

Teaching Public Affairs – The Cinderella Subject of Journalism Courses

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Abstract

Public Affairs: Even the name of the serious part of Journalism courses is problematic. For years this absolutely essential, but often maligned, part of so many university Journalism courses, has been taught by ‘a guy from Politics’ and hated, or at best endured, by its students.

But it doesn’t have to be that way. The plan was to revitalise a university’s ‘Public Affairs’ module. The aim was simple – to help students learn about politics by getting them interested in it. The result: confident, motivated students who went on to study more Politics at university – and a rise in the associated professional qualification (National Council for Training Journalists) Essential Public Affairs exam pass rate from 35% to 80%.

This paper will explore the strategies undertaken by the teaching team with regard to the ways in which they engaged the students, and the delivery of the module as a whole. As it is a ‘must pass’ component for the professional qualification, the engagement levels were seen as key. Finding that important ‘hook’ for each of the components of the compulsory syllabus was phenomenally important. It was the success in doing so that resulted in the improved pass rates.

Background

Journalism is a popular programme of study. Part of the reason for the popularity among selected courses is accreditation by the National Council for the Training of Journalists (NCTJ), a national body set up in the 1950s to oversee the training of UK regional newspaper journalists. In the 21st century the NCTJ’s remit stretches across all forms of digital journalism as well as broadcast journalism. Whilst the UK regional press has shrunk over the intervening 60 years, the NCTJ is still regarded as offering universally respected qualifications demonstrating key, core and understood journalistic competencies.

At the time of this study, students wishing to become journalists had to study seven preliminary qualifications before joining a media outlet, working for two years on the job and then taking the final Journalism Diploma examinations. Success in those final exams allowed the candidates to call themselves fully qualified journalists or ‘senior’ reporters.

To qualify to take the final exams, candidates had to first have all seven preliminary qualifications. These qualifications used to be offered almost exclusively by further education (FE) colleges, but in the 1990s and 2000s universities started offering the preliminary qualifications as additional qualifications embedded within wider Journalism programmes.

Students would study for a Bachelor’s or Master’s degree and study the seven NCTJ preliminary qualifications alongside their more ‘academic’ studies of the substantive subject.

Preliminary qualifications need to be passed with grades of at least 50% rather than the standard 40% for undergraduate courses at UK universities. While shorthand was generally perceived to be the most difficult to achieve a satisfactory pass in – writing shorthand at 100 words per minute over a four-minute period – Essential Public Affairs (EPA) always caused students great concern.

The NCTJ provided a programme of study, a syllabus and an external exam, set by an exam board for most of its qualifications. FE colleges and private providers largely stick to delivering the NCTJ syllabus. Undergraduate and postgraduate courses deliver and assess qualification-appropriate material, as well as the NCTJ-stipulated content. EPA was one of five core subjects NCTJ students have to take, the other four being Media Law, Reporting, Shorthand and a Portfolio of Journalism. Two optional modules made up the seven NCTJ preliminary qualifications. These included Court Reporting, Production Journalism, Broadcast Journalism, Sports Journalism and the Business of Magazines.

Students' attitudes to their study of Public Affairs was evaluated in a series of reflective commentaries, completed by the students before, during and after their study of the programme. The first of these was written in the very first session of the taught module and students were asked to be honest about their hopes and fears. They were asked to hand in one copy of this initial commentary and keep another for themselves. They were asked to keep up a learning journal throughout the course. In the final week of the module students were asked to reflect once again on their study of Public Affairs and how their attitude had changed during the course of the year-long module.

Students who had previously studied A level Politics tended to be reasonably confident about Public Affairs – and they were right to be. They should already have been aware of most of the institutions and concepts. Students who had not studied Politics were almost universally – over a number of years – nervous and unconfident about their forthcoming study of Public Affairs. They stated very clearly in their initial reflections that they did not understand politics, that they tended to avoid interacting with it and that they had not expected to have to study it as part of a Journalism degree.

There are several reasons why EPA caused such anxiety. Firstly, most students had never studied politics and felt intimidated by the subject. Politics was perceived as being dull and dreary and the students felt distant from it not at all knowledgeable. This was exacerbated by the second reason, the sheer volume of content. While most undergraduate Politics degree programmes have several modules which students may have to study, EPA had a far greater breadth. Half of the module focused on central government: the constitution, Parliament and the monarchy, the role of backbench MPs, PM and cabinet, devolution, the EU, Freedom of Information, the Treasury and economic policy, the civil service, and electoral systems. The second half of the module covered local government: local government structures (noting there is no coherent structure across the UK), the service provision and responsibilities of different councils (including adult social care and children's social care), planning rules, local government finance, revenue and capital spending of local councils, the role of councillors and the role of elected mayors. Then there is the NHS and health policy. For most undergraduate Politics programmes, there would be enough content here for at least half a dozen modules, but it was all crammed into EPA.

Added to this breadth of political structures and actors was the need to be aware, and understand, topical political events. There may be particular changes to, for example, local planning rules, or access to children's social services. Students needed to be aware of such changes in case they came up in the exam.

On top of this, the students needed to consider who might be appropriate people to interview on each of these issues. There was a standard question of identifying five appropriate people to interview and listing five appropriate questions. These are the practical skills all journalists need to develop. This volume of material to be covered could be overwhelming for students. It is for the staff who have to teach the module across a 22-week period! Finally, there was the fear of the assessment: a single 90-minute exam, written by the NCTJ. Most of the questions were compulsory, and everything in the syllabus could be assessed. Thus, there was an exceedingly large syllabus, all of which could be included in an exam.

The traditional method for teaching this module was through rote learning. There were traditional one-hour lectures and weekly seminars. It was very intensive, and the aim was to get the students to pass. At first, when a new way of teaching this curriculum to undergraduate students was introduced in 2010, the Essential Public Affairs exam pass rate was around 35% at the first attempt, with most students having little confidence in the materials which they were, in effect, regurgitating. The aim was not even about 'comprehension' of the subject material – 'the lowest level of understanding so that the learner can make use of the knowledge learned' (Jarvis, 1983, 69). It was simply getting them through the exam.

The Changes

A number of changes were undertaken. New staff members took over the module. Extra class time was designated for the students – linked to a University Teacher Fellowship project. The underpinning of the changes was to get the students more engaged with the materials. This was reinforced through presenting the module as a 'Journalism' module rather than as a 'Politics' module.

The two staff members who took over the module were both University Teacher Fellows, each with a great deal of experience. They were also both Politics graduates. Tor Clark was a political journalist and newspaper editor before coming into academia. Alistair Jones was a career academic who has published British politics textbooks and EU textbooks. Both also have extensive experience in the media, for example, appearing together as expert political analysts on BBC Radio Leicester election night specials in 2010, 2011, 2015 and 2017. This experience of being a commentator in the media – in print and in broadcast media – enabled both staff members to utilise examples of their experiences, both as 'best practice' and 'worst practice' to reinforce their teaching.

Before 2010 the PA module had been taught in a one-hour lecture, followed by one-hour seminar format. A significant change was in the structure of delivery of the module. While the one-hour lecture was retained, it was reinforced by a two-hour workshop and fortnightly tutorials. Thus, there was still the appearance of the 'delivery of knowledge' in the lectures. Rather than focus on the rote learning approach which had previously been utilised, the lecture delivery was far more interactive. The workshops were used in a range of different ways, but with the emphasis on the practicalities of being a journalist. Real-world stories were used to reinforce the 'facts' needed to pass the exam while also used to create debates on topical issues. Peer-learning and peer-marking were often built into the debates.

While changes to the structure of delivery were important, so too was the delivery of content. As noted above, rote learning had been the standard form of delivery: the dissemination of knowledge. Using Bloom's taxonomy as the underpinning of changes, the aim was to move them further up the pyramid, from having knowledge up to comprehension, application, analysis, and (hopefully) synthesis and evaluation. The application and analysis were very much about linking their studies to their future careers as journalists (see Biggs, 2005 and Race, 2007).

With a starting point of negligible knowledge on the subject matter, along with trepidation about studying a 'difficult' subject, the challenge was to engage the students. In each of the lecture sessions, the aim was to find a hook that would create interest in a subject. Thus, when studying the EU, the use of five headline stories, where all had been published but only one was wholly accurate, was a way of engaging with the students. Quite simply, they had to identify the 'true' story. When examining the role of the civil service, the use of clips from the BBC television comedy series 'Yes, Minister' and 'Yes, Prime Minister' was a useful hook.

These lectures were only the starting point. Topical issues, derived from the lectures, were then used in the subsequent workshop. Thus, having examined the role of the monarchy in the context of parliament, a subsequent debate could focus on the need for the monarchy, and/or the House of Lords. The class would be divided arbitrarily each week. Each team would have to consider one perspective, as well as working on potential counter-arguments against the other side. Again this is linked to the place of work, where a journalist may have to present an objective perspective which may run counter to their own opinions.

There was also the practical perspective. If the debate was on the abolition of the monarchy, which five appropriate sources might be approached for interview? What five questions could be asked of the interviewees? In every EPA exam, there is at least one question which asks the students to identify five sources and to prepare five questions. These are ten marks (or more) that all of the students should be able to get if they have engaged with the practical workshops, regardless of the topic. Some of these are straight forward: a *vox pop*, an academic expert. Having two lecturers who are frequently in the media commenting on a host of different subjects reinforced the importance of approaching an appropriate academic expert. Such an emphasis on this practical perspective could almost be perceived as rote learning. The reality is it is much more about reinforcing a particular valuable skill, one that will translate into the workplace (see Argyris & Schön, 1974, 182–196).

Finally, because all this understanding would be tested in a national exam, it was important the students should be familiar with the exams and the way to tackle them. So every week, after the full study of each topic, students were set exam-style questions to complete in their own time. They handed these in to their tutors but also engaged in peer marking of their answers at the start of the following week's workshop. These questions and the peer marking of them helped embed their specific knowledge of the various topics. Importantly this process gave the students confidence that they knew and understood the specific details and knowledge required to pass their exam. In short, it boosted their confidence because it proved to them they knew more than they thought they did.

What was also important in nurturing the interest of students was a willingness to answer questions in class; to digress where needed. There was a degree of flexibility to do so in the

workshops, where these questions could be bounced to the class as a whole. In the lectures, questions were encouraged, even if it led to the sessions running out of time. To counter this problem, audio commentaries were put on each individual slide, and the slides made available 48 hours prior to the lecture. Thus, students had the opportunity to engage with the material in advance of the sessions, but also had the commentaries should the session time out. This willingness to address the questions of the students led to more and more questions being asked in class. Some of them were bounced back to the class as a whole, to consider their opinions, even in lectures. The important point, which was continually reinforced, was, apart from factual inaccuracy, there was no such thing as a wrong answer. Removing that fear of being ‘wrong’ encouraged greater participation. Linked to this, and this point was reinforced repeatedly, was the commitment of the lecturers to challenge every answer, regardless of their own personal opinions. Getting the students to defend their positions, despite rigorous challenges, is an important part of being a successful journalist. The result was (possibly) greater knowledge, but definitely greater confidence.

The debates on specific topics – for example ‘should the UK have a monarchy?’ or ‘is the benefits cap acceptable’ – allowed students to engage in real debates on real and topical issues whilst, once again, giving them the confidence to demonstrate they knew more than they initially thought they did about politics and topical political issues.

This approach did not work for all students. There was a case in an early lecture of a student sticking up her hand and stating “I don’t understand any of this!” The fall back here, especially for this student (although she was not alone), was the use of one-on-one tutorial sessions. These were available to all students. They were an extra level of support for those who were struggling. For the stronger students, new challenges to develop their knowledge and understanding were offered. This extra guidance was hugely important and influential. In the case of the student who claimed not to understand anything, she passed the exam first time with a grade around 60%.

The success of these innovations can be measured in a number of ways. Firstly, there is the number of students passing the exam. Prior to these changes, that was a 35% pass rate. In 2014, it was 72%. In 2016 it was 90%. Some of this may be attributed to cohort size. Most cohorts were between 20 and 30 students. One cohort was over 50, and the pass rate was still 71% (in 2015).

These innovations can also be measured in the careers of the graduates. No students considered a career as a political journalist, or even an economics or business journalist. The fixation was on fashion, cars or sport. Yet some of these graduates have developed careers as business reporters and as political journalists with national and international journalism organisations. In these cases, the students have acknowledged the huge input from the staff on the EPA module. The enthusiasm with which the module was delivered, along with the engagement of students by the staff, has been a profound influence.

Caveats

These students did exceptionally well to overcome their initial fears and achieve success in Public Affairs but there are a number of caveats which need to be noted. The first of these is the extra contact time we had with the students. If it were not for the one-on-one tutorials, some of the students might not have succeeded. As staff members, we were very lucky to have that extra time made available to us on our teaching loads. This helped by the University Teacher Fellowship project which focused on improving student engagement.

The reality is, sadly, that most universities do not have the staff time available to indulge existing students with extra contact time.

There is also a problem with the EPA module. There is far too much content in the module for it to be covered adequately. Staff have to cherry pick those areas most likely to come up in an exam and teach around them. So, in a lecture on the Treasury and Economic Policy, a list of key terms with brief explanations is included on the off chance a question may ask for a definition of monetary policy or fiscal policy, or a comparison of direct and indirect forms of taxation. The response to the breadth of the module is that a depth of knowledge is not essential. Yet, without that depth of knowledge, a proper understanding of the material cannot be achieved. For all staff who teach EPA, they have negligible input into the syllabus. Year on year, the volume of the syllabus grows.

The third caveat is the staff taking the module. We bounced off the walls in the way in which we delivered the module. Despite both staff members having over 20 years' experience, there is still a love of teaching and a desire to, in effect, show off in front of an audience. For us, it worked. We complemented each other. The eclectic range of knowledge we have acquired over the years has given us a range of tools with which to engage students – even if it meant comparing some reporting in the British media on the EU to that of the Zhdanovist period under Stalin's rule of the Soviet Union.

Conclusion

We have entitled this paper the Cinderella subject of Journalism courses. The reason is simple. Many of the other modules which are offered on Journalism programmes look far more beautiful. EPA, on the other hand, can look dull and difficult. Nobody really wants to study it, but it is compulsory. Yet we have found ways which have enabled students to engage with the module; to develop an interest in the subject matter. And they have been able to go to the ball. Subsequent careers have blossomed.

What we found was the need to engage with the students, to find that hook. The success of that approach was vindicated by the students' end-of-course reflective commentaries which talk of how both their confidence in the subject and also their interest in it had grown in ways they could not have expected when they began their studies six-to-eight months earlier.

It was about instilling confidence in the students: confidence to ask a question without thinking they might look stupid; confidence to answer a question in front of the rest of the class – and to defend that answer as well, and confidence in their own knowledge and confidence with material that had always previously seemed difficult, complex and beyond their experience.

Confidence in, and knowledge of, politics is needed to succeed in EPA. For those students who were happy to do enough to scrape a pass, there were all sorts of challenges to engage with them. Yet for those who did engage, who could see an interest in the subject matter, we could help them to achieve academic and vocational success, to become better students and, ultimately, better journalists.

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