  - teamwork (cooperation)
  - achievement/innovation (persistence)
  - communication skills (oral expression)
- Does the teaching of European Studies address or accomplish these objectives?
  - Irish European Studies community slow to grapple with T&L issues
Addressing the Challenge

Experiment with workshop format teaching

- Use of modified version of literature circles
  - Typically associated with school rather than university
  - Strong tradition in the US school setting
  - Focused largely on English literature studies; but increasingly used to teach second language acquisition
- Also draws on research/writing circles and writing retreats used to engage PhD students and junior faculty
According to Bedel (2012), literature circles promote peer discussions, negotiation of ideas, and the expression of comprehension.

‘… provide opportunities for immersing students in discussions that encourage their personal responses. When students feel their personal responses are nurtured and respected, they develop confidence to grow beyond status-quo thinking and to engage in critical perspectives on meaning making’ (Sanacore, 2013).
Reconstructing the Classroom

- Using the classroom to encourage improved critical thinking, analytical skills & written ability
- Module: GV6011 EU Political System & Policies
- Assignment: 3,000 word book review (worth 60%)
- Timing: Two days at end of term
- Setting: Neutral external venue with roundtable set-up (refreshments provided)
- Instructions:
  - Read the book!
  - Come prepared
  - Bring a laptop
  - Prepare to discuss
GV6011 Writing Workshop

- 9am-5pm, 10 & 11 December 2013
- Format and schedule
  - Setting of objectives & work-plans
  - Reading and writing
  - Progress reports & discussion (over coffee)
  - Reading and writing
  - Lunch break
  - Reading and writing
  - Progress reports & discussion (over coffee)
  - Reading and writing
  - Assessment of progress
  - [Near completion of reviews by end of Day 2]
GV4304 Workshop

- Format: Workshop based on short lectures, readings, writing and discussion
- Timing: One day 10am-4pm, end of term
- Venue: Neutral internal venue with roundtable set-up (refreshments provided)
- Instructions:
  - Less preparation
  - (loosely related to assignments)
  - Be prepared to contribute
  - Bring laptops and reading materials
Student Evaluation of Exercise

- **Very positive!**
  - Large majority of students found that the workshops:
    - Made the assignment 'more manageable'
    - Made the learning process 'more intense'
    - Allowed students to gain insights from the discussion moments*
    - Facilitated interaction with classmates*
    - Forced students to concentrate and instilled discipline
    - Helped students to appreciate how best to tackle assignments/tasks
- **Interestingly**
  - Not all students were adequately prepared
  - Students preferred **not** having access to the internet
  - Students favoured the neutral location
  - Students like peace and quiet!
Impact of Exercise

- 'Learning by doing'
- Modifies the classroom and alters the timing of the learning process
- Cultivates skills which are otherwise difficult to nurture
- Facilitates reading, discussion, reflection and intellectual scholarship
- Promotes new learning strategies and approaches (i.e. transferable skills)
- Some additions/adaptations:
  - leave students to discuss independently
  - encourage greater preparation
  - share student written work
  - include mini writing targets
- Note: Ultimately, the quality of assignments determines the merits of exercise ... but this is difficult to measure ...
Some student thoughts …

- ‘I’ve learnt that I work better without the distraction of the internet and this is something I will take away’.
- ‘The discussions with others. It makes you think’.
- ‘It allows time to interact with classmates and to bounce ideas off them’.
- ‘The encouragement for discussion provided learning that cannot be achieved in an hourly lecture setting’.
- ‘I definitely think I learned more from the workshop than from three double lectures’.
- ‘I will try to structure my working day more effectively and discipline myself to stick to the timetable with limited internet access’.
- ‘One day can seem daunting’.
- ‘It would be helpful to have a free day in between the two days to gather thoughts and material’.
Implications

- Begs questions about the utility of traditional lecture format
- Points to important learning outcomes from workshop format
  - Students perceive improved knowledge, skills and engagement/enthusiasm/confidence
  - Feedback and evaluation suggests similar findings to those which apply to literature circles
- Suggests some reconstruction of the classroom
  - Implies scheduling challenges
  - Involves resources implications
  - Requires buy-in from students (and attendance)
  - Challenges students and teachers (and the relationship between the two)
  - Only works for small groups ...
- Potentially points to a paradigmatic shift in how we deliver learning opportunities
  - More research needed ...