

ASSESSMENT FLEXIBILITY AND STUDENT-LED CASE-TEACHING: ENHANCING LEARNING IN AN INTERNATIONAL CLASSROOM

Gorana Mišić, University of Glasgow

The teaching-learning challenge

The literature outlines the differences between ‘western’ and ‘eastern’ teaching practices and expectations in learning (Carroll and Ryan 2005; Chalmers and Volet 1997; Kingston and Forland 2008; Theodoridis 2015), as well as general differences in learning styles (see Cassidy 2004; Dunn et al. 2002). In the past seven years, some of the main challenges that I experienced when teaching public policy students in a diverse environment resonates with the findings of the above scholars. First, I have found that students have different learning styles and strengths and weaknesses. While these differences exist in homogenous classrooms, too, they affect students’ performance and motivation in diverse environments much more.

Second, different academic traditions or teaching cultures from which the students come lead to challenges in performing certain assignments and participating in classroom interactions. In addition, students differ in their confidence to write, speak, and interact in English. Lastly, given the variation in their background, students engage with the course material to varying degrees in terms of relevance and applicability to their own context. This issue is further aggravated when, unlike students’ background, the literature and examples are primarily ‘western-based’.

Therefore, I designed the course Political Parties, Policy-Making and the Accountability Challenge in the Digital Age to address these challenges and increase student collaboration, motivation, and engagement, and subsequently learning. The course design emphasized two interrelated and transferrable elements: assessment flexibility and student-led case-study seminars. This chapter describes the design of these elements and analyses their impact on student motivation, engagement, and learning.

The course, the students, and the lecturer

In the Winter 2020 term, I taught the course Political Parties, Policy-Making and the Accountability Challenge in the Digital Age at Central European University (CEU), School of Public Policy. This was an elective, 4-ECTS-credit course offered for the first time to MA students in two programs: a one-year MA program in Public Policy and a two-year MA program in Public Administration. Since CEU is an international university, classrooms are highly diverse. Accordingly, this course was attended by 13 students from Africa, Asia, Australia, EU, Eastern Europe, Middle East, and North America. The learning objectives of the course were fourfold: (1) to equip the students to be able to analyse and discuss how political parties influence policy-making; (2) to identify and discuss challenges related to keeping political parties accountable; (3) to critically evaluate the effectiveness of accountability mechanisms related to political parties and policy-making, and

propose solutions relevant to the context; and (4) to work collaboratively, provide peer feedback, and reflect on their own learning.

Pedagogical methods

Assessment flexibility

Even if the concept of different learning styles is often challenged and disputed in the literature (see Riener and Willingham 2010), students would have preferences on how they want the information to be presented to them and how they like to engage with it (Pashler et al. 2008). Every instructor can observe that some students are stronger in writing or reading, others in speaking or listening. Moreover, in an international classroom, students coming from different academic traditions and teaching cultures would have different expectations, behaviours, and skills (under)developed (Chalmers and Volet 1997; Hofstede 1986). It is not surprising to see native speakers and students who finished previous education in the ‘west’ to be more active and outspoken, as well as better in writing than the students who studied in the ‘east’. To address these issues, and enhance motivation, engagement, and learning, the course design introduced choices in assessment.

Since this was a discussion-based course, embedded in the experiential learning paradigm, i.e., teaching with case studies and simulations, the syllabus specified assignment type and weight as follows:

- 15% Preparation: preparing the readings, short pre- and post- class assignments, peer-feedback to colleague’s op-ed(s), and a simulation reflection
- 20-30% Participation: in-class and online discussions and group work, where students chose in this given range how much they want the participation to influence their final grade, and it had to make 50% together with the op-ed
- 20-30% Accountability challenge op-ed: 1000-1300 words long op-ed addressing a topic related to accountability and political parties, where students chose in this given range how much they want the op-ed to influence their final grade, and it had to make 50% together with the participation
- 35% Policy brief or a case study class : each student could choose between leading a case study seminar and writing a policy brief on a topic related to the course content.

The students were invited to shape their learning experience by choosing the weight that class participation and writing an op-ed will have in their final grade. Participation and op-ed were both mandatory requirements and together made up 50 per cent of the grade. Students could choose how much each will count for in their final grade in the range between 20 and 30 per cent. It was expected that students who (believe they) expressed themselves better verbally would choose a higher percentage for participation - and vice versa: students who have stronger writing skills would give more weight to the written assignment.

Second, students could also choose between leading a case study class with a colleague or writing a policy brief individually. In both assignments students were cognitively performing the same task: identifying and analysing an appropriate case, applying the theory, and proposing recommendations and implications for policy-making. This choice aimed at giving students an opportunity to perform the assignment they felt corresponded to their skills and learning styles more closely, and thus, at increasing ownership of learning and their motivation to engage with the course (see Aiken et al. 2016; Thibodeaux et al. 2019).

Student-led case-study seminars

To further address differences stemming from variations in academic traditions and teaching cultures, especially lack of engagement in class participation, the case study classes were fully student-led. Lack of engagement can be attributed to lack of preparation, but my past experience shows that more often than not, students do not engage due to lack of confidence, insecurity with English, and lack of previous experience in class participation (see Rocca 2010 for more about the reasons why students may not engage in class). Introducing student-led seminars was based on the assumption that students interact easier with peers. Moreover, student-led classes aimed at increasing the ownership and sharing the responsibility for learning, as well as at fostering peer-to-peer engagement (see Zepke and Leach 2010).

Since one of the main aims of the course was to critically evaluate the effectiveness of accountability mechanisms related to political parties and policy-making, and propose solutions relevant to the context, analysing diverse contexts was crucial. International classrooms are characterised by varying student interests, individual contexts and lives, as well as cultural backgrounds. This calls for acknowledging and integrating diversity in the course design to make course content more relevant to the students (Albrecht and Karabenick 2018), especially if the literature is primarily 'western' based. In this, having an international classroom is a valuable asset.

One of the distinctive features of the course was the design of the case study class, which was a student-led seminar. Whereas the syllabus set the theoretical framework and the suggested literature list for each class, students who signed up for a case study class were in charge of identifying an appropriate case (usually from their own country), as well as choosing and assigning the readings for their peers. Following the research on student motivation (Pintrich and Zusho 2002; Seifert 2004), this assignment was also expected to increase students' motivation by tailoring the course content towards their interests, creating the opportunity for them to discuss their own contexts and experiences with their peers, as well as to reflect on their views and arguments, and ultimately for enhancing the understanding of the studied frameworks and theories by applying them to familiar cases.

The students received detailed instruction for this assignment. It specified the following four steps for preparations: (1) individual study focusing on the assigned theoretical reading, (2) con-

sultation with instructor, (3) individual and pair work preparing the case study and for the seminar leadership, and (4) feedback from the instructor on students' class preparations. During the student-led classes, the instructor took the role of the observer or participant. On average, students had 60 minutes for their case discussion, which included time needed to read the case in class and tasks they prepared for their peers. Students were assessed not on their discussion leadership alone, but rather on a combination of the quality of the preparation of the case and analytical framework and discussion management.

Finally, each student-led class was followed by a short meeting with student seminar leaders to reflect on the class, what went well or not so well, and why. At this point the students reflected together with the instructor on the plan they made, as well as on the main takeaways from discussions and contributions of their colleagues. This immediate feedback was meant to help students digest the new experience, recap the takeaways or express any frustrations. To the instructor, this further showed students' thinking and understanding of the topic and the material.

Collected sources of data and methods

After the course I collected student feedback through an anonymous questionnaire and a colleague, who was external to the class and students, conducted focus group discussions to understand better how the course worked for the students. Ten students filled in the questionnaire and six students signed up to participate in the focus group discussions.

The questionnaire was conceptualised as an additional course feedback of nine open questions. As opposed to the institutional course feedback, which was more generic, this questionnaire asked students about their motivation and engagement with different assignments and elements of the course. All students enrolled in the course gave consent to use their anonymous feedback for the purpose of research.

The students who signed up were invited to participate in focus groups. Focus group discussions were conducted in two groups of threes. The discussions lasted for approximately one hour and revolved around unpacking further some of the points made in the anonymous questionnaire, such as higher level of engagement as participants in a student-led seminar, learning from peers, and responsibility for learning of their peers in the role of seminar leader.

Findings

Assessment flexibility, as discussed above, was intended to give students an opportunity to co-design their learning experience, and thus, increase ownership of learning and their motivation to engage with the course. Some students recognised that even if the choice was not decisive for their final grade, being able to rely on their strength gave them confidence. They also considered it fair that, for instance, students who do not feel comfortable talking in class take a lower percentage for participation (Participant 2). My experience showed that choice did not affect the

final grade (i.e., the grades would have been the same if they chose a different ratio in the given range), but it did affect students' motivation to work in the course.

It was expected that students who thought they were better in writing would choose a higher percentage for the op-ed assignment (and vice versa, higher percentage for participation if they thought their verbal skills are stronger). Student feedback showed that some of them indeed took assignments based on their strengths, but others wanted to work on their weaknesses and therefore took the assignments they considered more difficult. In both cases, the possibility to choose was motivating. Overall, considering the final grades and assignments, I did not observe lack of effort or lower quality of those assignments which students identified as being weaker at, and for which they chose lower weight in the overall grade.

The student-led seminar was designed not only to give students an opportunity to tailor the course content towards their interests, but also to increase the ownership and share the responsibility for learning, as well as to foster peer-to-peer engagement. Since the course was based on case teaching and the majority of students—nine out of 13—opted for the case study assignment (as opposed to writing a policy brief individually), in the feedback questionnaire students were asked to reflect on how engaged they felt during the peer-led seminars. They overwhelmingly reported increased learning and engagement both as seminar leaders and participants:

I enjoyed working on the case study class as I was able to apply the theory to a specific case. Even more interesting was uncovering the mechanism in discussion with the class. In isolation I could only think of few pathways but with the class I was able to identify multiple mechanism through with media fixes political accountability. (Feedback 5)

The interactive portions were the most useful and I especially appreciated hearing from my classmates about their experiences in their home countries. (Feedback 10)

Both the questionnaire and the focus group discussion revealed that the students considered this type of teaching strategy new and different and therefore more engaging and interesting. More importantly, they reported feeling responsible for their peers' success and learning: participating in the discussion and tasks during student-led seminars meant supporting peers in being successful in their assignment.

I felt somehow more responsible to read and prepare to support a discussion that my peers were leading [...] I felt a responsibility and, most importantly, was motivated to provide good class experience for my peers. (Feedback 6)

I think one of the ‘in the moment’ reasons for staying engaged as your peers are leading the class is wanting to support them, wanting them to do well. You know, they are trying really hard, they worked really hard on this, so to sit silently and not engage with them is just kind of painfully awkward. That way of being a good classmate. I think my motivation a lot of the times was to be as engaged as possible so that those friendships would be okay and that after all their work they could feel they had done something well. (Participant 4)

Moreover, the students reported feeling more comfortable joining a peer-led discussion:

For example, a lot of time when you are contributing to a class, you are a little conscious about saying the exact right thing or something of that sort, but when your peers are leading the class, you know that you all are coming from some sort of equal level of knowledge. So, I think that you are more comfortable sharing your opinions, because you know that the other person is on a similar note. (Participant 2)

Finally, some students described how they gained new insights while leading the case discussion—based on the contributions from their peers and different national contexts.

I remember two comments, one from our peer from the US, she looked at the situation we were describing from the US perspective, and she looked from a completely different angle, suggesting topics that we hadn’t thought about, but that perfectly fit into the case, and it was like a ‘wow’ moment as it actually showed how can someone’s review work better. (Participant 1)

I think I had a very narrow understanding of what is political and party corruption and how it works in post-soviet countries. When we looked at experiences from India, and the case was a big case of corruption and people went on the streets protesting, I saw the bigger scale, how big protests can be. [...] That was quite revealing for me, because it was still a mechanism that exists in a country, it is quite efficient in terms of constraining parties from being corrupt... (Participant 3)

Replicability in a different context

Student-led seminar is a very different type of assignment from what students are used to do in class. In this sense, it requires a lot of time to help students prepare and it could be rather time consuming for a single instructor in a large classroom (e.g., larger than 20). Similarly, it would probably work less well with less experienced or younger students (i.e., early BA years) who may not have sufficient academic skills to prepare a case and facilitate a peer discussion.

However, for all instructors who have smaller classes with more advanced international students, this method can increase student motivation and engagement; it can give students the space to collaboratively explore their own contexts, to co-construct knowledge, and learn from each other. The method can work equally well in a less international classroom. Even if the students would come from the same context or country, they can still choose cases within that context based on their interest or familiarity, engage in collaborative exploration of their interests, and co-construction of knowledge. Regardless of the level of class internationalisation, detailed guidance, formative feedback, and clear instruction are crucial to make this model work.

Conclusions

This chapter discussed two elements of course design aimed at enhancing learning, motivation, and student engagement in an international classroom, namely the flexibility of assessment and student-led seminars. The findings show that the combination of these two distinctive course design elements, which in essence gave students the opportunity to shape their learning experience, increased students' motivation and engagement throughout the course. More specifically, choosing the type of the assignment (writing a policy brief vs. leading a seminar) and deciding on the weight of some assignments (participation and op-ed), students felt that they can express their strengths, which increased their motivation. Student-led seminar, which enabled the students to bring in their own cases and lead discussions, proved successful in increasing engagement and sharing responsibility for learning: students reported feeling responsible for their peers' learning and success, which motivated their preparation, participation, and overall engagement.

This teaching approach can be used also in less diverse environments, but might bring out the most of highly international classrooms as it addresses common challenges related to different learning styles, diverse backgrounds, and teaching and learning traditions. In both cases, giving students choice and the opportunity to shape their learning experience increases their involvement in learning, overall engagement, and ownership of learning.

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Summary

This chapter describes student-centred teaching strategies and their impact in a fully international MA course Political Parties, Policy-Making and The Accountability Challenge in the Digital Age, designed to address diversity challenges and increase student motivation, engagement, and consequently, learning. The chapter focuses on two interrelated and transferrable elements of course design: assessment flexibility and student-led case-study seminars. Students were engaged in the assessment design by being allowed to choose between assignment types and, with some limitations, the weight that a particular assignment will have in their overall grade. They could also select the case studies that were analysed and discussed in the student-led case study seminars. The student feedback and instructor observations show that such strategies

have a positive impact on student engagement and motivation, as well as on student ownership of learning.

Keywords

assessment flexibility, case-method teaching, motivation, (peer) assessment, student-led seminar



Gorana Mišić received her PhD in Public Policy from Central European University in 2018 and currently is a Learning Innovation Officer at the Adam Smith Business School, University of Glasgow. She is experienced in academic development, education management, teaching and research in the field of public policy, anti-corruption, and the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning. She taught PhD courses related to foundations in teaching in higher education, creating a teaching portfolio, facilitating discussions, and experiential learning. In Public Policy, Gorana has taught MA and BA courses related to policy process and analysis, accountability of political parties, corruption control, public management, critical inquiry and contemporary social problems, and comparative public budgeting.

Gorana.Misic@glasgow.ac.uk