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## RECONCEPTUALISING HISTORY TEACHING AND ASSESSMENT TO MEET STUDENT EXPECTATION

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In what follows I would like to reflect, in my capacity as a senior lecturer with 15 years experience on a history programme within a New Zealand university, on changes made both individually and as a programme in response to indirect student feedback. In 2016 I made the decision to undergo a formal and prolonged self-reflection on my classroom performance and believed the best way to do that was to enrol on the postgraduate certificate in tertiary teaching (PGCertTT). Enrolling part time, this qualification would take two years to successfully complete, as I continued to execute my university teaching and research workload. My decision to enrol occurred simultaneously with a major review of the history programme in response to university academic reform documents. So, as a result of two rather separate processes, I found myself reviewing my teaching in both an individual and a collective context; circumstances that proved in the event to be quite fortuitous. A series of programme meetings held over the course of eighteen months were staged, as we discussed how to improve the programme. Criticisms made by students ranged from a lack of choice of papers, through to the deficiency of tutorials (or, as they are known in some contexts seminars), although the main problem seems to have been a rather brusque feedback offered by one staff member to a student.

The PGCertTT encourages the teacher to reflect on their personal characteristics that they bring into the teaching setting. Ramsden (1992) notes three possible roles for a teacher operating in either physical or virtual space: teaching as telling, teaching as organising student activity, and teaching as making learning possible. Furthermore, Kember and Kwan's (2000) model presented a graphical representation of teaching as being either *content-centred* or *learning-centred*. Before undertaking the PGCertTT I would have defined my own style as being located at the *content* end of the spectrum. As we discussed the overhaul of the history programme some of the theoretical work I had been reading was fed in to group discussions. One of the significant themes alongside a move toward student-led learning was the idea of getting students to think as historians. The programme is located within a school of humanities rather than a department and there have been implications here. Students have not been given any training in being historians in the way perhaps a department would offer a *Methods in History* paper, so it was a logical move to reconstruct tutorials as labs in which the process rather than content of history was introduced. Labs could also be a space in which assignments were flagged and discussed and trial runs of assignments undertaken.

The constructivist learning theory “highlights the interaction of persons and situations in the acquisition and refinement of skills and knowledge” (Schunk, 2012, p. 231), and envisages knowledge as constructed by the learner, rather than as a given (information is the given, knowledge is not). The labs as they now exist give students primary sources and we ask them to use them to show how they might be used to answer a question. History is, after all, the process of making sense of disparate scattered documents, in order to *get at* the past. There is validity, hence moving away from the role that one academic describes as the “sage on the stage” to being a “guide on the side” (King, 1993). The tutorials previously occupied the place of labs that could often become a limited conversation between the tutor and one or two students, although the lab encourages all students to actively contribute. There is less scope to simply be a passive by-stander. Weimer (2013) notes that the facilitative role is less

glamorous, nevertheless “students completely control the most important part of any educational experience” (p. 69).

Indeed, King (1993) further notes that learner-centred teaching encourages active learning as opposed to passive learning: “really thinking about it” rather than “passively receiving it and memorizing it” (King, 1993, p. 2). Ideas employed that are suggested by King to promote more active learning are exercises such as “think-pair-share,” “generating examples,” “concept mapping,” and “developing rebuttals” (King 1993, p.9). So, too, the ideas of Lee, Green, Odom, Schechter, and Slatta (2004) are linked to this learner-based approach when they note that a problem-based approach utilises interactive lectures, discussion, and independent study. Inquiry based learning is perhaps compatible with *deep learning* and nurtures, in the words of Lee et al. (2004), “curiosity, initiative, and risk taking” (p. 9), promoting critical thinking.

Weimer (2013) argued that “we might like to think that the instructional universe circles around us, but students are the stars in the larger learning galaxy” (p. 69). Cutting some of the content and the obsession with the objective of *getting through* the curriculum are now replaced with time to think about thinking in the history discipline and how to construct an argument. We are, after all, engaged in developing students’ ability to think critically, and before the overhaul we did not spend many hours of a semester addressing this notion. In terms of student retention, the Kember and Kwan’s (2000) model also suggests that learning-centred teaching is more conscious of individual student needs, which may help to retain students who could otherwise withdraw from the paper after two or three weeks of the semester.

## **New Assessment**

In their overview of transformative learning (TL), Cranton and Hoggan, (2012, p. 524-527), explored ways in which TL can be judged to have taken place, including surveys, interviews, and conceptual mapping. One method which is not mentioned by name is the written essay. The essay does test aspects of Bloom’s (1956) taxonomy, in relation to the cognitive domain of analysing, synthesising, and evaluating, and I believe the assessed essay can also be used as an evaluation of whether TL has been achieved. Other methods of assessment might be used, however, in order to test other aspects of the students’ cognitive ability. Analysis of shorter, primary-source extracts can be adopted more frequently and students asked to place the documents in context, identify individuals named in the documents, and comment on the perspective of the extract. Who wrote it and why? Such an exercise replaces one of the two essays that were previously a common requirement of the student. This addresses issues of student learning, ranging from homogeneity to heterogeneity. Changing the nature of the assessment caters for student diversity in learning and ability. Students are now asked to complete three assessments across a semester. The first is an eight to ten-minute presentation recorded using zoom software to discuss views of an event or phenomena in history; the second is a report which uses primary sources such as a written document, an oral source, an artefact, or an object to cast light on an historical issue; and the third is retained as an essay assignment.

## Power, Diversity, and New Papers on the History Programme

As a result of my experience on the PGCertTT, I now have a better appreciation of the definitions of diversity in a number of guises within the classroom; consequently, I will adjust my classroom teaching and management. I intend to more explicitly recognise power inherent in the classroom. This relates to giving the student a greater stake in classroom learning. Surveys conducted early in the semester can identify preferred ways of learning, which gives the student a sense of ownership in the class, rather than having everything defined for them. Some of the ideas presented by Weimer (2013) will come into play in the context of a new paper I have created on *The Swinging Sixties*. This course was devised in the context of student criticism that the programme was stale and had limited offerings of any interest. Students can be involved in the devising of new papers and their curriculums. So, for example, they could be surveyed to answer, How much politics? How much war? How much popular culture would you want in this paper? In the process of developing research networks with academics in the United Kingdom, I have become aware of initiatives within the discipline of history that have sought to involve students in curriculum design. These align with Cranton's (2006) advocacy of "using participatory planning, in which students decide on some or all of the topics for a course, workshop or other educational activity" (p. 129). Over the last half decade, the University of Exeter has launched an initiative which has developed the perspective of *students as change agents* (SACA), outlined in papers written by Kay, Dunne, and Hutchinson (2010) and Dunne and Zandstra (2011). A similar initiative has been undertaken at the University of Loughborough. The project is summarised below in Figure 1, in graphic form (<http://blog.lboro.ac.uk/teaching-learning/category/module-and-curriculum-design/student-led-curriculum/>).

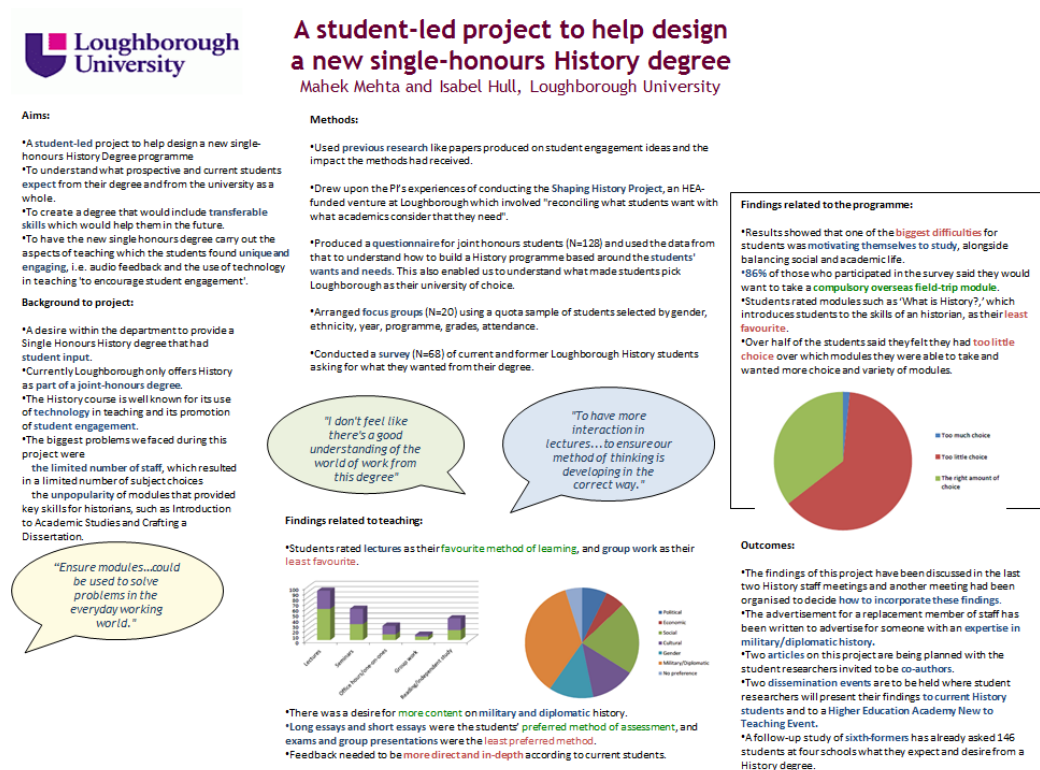


Figure 1. Student led curriculum development.

Source: C. Shields, <http://blog.lboro.ac.uk/teaching-learning/category/module-and-curriculum-design/student-led-curriculum>

## **Online Teaching Environment**

Another issue that was addressed on the PGCertTT was how teaching and a sense of community amongst students can be developed in an online environment. Roberts (2003) proposed a model that offered three perspectives on how the web can be used for teaching. The first is the web as a bank of information; the second as a forum for self-paced learning; and the third is for group analysis, decision making, and dialogue. In Roberts' (2003) survey conducted in the early 2000's, only 15 percent of a survey of higher education tutors used the web for "constructing learning activities" (p.135). I believe it would be interesting to see what this figure might be in 2018 as the potential of online platforms to develop virtual communities is now more appreciated.

There is a growing literature now that focuses on the concept of blended learning (BL). Ellis, Steed, and Applebee (2006) noted that BL envisages using eLearning to replace part of the teacher's in-class role, to provide students with information, to develop student understanding, and for helping them to apply new concepts. The idea of using the web to support knowledge-based tasks is one which I have built in to my online learning environment. Collaborative learning could be utilised, but a question of group responsibility may lead to disputes as to who did what and who really put the effort in. I believe collaborative learning might be more successful in the context of the internal classes where students can be instructed regarding how to work in groups and then getting each group to critique each other's work (perhaps a virtual poster or blog). In this model, "the content is created by the students" and the role of tutor becomes to create "space for knowledge building" as a "guide and facilitator" (Gonzalez, 2010, p. 68).

Online learning communities are not always easy to construct. Perhaps it is useful to ask the students themselves of what they want the online learning environment to consist? Course co-ordinators want it to be much more than a message board where students ask when their assignment is being returned. It is beholden to the course co-ordinator to shape the students' use of the Stream site to, in a sense, "light fires" that students' engage with and to prompt them every week for interaction. For example, at the end of each week a request can be made to "please post one question about the material you do not understand, and secondly, attempt to answer one of the questions posed by another student." One of the issues I have thought about many times over the last few years is whether to, in a sense, force students to interact on the Stream site, by putting assessment of their participation on the discussion forums. This might be considered as part of revisions and new approaches to class assessment and evaluation. I agree with the comments made in Gonzalez's (2009) survey of teaching staff, that developing material online is very time consuming and that they "don't think the university appreciates it" (Gonzalez, 2009 p. 308). So, too, the comments by Leach (2011, p. 118-119) which note the pressure of compiling a strong Performance Based Research Fund (PBRF) portfolio which militates against time spent developing web learning for students.

After completing the PGCertTT and the programme review, a series of reforms have been introduced to both my own teaching and that of the programme more generally. We have diversified assessment, moving away from the rather traditional essay to other forms of oral presentation. We now work on process as much as content in history, too. Students attend labs because they know they are focused on assessment, and the formative nature of the three assignments means it is in the students' interest to attend the labs consistently. So, we have

moved on from the traditional tutorial which works in some university contexts but not in my own.

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