

CALLING BRUSSELS: REVISITING AN INNOVATIVE INTERVIEW ASSIGNMENT

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The teaching-learning challenge

Three years ago, I introduced an interview assignment, which I baptized The Calling Brussels Project, into one of my introductory courses to the political system of the European Union (EU). It was one of several assignments that made up the final grade. I repeated this project with some small adjustments twice so that it has now been completed three times. The aim of the innovation is to connect what students learned from my lectures, the textbook, their own presentations and their research papers to real people and organisations.

To me, the challenge was not so much the skills of my students, in which I have the highest confidence, but to create a project, which students find appealing and useful, one that can be completed within eight weeks with no travel budget. My international students often come with different skill-sets: from their foundational academic skills to their command of the English language. This assignment takes this as an asset. It builds upon students' diverse knowledge and skills through peer learning with an expectation that making students practice their team work, communication and organisational skills under a semi-realistic research setting proves useful in all kinds of situations no matter where their career will take them. At the same time, students are to be inspired to want to find out more about the topic than textbooks provide. The project seems to achieve most of it and offers space for modification to address further student needs.

Pedagogical method

Video interviewing and video-conferencing as a teaching method has been discussed in the literature (Lo Iacono et al. 2016), so have interviews as unusual assignments (Pleschová 2007; Kenyon 2017), active and collaborate learning (Arvaja and Häkkinen 2010), team work and peer learning (Boud 2013; Lueg and Lueg 2014). However, I did not consciously connect my idea to any specific pedagogical method other than common sense and experience when I started to design the project. The idea was rather simple: I wanted to make the EU a less abstract organisation for students and at the same time make them practice essential interview, writing and communication skills. An excursion to Brussels might have done the trick but would have created other organisational issues that I wanted to avoid. Inspired by the Bologna goals of internationalisation and digitalisation, at least in retrospect, I came up with a cross-border video-interview project for my mixed group of international and home students.

As part of this assignment, students had to interview a person involved in political and/or legal matters of the EU. All interviewees were recruited by me before the course started, including European Commission and Council officials, practicing lawyers dealing with EU law, an ex-deputy minister of justice of a prospective member state, and interest group representatives. Andrew

Zuidema, my teaching assistant paid by the University's teaching grant that I had received for introducing this project, helped me out in the first year. We shared our experience in an article, which came in the form of teaching instructions on how to replicate this project (Nowak and Zuidema 2019).

I first provided a short one-page manual to the students that laid out the purpose, expectations and schedule of the project and contained information on how to conduct semi-structured narrative interviews.¹ In both years, the project followed the plan from the manual quite closely, except for some of the too ambitious deadlines that could not be kept due to the unruly nature of interviewing. Students conducted the interviews as a team of two to three students. To avoid long discussions, students were assigned their interviewees via lots. Each student took a slip of paper with the name of their interviewee. Those with the same name were grouped together as a team. To make students more enthusiastic about the interview, the interview and interview reports made up twenty-five percent of their final grade. Giving no grade for this important element of the course would most likely have devalued it in the eyes of the students (Friedland 2002, 171). Students had to get in touch with their interviewee and engage with them in a professional manner to request a 30 minutes video-interview within the following six weeks. The students were supposed to read the texts from Adams (2015) and McCammon (2017) as preparation for their interview guide and the interview. So, after having been assigned an interviewee and a team member by chance, students were ready to collect background information on their interviewee and formulate interview guidelines with fields of interest and questions to use for their interview. They then arranged the interview date by contacting their interviewee by email and conducted the interview via a video conferencing tool of their own or their interviewees' choice.

Corona, which hit us in the last weeks of the second run, did not impact the interviews in any substantial manner. The remaining ones that fell into this time were all carried out as planned. It was as if this project anticipated the rise of video-conferencing. As soon as the interview was done, the students orally shared their findings and experiences with the rest of the class in a rather informal manner. At the end of the course, students handed in a structured written report on the content of the interview and a reflective paper describing preparation, the interview itself, team-work, possible improvements etc.

The course, the students, and the lecturer

I introduced this assignment into a first-year course at the University College Groningen entitled Policy-Making in the European Union, which is classified as a political science and law course. In addition to the interview assignment, students are assessed for individually written minutes of a

¹ [https://www.rug.nl/research/portal/nl/publications/calling-brussels-student-manual-for-an-innovative-teaching-project\(8832a956-a3f7-41cf-9b7c-5b7be78b6040\).html](https://www.rug.nl/research/portal/nl/publications/calling-brussels-student-manual-for-an-innovative-teaching-project(8832a956-a3f7-41cf-9b7c-5b7be78b6040).html).

course meeting and oral presentation of these minutes, for a research paper written with a peer student (a different one than the interview partner), and presentation of this research paper. We meet four hours per week for eight weeks, followed by an exam period, in which the students finalize their papers and reports instead of undertaking an exam.

Students receive 5 ECTS for the course. Expected course learning outcomes include to be able to describe and explain the historical course of EU integration including the enlargement process, treaties and specific policy fields; to describe, compare, apply and evaluate different theories of European integration and governance; to analyze political systems with the help of the theories; to describe and explain policy making in the EU in a range of different policy fields; to practice writing academic papers, presenting and defending them in class; and to practice semi-structured narrative interviews. Students hopefully improve all kinds of other skills, like language, social, technical, writing, and presenting skills and, gain more academic confidence.

Around 20 students take this course each year. As the group was bigger the second time around, I had to assign three students for one interview. It also meant that I had to secure more interviewees for the second run. The group taking this course is made up to equal parts of international students and home students but the international orientation of the home students is quite obvious from their language skills and often international educational experience. All but three so far were (ex-)citizens of the EU, including the English native speakers. Approximately eight nationalities have been represented. They usually live in the same student house and are in their early twenties and for most of them, this is their first undergraduate degree programme. Students from different disciplines take this course, so they can either be more oriented towards the social or natural sciences or the humanities. This makes this class international and interdisciplinary.

I like to imagine that my experience as an international student—in my junior high school time and as an Erasmus student—has helped me to better understand the issues international students face but also made me see their uniqueness as something benefitting all. International students in this course are still a relatively homogenous group educated in western societies. The interdisciplinary nature of the group is a bigger challenge as it requires designing a practical assignment useful for students beyond political science, in which they practice and learn as a team, achieve the planned learning outcomes and build self-confidence. My own academic background taught me that the transfer of skills, insights, methods and good practices from one field to another can be very rewarding.

Collected sources of data and methods

When evaluating the outcomes of this innovation, I considered several sources of data. First, students wrote preparatory documents for the interview, reflection reports and content reports and gave a short presentation of their findings and experiences, which were used to evaluate

what they have learned. I also talked to each team in an informal setting as, for example, during the break, to see if they were on the right track or if there was anything they found problematic. Moreover, both years the course as a whole were evaluated by the students in an online evaluation form and I asked the interviewees how they thought the interviews went. Finally, I relied on my own observations of student learning.

Findings

The documents students had to prepare before the interview, especially the different drafts of the interview guidelines, together with the content reports from the interviews, showed engagement with the topic and with it an increase in knowledge of how the EU works. One shortcoming that these documents helped me to identify was that the topics of the research papers were not necessarily connected to the field of expertise of the interviewee and were written parallel with but disconnected from the interview assignment. Unfortunately, I do not see how the findings from the interviews could be used better for the research paper. The relatively short time frame and me, not wanting to rely too much on the interviews for the final grade as they are so unpredictable, kept me from integrating the interviews into the research paper assignment.

For their reflection reports the students were asked to critically reflect on the work process, teamwork and skills acquired and suggest improvements for the interview assignment. Not surprisingly, as this was not an anonymous report, all students appreciated the practical nature of this project, how it improved their skills of conducting an interview, and how it made them find out more about the EU. In these reports, students also reflected in a surprisingly open manner on their own organisational skills and how to enhance them for the future. The written reports basically repeated what students had reported orally in class in a more structured manner.

The anonymous course evaluations contained some more points that students considered as shortcomings. One student pointed out that not all interviewees worked for the EU and that this was a little strange for a course on policy making in the EU. However, this was done on purpose to show the network of organisations connected to the EU. I now address this point more explicitly when introducing the interview assignment. Another point of critique concerned the assignment of the interviewees by lot. One student would have liked to interview someone he knew and who was apparently working for the EU. Others would have liked to pick an interviewee from my list based on the policy field that interested them the most. However, for educational (exploring the unknown) and organisational reasons (time), I see no reason to change the procedure.

Student evaluations also contained two points, which I considered more seriously. First, students would have appreciated more guidance when writing the reports. The guidelines that I provide are rather short indeed. I did address this issue in the second run, stressing that students are free to present their findings in a way they see fit but that I will provide feedback on drafts so they know they proceed as expected. Such an approach makes writing more challenging for the

students and also more interesting for me to read.

Second, one student suggested that the academic level of this assignment could be raised by a more structured and comparative approach. True, the connection between the interviews is not always clear. Student teams work with their own interview guidelines and do not all necessarily explore the same issues, even if they all cover the same points (background of the interviewee, position in the organisational structure, daily routine of the interviewee). Taking over the suggestion would make this a much bigger project than it was meant to be, including developing a research question, more precise interview guidelines, instructions for a common comparative report and more.

Feedback from the interviewees above all included praise for the seriousness that the students demonstrated, signs of enjoying the conversation and helping students to learn something meaningful. I also book it as a success that all interviewees from the first year agreed to be interviewed again last year and this year.

Overall, students managed to arrange and conduct an interview with a policy or legal expert in a very short time. By teaming students up they could benefit from each other's strengths and compensate for each other's weaknesses, and thus improve their skills and knowledge by learning from each other. While team work improved the quality of the material students handed in, it did not free me from my responsibility to share my knowledge with them: giving feedback on all of their drafts, including emails, topics, interview design, etc. Letting students present their experiences and findings in class, added another element of peer learning. The interview assignment resulted in the students seriously researching the topics they had to address in the interview, and engaging with the EU in a very focused way. Students often displayed their specialist knowledge in discussions in class, at least when encouraged to do so.

Replicability in a different context

For a course of around twenty students this kind of assignment works well. It does demand some organisation and supervision from the lecturer, both of which will become more challenging with bigger courses, the recruiting of a sufficient number of interviewees might then become a major challenge. To some degree this might be compensated by larger student teams, but more than three per team seems ill advised. A lesser problem should be the transferal to other political systems and other fields of the social sciences. If the assignment is set up as a part of a course, not a course in itself, it can easily be integrated into an existing course.

The third run was done in the second semester of 2020/21 with only minor changes. For example, more attention was be paid to privacy issues in empirical research and what this means for the use of interview data in general and in this course in particular. Based on my observations, the assignment is a good element of the course and worth the time and effort. Nevertheless, the overall scores this course received in student evaluations before and after I introduced this

assignment, although being rather high, are disappointingly similar. Students' praise for the practical nature of the assignment that now showed up in the qualitative part of the anonymous evaluations did not seem to impact the quantitative part in the way I had wished. In general, the smaller the group of students and the longer the course, the easier it is to replicate this kind of assignment.

Conclusions

Overall, the Calling Brussels interview assignment is appealing for the students and definitely interesting for me as their teacher. It appears a useful tool for improving students' academic, language and social skills and, last but not least, it can be completed in eight weeks with no extra financial cost. I might be the one who decided to introduce this assignment to the course, but it is the mix of students from different countries and disciplines that contributes the most, together with the international group of interviewees, to achieving the course learning outcomes. Without these students, their pre-course skills and their enthusiasm, none of this would work. That it is Corona-proof, although just by coincidence, is of course a big bonus in times like this.

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Summary

In order for students to have a first-hand experience with field research, I introduced a practical component to one of my introductory courses to the European Union (EU). Teams of two to three students are interviewing EU policy and legal experts. In semi-structured narrative video-interviews students are invited to learn more about the position of their interviewee in the organisation, the interviewee's career background, the policy topics the interviewee works on and her or his daily work routines. Students share and discuss their findings and experiences with their peers so that they also learn something from the interviews that they had not conducted themselves. The assignment helps students apply foundational qualitative research skills, get a better idea of the organisation and of the people who bring it all to life. It creates a memorable experience by completing an activity that students originally find challenging.

Keywords

active learning, digitalisation, EU politics, internationalisation, interviews, video-conferencing



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