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Threshold Concepts Through *Enactive* Learning: How Effective Are They in the Study of European Politics?

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Studying European Politics can be a challenge! And this is not surprising: even the best scholarly minds of European politics often struggle to give precise definition to such a young, but already so complex and constantly evolving polity as the European Union, and are increasingly at odds with identifying its prospects for survival. One way to achieve a better understanding of the subject is to utilize a threshold concept approach, which is essentially a “less is more” approach that chooses to work with a few “founding” concepts, and identifies a “road map” for independent learning of broader but essentially inter-connected issues of the discipline. The threshold concept approach becomes even more effective if combined with *enactive* learning—that is, learning-by-doing, through role taking and simulation of the threshold concepts during seminars. Such learning evidently exceeds the boundaries of conventional knowledge and becomes a useful transferable investment for the future.

Keywords: European politics, threshold concepts, enactive learning, role taking, citizens’ juries, simulation

...We cannot teach anybody anything; we can only make them think.

Socrates

Drawing on my 8-year experience of teaching in higher education, I have come to realize the importance of making learning more (i) *accessible*—that is, ensuring that *all* students regardless of their abilities can equally enjoy and benefit from intended learning activities; (ii) *motivational*—that is, making learning interesting regardless of compulsory nature of some modules; and finally (iii) *reflective*—that is, recognizing that it is not just the knowledge but essentially an individual opinion developed through that knowledge that matters (Schön 1991)! However, in a modern-day teaching environment these commitments are rather difficult to follow, given the increasingly *en-mass* nature of higher education, often devoid of personal contact, but also the complexity or indeed, the volatility of some subjects to study. The latter is of particular relevance for teaching. For example, European politics, a fluid, complex, and constantly

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evolving discipline, whose substance and nature (especially if it is compulsory!) students often find hard to grapple with and consequently rather off-putting. And this is not surprising: even the best scholarly minds of European politics still struggle to give precise definition to such a young but already so complex and perpetually evolving polity as the European Union, and are increasingly divided over the prospects of its survival.

Faced with these challenges, and being particularly concerned with the demotivational compulsory nature of the module,¹ I have embarked on the road of experimentation, in order to improve students' learning experience (and the outcome)—to make it more enjoyable, rewarding, and intellectually proprietary for them. Consequently, I introduced the idea of *threshold concepts* based on a “less is more” (Cousin 2006:4) approach, which does not just open up for learning of a “particular concept, but also learning of other concepts related to it” (Carstensen and Bernhard 2008). In a nutshell, when dealing with a constantly evolving subject, like European politics, in order to avoid dangers of extensive, off-putting, and often superficial learning, I chose instead to focus on students' understanding of the four threshold concepts of the discipline: These are succinctly expressed by the questions of “why integrate? whose powers? why reform? and whose interests?”—the mastering of which, in my opinion, should enable them to develop knowledge and skills for a confident navigation of interrelated issues independently. My hope was that by laying conceptual foundations for the subject and exposing their interconnectedness with broader issues within and beyond the discipline, not only would I reduce the amount of information necessary for students to retain, but more essentially, I would provide better grounds for motivated independent learning, thus turning students' efforts into a worthwhile, “expedient,” and “transferable” investment for the future.

In this article, I therefore offer the outcome of my experimentation concerning the utility of the threshold-concepts approach for subject-evolving disciplines, like European Politics. I divide the overall discussion into four sections. In Section 1, I give a brief description of the module's structure and objectives. In Section 2, I discuss the advantages and difficulties of exploiting the method of threshold concepts. In Section 3, I contextualize the method further—by introducing the concept of *enactive learning*—in order to discuss its applicability and effectiveness. Finally, in Section 4, I evaluate my findings through formal assessment and comparative techniques, and offer some conclusions with regard to the utility of the method for subject-fluid disciplines. The overall objective of this exercise, however, is to demonstrate that *proper reflective learning*, by its very nature, ought to be experiential, continuing, and interactive, in order to overcome student fears of learning and to achieve deep and lasting understanding of the subject, which can potentially equip learners, apart from specialist knowledge, with broader transferable skills, independent thinking, and perpetual zest for “knowing more and better.”

Before I proceed with my discussion of the threshold-concept approach and its application to the field of European politics, I shall briefly outline the module's contents, main objectives and activities (including teaching and assessment methods) in order to give a sense of the context within which the threshold-concepts approach is employed.

¹The module European Politics is compulsory for second- and third-year undergraduate students taking European or International Politics Degree Scheme, in the Department of International Politics, Aberystwyth University. This often creates some negative sentiments especially among the students whose original background is not in politics, or those who take joint honors degrees—in other words, among those for whom European Politics is not of particular interest, and whose compulsory nature is seen as another unwelcomed hurdle to overcome on the way to the completion of their respective degrees schemes.

Module Aim/Teaching Objectives

The module European Politics is compulsory for honors students who in their undergraduate study pursue the European or International Politics Degree Schemes. The module aims to provide the foundation for a comprehensive analysis and understanding of the concepts and dynamics of the European Union. It offers examination of the logic for the formation and the development of the European Union, and also discusses key institutions and actors of European integration, and major policies and issues that are central to the future of Europe. The module endeavors to equip students with the knowledge and skills necessary to critically analyze not only the internal politics and policies of the European Union, but also to relate their experience more broadly to debates concerning the role of the European Union in national, regional, and global politics.

On the completion of the module, it is expected that students are able to achieve the following:

1. Have a detailed and critical awareness of contemporary politics and policies within the European Union and the Union's importance to the states of Europe;
2. Identify and apply appropriate concepts and theories to enable them to critically analyze the complexities of European integration;
3. Recognize major debates and issues concerning the exercise of power and authority within and between constituent levels of government in Europe;
4. Demonstrate, through written work and in seminar discussions, an awareness and understanding of different national and European level policies and interests;
5. Develop and effectively deploy skills of identification and location of appropriate sources; independent study and writing; confident and independent navigation of new and related issues; and being able to apply acquired knowledge comprehensively, including broader issues within and beyond the discipline.

These learning outcomes are assessed through student seminar contribution, one 2,500-word essay, and one 2-hour examination.² Assessment of seminar contribution (through presentations and especially through participation in group discussions and role playing) is a novel element introduced in this year's iteration of the module. This alteration has been considered in response to developing a threshold-concepts approach, which required some adjustment of teaching and assessment methods, including putting more emphasis on interactive and student-centered learning in lectures and seminars.

The module consists of 18 lectures and six 1-hour seminars. The lectures are organized in three main parts. Part I is designed to conceptually set the scene for discussing some principal issues related to the formation and the development of the European Union. Particular attention is given to the history and theories of European integration and governance. The main objective is to engage students into thinking about the rationale for the emergence of the European Union, of whose understanding may help them to tackle some complex issues related to further evolution of the Union.

²For discussion of learning outcomes at the undergraduate level, and how they should be suitably linked to assessment, see the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA). (2001) *The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland—January 2001*. Available at [<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/FHEQ/EWNI/default.asp>]. Accessed March 2009.

In Part II, the focus of the module turns to the EU's governance by way of considering the structure and power balance between the leading institutions of the Union, thus covering the councils, the parliament, the commission, and the EU courts, and their interaction with governments of Member States and other actors. This part also examines some prominent debates and issues related to the functioning of the institutions, in particular discussing "democratic deficit" and the need to reform and/or indeed to constitutionalize the Union.

Finally, Part III engages with a selection of policies considered to be wide-ranging and essential for the future of Europe. Notably, apart from examining the mechanisms and procedures of generic policymaking, the module also looks at financial policies (including the future of the Economic and Monetary Union), regional and enlargement policies, the Union's external relations (with a particular emphasis on the European Neighborhood Policy), Security and Defence and Justice and Home Affairs policies—in other words, a sample of policies whose impact may be seen as crucial for understanding the nature and the role of the European Union in the world.

Although the opportunity for interactive discussion within lectures of normally 60–70 students is limited, nevertheless, every endeavor is made to incorporate an interactive element into the presentation of topics during lectures. Topics are usually delivered through juxtaposition of conventional and alternative schools of thought and students are often invited to comment and indeed position themselves in relation to these differing perspectives. The principal focus of teaching-and-learning, however, lies with seminars, which offer a far broader opportunity to explore core and inter-connected issues *interactively* with a group of normally 12–15 students.

The final lecture of the module is dedicated to students' revision of the module's material in their preparation for the forthcoming examination. The lecture also serves as a concluding discussion to the module, and aims at mapping all issues raised in the module together in order to achieve final clarity and understanding of the European Union as a *sui generis* polity.

Although students' response to the lectures, based on the wide use of didactical material and occasional guest-presentations, has been very positive; in the past I felt that *proper reflective* understanding of the core questions of European politics (why? what? and how?) by students had not been comprehensively achieved. Indeed, as John Biggs (2003a:80) points out, the majority of people learn 10% of what they read, 20% of what they hear, 30% of what they see, 50% of what they see and hear, 70% of what they talk over with others, 80% of what they use in real life, and 95% of what they teach someone else. Previously I tried combining visual aids and interactive learning, however, these in my opinion were not sufficiently fulfilling of students' potential for learning such fluid and complex disciplines as European Politics.

I had therefore continued my search for better techniques and methods to encourage deeper student engagement with the subject, and to enthuse students' motivation for learning vast, diverse, and challenging concepts within the subject, until I finally encountered a discussion on the utility of threshold concepts in higher education debated in the 2006 Scottish Symposium on Threshold Concepts within the Disciplines. Being enlightened by the flexibility and the effectiveness of this approach, I have consequently decided to put its utility on trial myself, in my teaching of European Politics in Aberystwyth.

Understanding The Threshold-Concepts Approach

Threshold concepts are a relatively new approach to teaching and learning in higher education (Meyer and Land 2005; Symposium on Threshold Concepts within the Disciplines). It is based on an understanding that learning within

specific subject areas may be considered as akin to a portal opening up a new and *intensive* (rather than extensive) way of thinking, thus leading to a “transformative, irreversible and integrative” knowledge (Cousin 2006) and “exposing previously hidden interrelatedness” (Carstensen and Bernhard 2008) of issues at focus. In other words, the threshold-concepts approach seeks to identify key (founding) concepts—a kind of a mental “map” of the subject—the understanding of which would allow students to explore the depth of issues at focus and to embrace other related issues creatively and independently, thus considerably expanding the potential of their intellectual coverage. Threshold concepts essentially draw on a proactive conception of knowledge whereby *knowing* is seen not simply as “retaining and applying knowledge consistently,” and not only as “one’s ability and capacity to use it in a personal way in a variety of situations,” but more profoundly, as “applying knowledge actively, creatively and imaginatively in a variety of ways and where it forms the basis for further inquiry” (Bradbeer 2006). Threshold concepts are thus advantageous not only for helping students to retain some key information about the subject but also for helping to foster transferable skills which, by way of relating or indeed “mapping” different concepts and issues together—in an emancipatory, reflexive, and flexible manner—considerably expand the boundaries of knowledge within and beyond the discipline.

Given the experiential nature of threshold concepts I initially identified three, which I thought would be the key founding concepts—or rather, guiding principles of student inquiry—for the study of European politics within the module. They included: (i) the understanding of impetus (“why”-inquiry) for the emergence and continuing expansion of the European Union (essentially covering history and theories of integration here); (ii) the knowledge of key actors/institutions (“who”-inquiry) that govern the EU; and finally, (iii) the understanding of the actual process of governance (“how”-inquiry) based on the selection of policies (from monetary, foreign, and security to environmental and justice and home affairs), which in their diversity expose some characteristic features of the EU policymaking. In other words, by placing emphasis on learning about why the Union originated and who drives its development further (with some samples of “how” to expose the mechanics of actorness within the European Union) I sought to achieve an appealing mental portrait of the polity in order to further motivate students to learn about the other EU-related issues independently and creatively.

The underlying thinking behind the chosen strategy was explicitly reductionist in coverage and expedient in its objectives: “why? who? and how?” was seen as much more “affordable” for students to learn than, for example, embracing a 50-year history and practice of a polity, that is yet to be defined! However, the effective delivery of the threshold concepts, as revealed by the first formative student feedback, was not an easy exercise and even proved confusing for some in their intended learning objectives (ILO). As a result, I had to detail them further in order to make the utility of the threshold-concepts method more transparent and appealing to students. The outcome was my identification of four core concepts of European politics,³ the understanding of which I deemed essential for grasping the *modus operandi* of such a complex polity as the

³For clarity and simplicity purposes I summarized the four identified threshold concepts here—which are (i) the impetus for integration, (ii) the actors of governance, (iii) the rationale for reform, and (iv) the EU-centered policymaking—into four types of inquiry of “why integrate? what institutions? why reform? and whose interests?” They essentially act as signposts for the required areas of student coverage and highlight the core issues that students ought to learn in order to develop a better understanding of these and related issues within and effectively beyond the discipline.

European Union. They can be effectively summarized here in the form of the following inquiries:

1. “why integrate?” aiming to uncover the impetus for the emergence and continuing enlargement of the Union;
2. “what institutions?” looking at the EU actorness and power division/balance within the polity;
3. “why reform?” looking at how European Union functions, and why it needs reforming;
4. “in whose interests?” looking at the EU policymaking and the balance of interests in dealing with third parties.

These four concepts, in my opinion, effectively relate historical rationale for the creation of the European Union to many contemporary debates on the functioning of the Union, including the need to reform, to enlarge, to democratize, and to survive economic and political upheavals, thus forming the basis for student independent learning through “mapping” other European issues and policies with the key founding concepts of the module.

After running the initially identified key concepts through a number of lectures and the first seminar, I promptly sought students’ formative feedback on their understanding of the threshold concepts as ILO of the module. It was collected during the fourth week of teaching on their near-completion of the first two parts of the module.

The objective was to gauge students’ engagement with the threshold concepts which at that time was articulated only by means of interactive lectures, visual aids, and guest speaker sessions. Students were invited to express their opinions on color-differentiated sticky notes (Yellow—Yes! Go-ahead!; and Red—No-Go!) in relation to their grasping of the threshold concepts as well as the perceived effectiveness of methods/techniques and activities of teaching deployed in the module.

The outcome was extremely useful and encouraging. On a positive side, students clearly appreciated the idea of interactive lectures and guest speaker sessions highlighting clarity, cohesiveness, and accessibility of teaching methods (including visual aids). They also valued theoretical insights unpacked by the lecturer at the beginning of each session (“threshold concepts” which I used regularly in order to explain the “interrelatedness” of topics, and to map out the next theme of the module). At the same time, they also wanted “more politics in action,” “more today’s politics,” “more interaction,” and more opportunity “for opinion building.” In their “no-go” sticky notes they also indicated the desire to have more emphasis on “group work,” more “forum for discussion,” “fewer [traditional] presentations,” seeking more clarity especially in relation to theories and administrative functions of institutions and actors.

This constructive feedback (both positive and negative) led me to re-align my threshold-concepts approach with the teaching and learning activities initially planned for the module, in order to make the learning of “threshold concepts” more effective. I have decided to put more emphasis on *enactive learning*—learning by doing—whereby students were invited to take roles in seminars (in addition to their traditional 5-minute presentations at the beginning of each session) in order to “try” the threshold concepts in action.

To briefly sum up, students’ first formative feedback has clearly highlighted their growing satisfaction with the conceptual part of the module. However, in order to make threshold concepts useful in their generation of “irreversible, transformative, and integrative knowledge” (Cousin 2006) I needed to align them better with the learning activities at the seminars. This resulted in my

initiation of *enactive student learning*—through role playing in seminars and revision session in the module, to whose conceptual description I will now turn.

Threshold Concepts Through Enactive Learning

In my further teaching of the module I have decided to align the threshold-concept approach in a more constructive manner—that is, to allow more opportunities for students to construct their own meaning of knowledge (Biggs 2003a,b)—with the teaching and learning activities planned for the module. I focused on *enactive learning*—learning by doing through drama—as a novel but increasingly effective approach to enhancing learning in higher education (Zimmerman 1989; Owens 2005; Lean et al. 2006; Cherney 2008).

A number of studies have been conducted to uncover the utility and effectiveness of active learning especially through simulations and games (Lean et al. 2006; Coutu 1951; Fazey and Marton 2002; Huxman 2005; Robinson 1981). Findings generally concur on a particular value of active learning, and especially, *enactive learning*—through “engaging fictional entry point into an aspect of the subject/discipline being studied” (Owens 2005); in addressing cognitive and affective learning issues; and in facilitating interactivity, collaboration, peer learning, and active learning. An underlying assumption behind active and *enactive learning* is that “the goal and role will motivate the learning of content, and that learning the content in pursuit of the goal (which serves to contextualize instruction) will in turn lead to better content understanding” (Pitts and Edelson 2004). I thought this particular approach—learning by enacting threshold concepts through play—may yield a better understanding of the issues at focus and their underlying interrelatedness to broader concepts of the subject.

Consequently, I have introduced role playing in seminars and revisions sessions, to which I now turn.

Role Playing in Seminars

I dedicated the remaining five seminar sessions to learning through role playing and debating. Seminars were organized around the following themes:

Seminar 2: Discussion of the balance of powers by impersonating institutions and presenting their case to the judges (elected by students).

Seminar 3: The Treaty of Aberystwyth: saving the Treaty of Lisbon to reform the European Union.

Seminar 4: The boundaries of Europe: imaginative map drawing.

Seminar 5: Europe as Empire: parliamentary debate on the promotion/imposition of EU values.

Seminar 6: Europe as Fortress: parliamentary debate on the need to build walls around the European Union.

The themes of the seminars were explicitly structured around the threshold concepts as key (founding) concepts for the module. Each session was pre-empted by brief (strictly) 5-minute assessed presentations from 3 to 4 students—to form the grounds for role taking afterwards. Furthermore, each session was also concluded by my summarizing of the key points of the threshold concept at focus, based on students’ respective explorations during the seminar. Role taking was designed not only to inform students about specific themes and issues at focus, but to motivate them to apply the concepts to practice, to think and reflect on suitable solutions for pre-set scenarios and learning tasks at hand. The discussion below highlights the structure and some particular techniques deployed during seminars in order to facilitate effective learning of threshold concepts through an *enactive* format of teaching.

Seminar 2: students were divided into three groups to represent three main institutions of power within the EU: European Parliament, Commission, and Council of Ministers. Each one of them had to solicit their case in the Court of Justice—whose members were elected by peers—to argue for more power allocation (in case if deficient). In order to do that students had to investigate advantages/limitations of their respective institutions and those of their “opponents” and then argue their case in a dialectical manner—through question-and-answer session—in front of the judges. By engaging in discussion of power distribution and learning by cross-referencing, students broadened their experience of the threshold concept (“*what institutions?*”) and developed further understanding of which other actors may be involved, how they interact with each other, and how much power institutions have or should have in order to remain democratic.

Seminar 3: students had to enact a situation of crisis—the failure of the Reform Treaty (Lisbon) to be ratified by the Republic of Ireland. They, as the European Council (heads of member states/governments), “gathered” at an emergency meeting in Aberystwyth to negotiate a “way-out” from a stalemate that occurred as a result of the Irish people rejecting the Treaty (and proposed reforms) in a referendum. Realizing the urgency for reforming the European Union, students had to negotiate a new treaty which will be agreeable with all member states. As a result, students had to learn not only about the proposed reforms within the European Union—thus directly engaging with the threshold concept of *why reform?*—but more broadly, about the drive for reforms, varied dispositions/interests of member states, the difficulties of making compromises, and consequently, how the failure to negotiate may affect the future of the European Union. Furthermore, they all had to learn to negotiate in order to achieve a tangible result—a process they found extremely difficult (to reach consensus) resulting only in one group achieving a statement.

Seminar 4: the session was based on students’ imagining the future boundaries of Europe, and explaining/justifying their explorations. Students took the exercise creatively. In Group 2, for example, a student took the lead by inviting his peers to draw the boundaries of Europe themselves, and then discussing the differences in images afterwards. In Group 3, a student presented an impressive argument based on the examination of over 500 years of European history in order to convince her peers of the possible future cause for the EU development. Here, students learned to relate the threshold-concepts approach (in particular, *why integrate?*) more broadly to their understanding of the process of enlargement, possible rationale for further expansion, and what kind of interests and processes are at stake and in action for further development of the European Union.

Seminar 5 and 6: students were divided into two broad groups depending on their actual position in relation to the questions posed for them by the lecturer: (i) in Seminar 5 they were broadly separated into two groups of those who perceived Europe as a benevolent responsible force, and those who saw it as an interest-seeking Empire; and (ii) in Seminar 6 they were clustered into groups of those who saw the need for Europe to become an impregnable fortress, and those who insisted on more cooperation with and openness to outsiders. Each side had to present their position in a clear and argumentative manner, and to defend it during the question-and-answer session—in the form of a parliamentary debate. Again, the experience students gained by enacting and arguing their positions helped them to expand the boundaries of knowledge pertaining to the actual question thus directly identifying “*whose interests?*” were at stake in each instance of EU’s policymaking, and further reflecting on the interrelatedness of these issues to broader themes within European politics (for example, financial crisis, immigration, normative issues, etc.).

In conclusion, *enactive* learning through *role playing* in seminars proved absolutely essential for contextualizing the threshold concepts—*why integrate? what institutions? why reform? and whose interests?*—discussed in lectures. Students learned about theories and related issues independently and creatively through play, realizing the complexities and intricacies of the process of EU policy—and politics-making in practice. *Threshold concepts* par excellence is an important tool for enhancing students' learning, but combined with *enactive learning* they make the attainment of 'proactive knowing' more tangible, more memorable, and definitely, far more satisfactory for the student and the teacher!

Citizens' Juries in the Revision Session:

Citizens' juries were organized as part of *enactive* learning to improve the utility of the threshold concept approach. *Enactive* learning—learning by doing through drama—proved to be an effective way to shift emphasis onto students' ownership of the learning attained through the teaching-and-learning process whereby they are motivated to construct their *own meaning* and thus, achieve their *own knowing* of the subject-matter (Livingstone and Lynch 2000; Kuit, Reay, and Freeman 2001; Mcalpine 2004; Bulpitt and Martin 2005; Kolb and Kolb 2005; Nicholls 2005; Hancock 2007; Machemer and Crawford 2007).

Citizens' juries (Social Research Update 2002) is a new experiential method of action research in social sciences and policymaking more broadly. It proved particularly valuable for gauging public opinion on controversial or indeed new and innovative aspects of policymaking, by involving different (and often excluded) parts of society into a deliberation process, thus making the latter more accessible, transparent, and reflexive. I thought the *citizens' juries* method would be particularly useful in my pursuit of the following objectives of the module:

- enacting students' self-reflexive revision;
- gauging students' engagement with the threshold concepts of the module;
- and finally, receiving their feedback on the effectiveness of the method overall.

I conceived citizens' juries as part of *enactive learning*, inviting students to deliberate on specific issues thus facilitating their revision and also reflecting on the key concepts (and solutions!) learned in the module.

During the last session of the module, I split students into three groups in accordance with their belonging to the seminar groups. By using a PowerPoint presentation, I invited them to enact citizens' juries. Students were first asked to consider three questions *individually* and provide answers to them in a yellow form. The questions were as follows: Question 1: Looking back at the seminar/lectures, which issues have you grasped better than others? Question 2: What helped you to understand them better? Question 3: From a citizen's perspective, how can your new knowledge help to improve the European Union?

The first two questions were designed to examine the issues (and the method of study) which students found easier to learn within the module, in order to compare them with those embedded in the threshold concepts. The third question was meant to verify whether students have reflected at all on the issues learnt and whether they are able to offer any solutions/constructive opinions—as citizens—on how the European Union should function and can be improved.

My examination of students' answers on the first question revealed some interesting results. Students' individual reflection explicitly showed their far more effective engagement with the threshold concepts and perhaps, more importantly, their far more confident navigation of interrelated issues (thus showing effective utility of the method). Clearly more domineering themes mentioned by

students appear to be those related to the questions of why integrate? whose powers? why reform? and whose interests?—thus, showing that the threshold-concept approach is working!

My examination of the second question reaffirmed my anticipation that the threshold concepts may be more effectively realized through *enactive* learning: almost all students in their assessment of “what helped you learn better?” mentioned role playing in seminars.

Finally, as individual citizens, they elaborated on a number of themes and offered critical solutions for “crisis-ridden-European Union,” thus suggesting that they not only effectively “digested” transmitted knowledge, but also successfully reflected on it by “constructing”/offering their own opinions and solutions, thus claiming *their ownership* of the learning process!

On undertaking this exercise at an individual level, students were subsequently asked to *collectively* deliberate on the following two questions, and present them on a green form: Question 1: What are the joint issues you have successfully understood and mastered as a group? Question 2: What is the joint strategy you conceive as a group in order to “save” the problem-ridden European Union?

The exercise was designed to bring their individual answers, through collective discussion, into an aggregate decision making of a citizens’ jury. Here, in addition to reflecting on their individual experience, they were made to deliberate and come up with a *joint* strategy that may be effectively applied to improve the functioning of the European Union in practice. Apart from reaching some joint positions through discussion and lobbying, students, yet again, reflected and enacted the threshold concepts in practice. And their respective solutions—as to how to improve the functioning of the European Union—were versatile, intelligent, and relevant, drawing on their proactive knowledge attained through enacting threshold concepts in seminars and by “mapping” related issues to the conceptual foundations of the module.

In conclusion, the utilization of citizens’ juries as a method of learning and reflecting is new and clearly under-researched. Applied only narrowly here, it fulfilled its mission by helping me to engage students with their reflection and revision of the module, as well as to gauge their levels of knowledge attainment and “intellectual ownership.” Citizens’ juries further aided my exploration of the utility of the threshold concepts by exposing relevance of themes/memories brought up students through their deliberation, to the threshold concepts taught in the module. More broadly, however, I believe citizens’ juries may have an enormous potential for actively engaging students with constructive and enjoyable learning and for motivating them to enact, critique, and be fully in control of their attained intellectual ownership.

Evaluating The Threshold-Concept Approach

In order to realistically estimate the usefulness of the threshold-concepts approach I used both (i) formative and summative students’ feedback which helped to align the method more suitably with the teaching and learning activities of the module (Sadler 1998; Winter 2003; Juwah et al. 2004); and (ii) of course, students’ assessments in the module (Gibbs 1996; Fallows and Ahmet 1999; George and Cowan 1999; Hannon and Silver 2000), which included students’ choice of examination questions and their overall performance.

Examination Questions

After undertaking their final 2-hour exam, students’ essays were marked anonymously by myself, a second-referee, and checked by an external examiner. When

administering students' marks in the module, I thought that a "content-analysis" of students' choice of examination questions perhaps could serve as an indicator of their perception of knowledge and confidence attained in the module. To briefly mention, the examination questions were designed in such a way as to include four questions based directly on the threshold concepts of the module (why integration? why reform? what institutions? and whose interests?) and the other four—on related issues, briefly addressed in lectures and alluded to through discussions in seminars. The effectiveness of the method has been unequivocally confirmed by the overwhelming preferential treatment of the threshold concept questions by students whereby an overwhelming majority (two-thirds) of the student cohort elected to tackle the threshold concept questions in their exam papers. In addition, a very positive sign is also the fact that the remainder (one-third of the group) chose to examine other interrelated issues, thus fulfilling the two objectives of the threshold concepts: (i) to learn deeply about specific (founding) issues; but also (ii) to be able to confidently and independently relate their knowledge to inter-connected issues within the discipline. The findings thus suggest that the articulation of the core knowledge—through threshold concepts—has succeeded in mobilizing students' learning. The choice of interrelated issues also serves a testimony to students' attained confidence in tackling a "less familiar" terrain, by simply mapping their "core founding knowledge" of the threshold concepts with broader issues of European politics.

Students' Overall Performance in the Module

Based on a comparative observation of student performance in three consecutive years of teaching the module, the results suggest the overall improvement of student learning performance as indicated by a much higher average mark in the module and *more importantly*, by much smaller/tighter dispersion of other marks around the average (Figure 1). As the following graph reveals, students' performance during 2008–09 academic year has seen a noticeable improvement in (i) the frequency of students attaining a higher average mark of the module [interval 60–9]; (ii) the lowering frequency of those who failed the module [interval

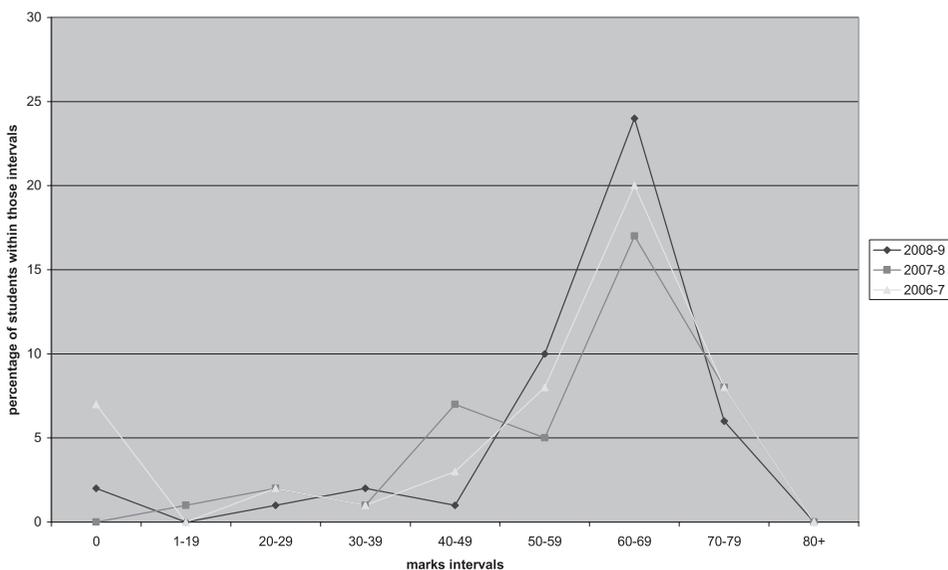


FIG. 1. Students' Module Performance Based on Their Marks, 2006–9

0–30] and finally, (iii) a more extended “tail” of those students who were awarded first class marks [interval 70 +] for their deep and creative knowledge of the subject.

Based on the above, I therefore believe that threshold concepts may be a much more expedient and confident way to improve students’ learning of “fluid” and complex disciplines, like European politics, in which the learning of “hard [traditional] theories” is combined with empirical facts and policy making which often challenge or subvert the conventional knowledge. The threshold-concept approach is also a way to make student learning much more expedient, enjoyable, and transferable, through interactive and indeed *enactive* environment.

In conclusion, I can confidently concur that the threshold-concepts method undoubtedly equips students with sufficient core knowledge of the subject and gives them a useful skill that enhances their ability for further exploration of broader issues independently by way of relating them to their core learning and experience of the threshold concepts. Moreover, the method, combined with *enactive* learning, can make students’ experience of learning (especially those modules of compulsory nature) unquestionably far more satisfactory and memorable! After all, they are learning to think—thus naturally expanding the boundaries of knowledge they acquire—rather than strategically regurgitating cognized information with the sole purpose of passing their exams.

There are, however, two caveats worth mentioning here: (i) identifying core “threshold concepts” may be tricky. After all, one endeavors to reduce the information level of the whole discipline to effectively a few concepts which may provide a “road map” for independent navigation of interrelated issues. This kind of strategic minimization (“less is more” approach) is never easy, and full of internal riddles, thus clearly highlighting some elements of risk which the teacher has to realize before committing themselves to further exploration and application of the threshold concepts. In other words, one has to be aware of possible and potential trade-offs one has to make in order to experiment with a more flexible and successful learning. Furthermore, as students’ first formative feedback demonstrated, introducing threshold concepts on their own may not be sufficient enough in order to ensure more effective learning! In my particular case, I needed to align the threshold concepts with respective teaching and learning activities, based on students’ *enactive* learning (role taking in seminars and revision session), which, in my opinion, improved the outcome dramatically. This way, I believe students are destined to learn infinitely more and better: by turning information transmitted to them into their privately owned knowledge and by making it a useful transferable investment for the future.

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