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The Six Reincarnations of Research-Led Teaching

Olga Burlyuk (Research Foundation Flanders (FWO) and Ghent University) reflects on six types of research-led teaching.

"Research-led teaching". All of us in academia have heard about it. Most of us in education are (supposed to be) doing it. But what does it really stand for? While preparing to speak on the topic at the UACES [Doctoral Training Academy](#) back in November 2019*, I have identified **six reincarnations – or most common ways of understanding – research-led teaching**. Put simply, when saying that you "do research-led-teaching", you may imply that: you teach your research; you teach others' research; you teach students to do research; you do research with your students; you research what you teach; and you research your teaching. In what follows, I elaborate on each of these.

You teach your research

Perhaps the most widespread understanding of research-led teaching implies that you get to teach your own research. It may be a guest lecture, a compact seminar, or a full-blown course (if you are lucky and your or another school allows you to design a course on the topic of your interest). Either way, you develop a curriculum based on your own research. In the situation when most of us are trained to be researchers (and often are not formally trained to be teachers!), are generally passionate about our research, and are dealing with excessive workloads, this is considered an attractive, indeed a desired, way to teach.

Given the current situation on the academic job market, however, teaching your own research mainly or only comes with a high risk: your teaching portfolio may become too narrow and render you unemployable. It is thus recommended that scholars, especially junior scholars, embed their research in a broader curriculum and do not shy away from teaching "old good" general courses, too. For example, in my case, I am happy to have courses like "Europe in the world", "Research methods in EU studies" and "Fundamentals of dissertation and research" listed in my teaching portfolio alongside more specialized courses on "EU neighbourhood policy", "EU migration policy", "The EU and the Ukraine crisis" or "EU cultural diplomacy".

In a similar vein, while you may consider yourself to be on top of the material in your field, designing a class or a course based on it might prove to be a challenging, even if a much-needed, exercise in stock-taking, broadening your outlook, engaging with alternative and dissenting opinions on the subject – and simply keeping up to date. You'd be surprised (or maybe you wouldn't?), but remaining up to date with the literature post-PhD is not obvious.

You teach others' research

Another prevalent understanding of research-led teaching implies that the substance of your teaching is driven by the research in the field. In practice, this translates into using lectures and especially course readings to expose your students to original academic writings rather than textbooks and handbooks.

The three points of dispute with regard to research-led teaching understood this way concern what "research" is worth being taught, how much of it and at what educational level.

All would agree that "research" we teach should be somehow noteworthy. Yet, opinions vary as to whether the selection criterion should be its being most fundamental, illustrative, mainstream, deviant, recent, theoretically, methodologically or ideologically diverse – or something else altogether. The final call should naturally lie with the tutor, but institutional and disciplinary constraints often play a role, too.

Similarly, deciding on the number, as well as diversity and complexity of academic texts to take up in a course is an exercise in balancing out (sometimes perceived as "trading off") breadth and depth of the course's contents. Some prefer comprehensiveness and extensiveness, others opt for intensity and detail: there is no consistent practice out there.

Finally, while the profession seems to agree that teaching led by research of some kind is the only way forward,



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opinions differ as to whether this approach is only suitable to teaching graduate students who are supposedly more mature and specialised or can just as well be applied to teaching undergraduates. Personally, I have used research-led teaching with both graduate and undergraduate students (occasionally mixed in one group), and I can testify that yes, it can be done.

You teach students to do research

This type of research-led teaching is essentially about **integrating research assignments** to train students in one (or a combination) of three things: the process of inquiry (boosting students' curiosity, creativity, critical thinking), the content of a subject (encouraging students' specialization, profiling), and research and writing methods (these days commonly sold as "transferable skills").

Beyond your usual course paper or thesis instead of or in addition to final exam, this may take the form of assembling a portfolio of some kind (for example, a selection of relevant news, public statements or case law that students build up week after week and you partly discuss at the beginning of each class); individual or group student presentations (in or outside lecture hours); and various in-class research assignments (yes, assignments need not always be "homework"). The latter can do a great job at activating students (especially if you have a longer time-slot for the class) and teaching them to do research quickly, "here and now", possibly in small teams. You can also formulate in-class research assignments in such a way as to expose students to various kinds of primary data, datasets or data portals, so that they feel more confident when embarking on their independent research for that final paper or presentation. I have been using all of the above in my courses over the past years, with groups ranging between 5 and 55 students, grad and undergrad, and they seemed to appreciate the benefit of it (even if they have complained of the workload at times).

There are two main challenges for the teacher here. The first lies in striking the right balance between student autonomy and tutor supervision: do you leave most choices up to them, or do you guide them closely, step by step? Each option comes with its set of pedagogical wins and losses. The second challenge rests with assessing and somehow curbing the burden of evaluating plentiful student submissions and providing feedback.

You do research with your students

This type of research-led teaching hardly needs explanation: you **team-up with students in doing research**. You learn from each other and get all the other benefits of genuine collaboration. Mind you: your ability to practice this type of research-led teaching depends not only on the strength and commitment of students and the nature of your research but also on the formal rules of your institution. In some cases, you may be unable to formally account for such collaboration as teaching, which may, in turn, pose problems for both sides.

You research what you teach

Research-led teaching better captured with "teaching-led research" refers to arguably infrequent and counter-intuitive but nonetheless occurring situations when teaching a subject inspires you to **take up new research avenues**. Well, why not?! Personally, I have been tempted twice: when teaching a course on "EU migration policy" and when teaching an MA research seminar on "The EU and Brexit". I have resisted on both occasions so far, but this is no guarantee for the future.

You research your teaching

Finally, "you research your teaching", or "teaching as research", denotes cases when **teaching is your research**. This type of research-led teaching need not be limited to scholars working in pedagogy studies: one might just as well do research into the teaching of a particular subject or discipline, or reflect on trying out an innovative research method. Plenty of academic journals invite submissions on teaching and learning in their specific fields, and many professional associations have respective branches or interest groups.

Whichever type of research-led teaching discussed above you may wish to practice, beware of the professional evaluation matrixes in the academic system you are or wish to land in, which may shift your priorities, as well as of the bureaucratic "do's and don'ts" at your university or college, which may and will set the parameters of the possible. There is much variation across countries and higher education institutions. And at all times remember: teaching should be fun!

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