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« Deconstructing » the European Union:

making the complex accessible to students

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The ancestor of the European Union, the European Economic Community, was once described by Jacques Delors - formerly one of its main actors as the president of the European Commission between 1985 and 1995 - as a “political unidentified object” or UPO. Such a phrase, as funny as it may sound, is nothing but the truth. In fact, the EU is comparable, in certain aspects to a national political system, but also demonstrates elements closer in nature to a regional or international organisation. Fundamentally, the EU is based on a varying mix of intergovernmental relations and supranational institutions. The multi-faceted nature gives it the appearance of a strange entanglement of institutions and processes not necessarily easily accessible intellectually. This is true for EU-citizens as well as for foreigners, especially for university students, who have to grasp not only the intricate history of the European construction, and its member States, but also the way EU institutions work, its decision-making processes, and its policies in conjunction with other levels of existing governance. This complexity represents a true challenge intellectually and pedagogically for teachers in the classroom. How can integration and its consequences, decision-making processes, Europeanization, cognitive transfers not only be explained to but above all UNDERSTOOD by students?

Our own personal experience has taught us that deconstructing the European Union is necessary to allow students to grasp the inner workings of the European Union and the attached vocabulary. Based on our own teaching experiences, our analysis proposes to look at certain challenges that we have come across and that are involved in teaching the EU, including but not limited to questions of comparison (is it appropriate to compare to more familiar systems and vocabulary or does this hinder a real understanding?). With a non-exhaustive list of challenges laid out, we look at the possibilities offered for teaching the European Union and helping students wrap their minds around the complexity of the EU and own the knowledge. The options for teachers include the use of metaphors or new activities and experiential learning to “help the medicine” go down.

I. A TOPIC AND TEACHING THAT IS BY NATURE PLURIDISCIPLINARY AND MULTIFACETED

Many of the challenges of teaching European Union studies and the complex concepts associated can be linked to the challenges of teaching more generally in political science (or other disciplines), namely cognitive development and learning approaches of students. Referring notably to Marton and Saljo (1976, 1984) who distinguish “deep” and surface approaches to learning or Perry’s (1998) concept of cognitive development¹ that details the learning steps (dualistic, multiplicity, relativism), the capacity to bring students from a dualistic level of development in which information or “truth” is essentially black and white, right or wrong, and in which there is no problematization of knowledge (thus no critical analysis or complex thinking), to levels in which they can have the recognition of the variety of positions (multiplicity despite confusion over what is the right answer to the capacity to see different interpretations of reality and the awareness of the grey areas, or the provisional nature of truth and knowledge (relativism), is thus an essential part of the professors reflection on how to best convey the material and to promote “good teaching”².

Conceptualizing the European Union is a bit an intellectual challenge and can be for students, a hurdle that when inadequately explained can be insurmountable. Students in higher education institutions particularly in the first years can have a very timid grasp of the intricacies of their own national legislative and political system much less the European Union, its internal governance and the interactions with other levels of governance

¹ See also John Biggs’s SOLO Taxonomy (structure of the observed learning outcome): Biggs, John and Kevin Collis (1982). *Evaluating the Quality of Learning: The SOLO Taxonomy* (New York: Academic Press).

² See for example on principles of good teaching Biggs, J. and Moore, P. (1993, 3rd ed.). *The Process of Learning* (Australia: Prentice Hall) and Biggs, J. (2003, 2nd ed.). *Teaching for Quality Learning at University* (Buckingham: The Society for research into Higher Education and Open University Press).

(national, regional, international) that encompass terms such as Europeanization. In all fairness, these terms are hotly debated amongst the experts themselves,

How does one intellectually deconstruct in order to make the intellectual reality accessible to undergraduates unfamiliar with the European? Above all how do we, as university instructors get beyond the “surface” learning allowing them to grasp the intricacies of the EU?

In order to answer these questions, it is useful and indeed necessary to firstly question what concrete information and learning outcomes are sought by the professor. What is a professor of European Union studies seeking to get across in his course on the European Union? Our experience is here limited to courses in political science and sociology, but the ramifications certainly go beyond our own disciplines and can be applied certainly to Law, History or other disciplines that are associated with European Studies.

In terms of actual content, it is important to insist on the EU as the product of a historical process. Explaining the EU is first and foremost reviewing the context and conditions of its construction. Yet, in order to truly understand the history of European construction, a simple description of historical milestones is insufficient. Indeed, throughout its history, the UE has been the subject of much debate between the proponents of a federal nature and those of a more sovereignty based approach. These debates explain in many ways the composite and complex nature of the EU today. The challenge is thus to aim at a learning outcome enabling them to comprehend and analyse this complex history. This demands, in our view the introduction of different theories relative to integration. Which brings us to yet another challenge: enabling students to grasp the nuances and theories of European integration (functionalism, etc.).

These theories lead inevitably to the discussion of yet another dimension of the EU: the sociology of the actors. Indeed, if the history of European construction is firstly that of National decision-makers (Heads of State and government) and their ministers and advisors (cf. Jean Monnet, whose personality/character explains in large part the role of France in the creation of the EC), the understanding of the process of integration refers to

institutional actors such as the Commission or the COREPER, that must be understood not only as institutions but also through the prism of the bureaucracy and its personnel that compose them. **In our opinion students cannot for example simply comprehend the institution or purely legal aspects of the Commission, but must indeed be aware of the underpinnings of the institution itself both in terms of the people and the processes that play an essential role in the daily life of the EU.**

Once we happen upon the challenge of institutions we are also required to evoke policies given that the forementioned institutions work together to elaborate and implement public policies on the European level. This brings us to a fourth angle of teaching the EU: taking into account the decision-making processes from agenda making to implementation and evaluation.

Finally and last but not least, presenting the inner workings of the EU through its history, actors and policies should be accompanied by a more global approach that places the EU as its own player on the international scene, an actor in international relations, interacting with diverse actors of different types and levels. This perspective leads the professor to tools of international relations theory and practice.

It becomes evident that in order to make students grasp the EU, one must call upon different subsets of political science as well as other social sciences, in particular socio-history, international relations, political theory, political sociology, comparative politics and public policy³. Thus the challenge is very particular: how do we teach students to juggle with concepts belonging to different fields in political science with which they are not necessarily familiar?

II. TACTICS FOR TACKLING THIS COMPLEXITY AND THESE CHALLENGES

³ Saurugger, Sabine (2004). "La Science politique et l'enseignement de l'intégration européenne : normalisation par le 'haut' et par le 'bas' ? ", *Politique européenne*, 3(14), pp. 105-107.

In order to take on such challenges, teachers can of course favour comparisons, but in our experience, as we will illustrate in the sections that follow, it's in deconstructing and in making the EU more hands on that students will be able to not only integrate the information on the EU we impart, but will be able to analyse and understand the object that is the EU. We will focus on two specific approaches that of metaphors and imagery and learned centred activities both of which aim at bringing the EU to life and deconstructing the inner-workings.

THROUGH METAPHORS AND IMAGERY

Although EU is for sure neither a State, neither a classical intergovernmental organization, it is nevertheless useful, to make it understandable to students, to deconstruct it by comparing some of its aspects to ones of a state and of an international organisation. Comparing EU to something students have already studied may be very helpful.

However, one must be very prudent when turning to comparisons. The problem of comparison is one frequently come across when teaching- the use of the USA as an example can more often than not impair the comprehension of the very nature of the EU as an entity, its processes and of even more complex concepts like Europeanization (or the interaction between levels of governance more generally). There is thus an inherent risk in comparisons; students may lose sight of the specificities of the European Union. We have for example seen many students lump together and confuse the EU and the federal system of the United States of America. Yet, while certain may regret it, the EU is not a federal system, not even a confederal one such as in Switzerland. Simultaneously, the EU is not an international organisation that can be compared to the UN for example. Therefore, when comparing EU with any political object, one must consistently highlight the unique characteristics of the European construction and the specificities of the organisation. This intellectual challenge of « visualizing » the EU has led us, rather than turning to comparison,

to propose a visual approach based on the use of metaphors. In order to avoid the possible comparison of more classical or traditional political objects, it can in fact be useful to turn to metaphors that are not directly political in nature.

The approach through metaphors and imagery allows teachers to explain a lot to students. It seems to us particularly useful regarding a complex object as the European Union. We can illustrate that here through in three us in particular to explain three main aspects to students including European integration, governance and Europeanization.

THE EUROPEAN UNION AS A HOME

We have frequently used this metaphor to illustrate to students, specifically those who are not political science specialists the difference between cooperation, which is traditionally the foundation of intergovernmental organisations and integration that is the specificity of the European Union.

Most students in the humanities and social sciences have a certain familiarity with intergovernmental organisations based on cooperation. The UN, its Security Council, and its general Assembly, UN resolutions are all often present in the media. Everyone has an image of UN Ambassadors speaking, voting for or against a UN resolution. How do we then make the distinction evident between the intergovernmental organisation « par excellence » that is the UN and the EU? A non-political comparison can be of interest, using a very concrete metaphor that refers to each individual's experience. In our case, the image that we most use is that of a house.

We start by theorizing that every state is a house. Like a household, each government administers the house as it sees fit (budget, social policies, agriculture...) within its defined territorial boundaries. Yet, the organization of neighbourhood boards allows for fixing the rules that apply to everyone and insuring good neighbourly relations. This is the role of the international organizations of cooperation, which "favour the cooperation

between states”⁴: at the international level, the UN is responsible for working on peaceful relationships between the homes that represent states. This type of organization exists as well at the regional level, such as The Nordic Council that favour cooperation between states within a given region.

What about the EU in all this? Given its integration project, the European Union cannot be compared to a neighbourhood board. However, the European Union, with its supranational and intergovernmental institutions, could be seen as a very large house in which member states each occupy a room and share certain common rooms (like the living room or kitchen). Rather than managing the house as before, governments exercise their sovereignty only in their room: meaning that their freedom in decision making is reduced in range and itself subjected to general rules applicable in the entire house. As such, much like in a boarding school for example, everyone can decorate their room as they see fit, organize and chose the furniture as they so choose; the governments are free to decide their educational policy or social policies in their space, « in their room ». All of this can be done so long as a certain number of rules are respected. As such, as in boarding school, to continue our metaphor, everyone has to have made their bed by 9am and lights out is at 10pm. In the European Union, everyone must respect human rights, the rule of free competition..., and all common rules that apply to every member state. In other words, the European Union is like a huge house, which is organized by common rules that apply to all of its inhabitants, but in which each state administers its room as he or she sees fit.

What about the common rooms? The common rooms represent the “integrated” political domains, where the states have partially or totality abandoned their sovereignty. The largest room, the living room, could be compared to the most integrated sector in the EU, the economy. In the living room, we live together, without difference, according to a “mode” fixed more or less together. The kitchen could be compared to the mixed nature of foreign policy. Everyone keeps a kitchenette in his room, but sometimes, some take meals together while other eat almost always alone because they follow a special “diet” (such as

⁴ Roche, Jean-Jacques (2001, 2nd ed.). *Relations internationales*, Paris: LGDJ, p. 164.

Denmark which obtained, when ratifying the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, an opt-out for the common foreign and security policy). Thus the metaphor goes...

A metaphor in concretely explaining integration allows students to comprehend more easily the concept through visualisation. Once that hurdle conquered, it is time to imagine how it functions: how does one decide on the decoration for the living room or the menus prepared in the kitchen? In other words, how are decisions made relative to the economic pillar or to the CFSP?

THE EUROPEAN MULTI-LEVEL GOVERNANCE, A FORM OF CORPORATE GOVERNANCE?

Whereas organizations of cooperation such as UN look like “forums in which diplomacy is undertaken multilaterally », integration organisations, « because they must insure the merger of the individual interests of their membres [...] express the general interest of the group and thus can make decisions that are enforced in States ”⁵. This opens the way to a complex decision making system. Political scientists often designate the way the EU works by the term multi-level governance.

The concept of governance which in the 1970s began in the economic sector to designate the decision making procedures of large corporation has increasingly become used by political scientists to describe and embody the process behind most public policies. It is a useful tool to depict the specific type of model of public action within the EU, based not on domination but on accommodation, on the transactions between actors of diverse natures and levels, with varying levels of decision-making power depending on the domain and the situation. The concept of multilevel governance can be defined as “an arrangement for making binding decisions that engages a multiplicity of politically independent but

⁵ Roche, Jean-Jacques (2001), p. 165.

otherwise interdependent actors – private and public – at different levels of territorial aggregation in more-or-less continuous negotiation/deliberation/implementation, and that does not assign exclusive policy competence or assert a stable hierarchy of political authority to any of these levels”⁶. Relying on this notion “forces one to address processes of the supranationalisation, the decentralisation and the dispersal of authority as potentially coterminous”⁷.

In order to explain to students the way, in which the EU functions, the teacher can use the image of a corporation, which would mix different modes of functioning, borrowing simultaneously from holding companies and cooperatives... In fact, given its supranational nature, the EU is in many ways a holding company, meaning a group of firms linked by common goals and interests. If we accept this supposition, the European Commission can be assimilated with the Board of a transnational company whose mission is to insure the interests of the firm, independently from the individual interests of the various subsidiaries that make it up. At the same time, in some ways, the EU relies on a cooperative mode of working, in which the members take decisions together either based on the principle one state = one voice (this refers to the European Council) or on a balanced distribution of voices (in the frame of the EU Council). As far as the European Parliament is concerned, it is best thought of the representative of employees within a company, with political parties being equated to unions.

Multilevel governance also implies interactions between actors of different natures, such as central governments, regions, cities, non-governmental actors, etc. In a corporation such interactions could refer to the coordination between its different levels: the HR department, financial operations, managers...

⁶ Schmitter, Philippe (2004), “Neo-functionalism”, in Wiener, A. and Diez, T. (eds). *European Integration Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 49,

⁷ Stubbs, Paul (2005). “Stretching Concepts Too Far? Multi-Level Governance, Policy Transfer and the Politics of Scale in South East Europe”, *SouthEast European Politics*, 6(2), p. 67.

In other words, using the metaphor of an original corporation mixing different ways of working can help teachers to explain the specific governance of the EU to students.

EUROPEANISATION, THE FRUIT OF POLICY TRANSFER?

The more one seeks to explain complex phenomena, the more it is necessary, for the teacher, to refer to more specialized analytical tools. The notion of Europeanization, which can be dealt with only with more advanced students of the EU is a very pertinent illustration of this.

According to C. Radaelli, Europeanization “has something to do with the penetration of the European dimension in national arenas of politics and policy”⁸. In other words, it refers to the possible influence of the European level on national policies, suggesting that this influence finds its expression in a convergence. For P. Muller, any study of Europeanization implies the following: “determine to what degree we notice a convergence in the methods of elaboration of public policies in the States of the Community [...] that leads them to set in a similar manner the problems that public policies intend to resolve”.⁹

With this explained, one must still explain to students how this Europeanization is produced, in other words, what, concretely in the working of the EU leads to public policy convergence. Given the complexity of the Union, the use of concepts developed within other sub disciplines of political science other than European studies can facilitate the understanding of the processes that result in a « Europe »-colored convergence of national policies. For example, the utilisation of the concept of policy transfer is particularly

⁸ Radaelli, C. M. (2000). “Policy Transfer in the European Union”, *Governance*, 13(1), pp. 25-43.

⁹ Muller, Pierre (1995). “Un espace européen des politiques publiques”, in Mény, Yves, Muller, Pierre and Quermonne, Jean-Louis (eds) (1995). *Politiques publiques en Europe* (Paris: L’Harmattan), p. 23. Our translation of the original French: “déterminer dans quelle mesure on constate une convergence des modes d’élaboration des politiques publiques dans les pays de la Communauté [...] qui les conduiraient à poser de manière semblable les problèmes que les politiques publiques entendent résoudre. ”

pertinent. Defined by D. Dolowitz and D. Marsh as “the process by which knowledge of policies, administrative arrangements, institutions and ideas in one political system (past or present) is used in the development of policies, administrative arrangements, institutions and ideas in another political system”¹⁰, the notion of policy transfer enables teachers to describe concretely the mechanisms that can explain how the diffusion of certain ideas or policy solutions occurs between EU and national political systems. Other works by various authors who build on these notions can also give students concrete policy domains¹¹.

Of course unlike the image of the house, the metaphor of policy transfer supposes that we are dealing with students who already have a previous background in both political science and European studies. Nonetheless both tools are the fruit of the same approach, calling on images or concrete notions that students can identify with, obviously the more the object one seeks to explain is complex the more specialized the tools that will be used.

As we see, imagining metaphors, using and evoking visual representation can help the teacher make more complex subjects accessible to a more or less knowledgeable audience. Such an approach can also be complemented by a « living » teaching that, student centered in nature, brings to life the subject being taught.

THROUGH LEARNER CENTRED APPROACHES

Given not only the complexity of the information and subject matter we are trying to impart to our students, but also the diversity of the student body (diversity not only in terms of an

¹⁰ Dolowitz, D. and Marsh, D. (2000). “Learning From Abroad: The Role of Policy Transfer In Contemporary Policy Making”, *Governance*, 13 (1), p. 5.

¹¹ See Bulmer, Simon and Padgett, Stephen (2005). “Policy Transfer in the European Union: An Institutional Perspective”, *British Journal of Political Science*, 35(1), pp. 103-126, and Enos-Attali, Sophie, Jönsson, Alexandra and Sheppard, Elizabeth (2007). “Phénomènes de convergence dans un contexte européen : quel rôle pour l’européanisation ? ”, in Palier, Bruno, Surel, Yves et al. (eds), *L’Europe en action. L’européanisation dans une perspective comparée* (Paris: L’Harmattan), pp. 313-357.

increase in international students, students of diverse knowledge levels and also of diverse learning approaches), the most appropriate paradigm for considering our teaching is in our opinion a learner or student centred approach as opposed to the instructional paradigm that has long dominated in higher education.¹² Following Collins and O'Brien we can define this approach as "Student-centred instruction [SCI] is an instructional approach in which students influence the content, activities, materials, and pace of learning. This learning model places the student (learner) in the centre of the learning process. The instructor provides students with opportunities to learn independently and from one another and coaches them in the skills they need to do so effectively. The SCI approach includes such techniques as substituting active learning experiences for lectures, assigning open-ended problems and problems requiring critical or creative thinking that cannot be solved by following text examples, involving students in simulations and role plays, and using self-paced and/or cooperative (team-based) learning. Properly implemented SCI can lead to increased motivation to learn, greater retention of knowledge, deeper understanding, and more positive attitudes towards the subject being taught (Collins & O'Brien, 2003)."

TECHNOLOGY AND ACTIVE LEARNING

In today's classroom, rare is the professor who has not attempted (more or less willingly and with more or less success) to include some form of technology for students use. From the basic use of platforms such as Moodle or Blackboard to inform students of syllabi, readings and other information to more complex uses of technology particularly in the hard sciences where simulations in modern dental schools or medical schools allow large classes access to practical experiences on patients without both the cost and the logistical

¹² See Barr, R. B. and Tagg, J. (1995). "From Teaching to Learning -- A New Paradigm for Undergraduate Education", *Change*, 27(6), pp. 12-25.

nightmares in first year mass courses.¹³ While European integration may not yet warrant research into robots (though who knows what the future will hold), technology is resolutely here to stay and can be used to our advantage in a number of ways.

These experiences do not preclude the traditional classroom experience (nor the role of the professor as a vector in the learning experience), on the contrary what we advocate is blended learning: “the effective combination of different modes of delivery, Models of teaching and styles of learning” (Procter, 2003). Blended learning combines the more traditional face to face approach with the benefits of technology that include being able to allow diverse populations access to both theoretical/information. In addition, case studies breaking down the intricacies of certain processes or giving concrete examples make the EU more tangible all the while permitting students to go at their own pace a strategy and to self-evaluate through online quizzes. These are in particular complements to the aforementioned work through metaphors and imagery. Case studies and various documents can enhance the use of metaphors and allow students to cogitate on them outside the classroom. These activities are particularly useful in the case of large group teaching in the first years of degree programs which can preclude in particular the time and one on one interaction that true analytical case study work requires. Technology also permits students to interact with the professor (forums, skype “office hours”).

Above and beyond the use of blended learning allows students outside of the classroom to continue active learning on the EU encouraging them beyond the traditional “readings” that may or may not be done given the very one sided nature.

¹³ Impressive simulateurs have been put into place in European countries such as Holland where ACTA Dental School in Amsterdam developed with industry the Moog Simdont Dental that helps the students confront realistic dental situations improving their skills and allowing for flexibility. In France University Paris Descartes has through their program iLumens (amongst others) developed technology to reach out to medical students in innovative ways through simulations(<http://www.ilumens.org/>). These do not take away from classroom time per se but permit students to take on the practical exercises required of them in a new and different way.

Our classroom experience has above all led us to believe that the “hands on” approach to both research and in class learning is a fundamental addition to any class on European integration. As one Chinese proverb explains, “Tell me and I will forget. Show me and I may remember. Involve me and I will understand.”

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

This experiential learning along with metaphors and the use of technology can be a very rich and hand-on approach in political science teaching in generally and in EU studies in the form of European simulations (“Model EU”).¹⁴ The idea of adult learning cycles or processes as exemplified by Kolb (1984) is useful to identify how varying activities may allow instructors to reach students who might be difficult to reach due to the dryness (we have to assume students to not always share our passion for the material at hand) and/or complexity of the discipline if presented in the traditional, straight-forward lecture method. Experiential learning permits students to link the theories as well with practice and experience. With students in European Union Studies classrooms, the different types of students (different majors such as law, political science, economics, sociology, etc) possessing sometimes difference levels of prior knowledge and different learning styles can be a true challenge that adds to the complexity and challenges already inherent in the subject matter. The increasing academic study of this type of activity demonstrates the overall value in teaching European studies¹⁵ and in political science in general¹⁶.

¹⁴ It is in our opinion one of the major ways the complexity of the EU can be deconstructed. See Sheppard, Elizabeth (2005). “Motivating the troops: Challenges to First time university teachers”, in Gregušová, G. (ed.). *How to Teach Political Science. Experience of First-time University Teachers*. Vol. 2 (Budapest: epsNet), and also Loedel, Peter H. and Occiphonti, John (2004). “Europe Matters Teaching the EU in the US”, *Politique européenne*, 3(14), pp. 21-42.

¹⁵ See Van Dyke, Declair and Loedel (2000). “Stimulating Simulations: Making the European Union a Classroom reality”, *International Studies Perspectives*, pp. 145-159.

Our classroom experience has been that of 1 to 2 day long simulations that are the culmination of a semester long “research” project. Each student is assigned a member state of the European Union which they represent in the final “European Council” negotiation. The two fold project (both research and more active learning through the simulation), allows students not only to familiarize themselves with the countries, issues and positions within the EU, but don the “cap” of the politicians that make the process work. In our experience, the difficulties of negotiating with their peers allow students to understand not only the complexities of the subject matter but the more practical dimensions of negotiating, compromise, etc. Students are more aware of the historical contextual dynamics, political process and the actors involved in European policy-making overall. The fact that they feel “ownership” of the project and taken on the identity of the country they represent bring the EU to life in a very real way.

Concretely students are able to identify not only actors, but institutional dynamics and power politics in a new way while also being able to comprehend the interconnectedness (spillover) of the nature of European politics.

CONCLUSION

As teachers and often practitioners of the EU, the complexity inherent in its construction, integration and function are “par for the course”. We ourselves are used to the grey areas of challenge and complexity that come along with our chosen profession and subject area. Yet, in the classroom, small or large, with students (often of different levels of knowledge and with different learning styles), these challenges require us to go beyond more traditional methods of teaching¹⁷ and reach out to more creative and more innovative approaches that can take many different forms. The two examples that we have evoked here are those we have thus far (but not exclusively) tested in our own classrooms to meet the challenges we have faced in the various classroom settings we have encountered (cf.

¹⁶ Rosenthal, C. S. (1999). “One Experience is worth a thousand words : engaging undergraduates in field research on Gender”, *PS : Political Science and Politics*, 32(Mar), pp. 63-68.

¹⁷ Barr, R. B. and Tagg, J. (1995).

large group teaching, teaching to non-EU students, diverse student bodies, etc.). As well as being mutually reinforcing, and indeed complementary, they share the desire to make the EU come alive in the minds and activities of the students in ways that text books may not be able to do and to “deconstruct” the processes, actors and institutions that make-up the EU.

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