

Curriculum, Assessment and Supervision

Diploma in Education

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Table of contents

Part I: A Critical Evaluation of PO4700: Contemporary International Relations	1
1. Introduction.....	1
2. The programmes: BESS and PPES	2
2.1. The programmes' learning outcomes	2
2.2. Module alignment.....	4
3. Designing PO4700: a theoretical mapping	5
4. Learning and teaching approaches	6
Part II: Constructing an Assessment Instrument for PO4700	8
5. The assessment: module and programme alignment.....	8
6. The theoretical contours of assessment in PO4700.....	9
7. The assessment method: a critical evaluation.....	10
8. Final thoughts.....	14
9. Bibliography.....	15

Part I: A Critical Evaluation of PO4700: Contemporary International Relations

1. Introduction

This is a critical evaluation of a fourth year module in Contemporary International Relations (PO4700) offered by the Department of Political Science as an optional module under two principal programmes: the Business, Economics and Social Studies (BESS) programme and the Philosophy, Political Science, Economics and Sociology (PPES). The module descriptor supplied in Appendix A is the version used in teaching the module for 2011-12. As such, this exercise will apply the curriculum and assessment literature to an existing course with a view to highlighting the strengths and limitations of an 'actually-existing' module as opposed to an 'ideal-type' template.

In framing this self-reflection exercise, it is pertinent to note that the author has just completed his first year of teaching at undergraduate and graduate level having recently

completed his PhD in Politics.¹ As will be demonstrated, the curricula and assessment approaches used in PO4700 combine a pragmatic awareness of objective external conditions, his limited experience, and a genuine interest in innovative teaching practices and student satisfaction.

This curricula discussion begins with an overview of the BESS programme, a critical examination of its learning outcomes and its influence on the design of PO4700. This is followed by an evaluation of the curriculum models and theories that have influenced the design of the module. The final section surveys the key teaching approaches adopted.

2. The programmes: BESS and PPES

The module Contemporary International Relations (PO4700) forms part of the TCD flagship programme Business, Economics and Social Studies or 'BESS'. This four-year undergraduate programme is designed for students who wish to study a broad array of topics in business, economics, political science and sociology, as well as have the opportunity to specialise to a high level in a chosen subject as they advance. PO4700 also falls within the programme Philosophy, Political Science, Economics and Sociology (PPES); a four year undergraduate programme hosted by the School of Social Sciences and Philosophy. A relatively new programme, PPES' first intake of students was in October 2008. It is for students who wish to focus on these four core social science subjects, with the opportunity to specialise at a later stage. Both BESS and PPES are aimed at a domestic and international market, attracting students from across Ireland, Europe, North America and elsewhere.

2.1. The programmes' learning outcomes

Given the substantive overlap between these two programmes it is unsurprising that their respective learning outcomes dovetail with one another almost to the letter. For instance, the BESS programme states that students, after successfully completing the course, should be able to:

Analyse and solve a variety of problems in the private and public sector from a multi-disciplinary knowledge basis of theories and frameworks in business and the social sciences;²

The PPES programme imports this outcome but narrows the field to enquiry 'related to philosophy and the social sciences.'³ As such, the following overview of learning outcomes applies to both programmes, with some deviation in terms of subject specification. Learning outcomes can be defined broadly as 'statements of what a learner is expected to know, understand and/or be able to demonstrate after completion of a process of learning' (European Union 2004: 44). In general terms, the use of learning outcomes conforms to an 'outcomes-based approach' to curriculum, where all learning can be expressed in terms of outcomes to be demonstrated (Gosling and Moon 2001). Both BESS and PPES list eight learning outcomes. This is in conformity with EU-wide directives which place emphasis on a

¹ Prior to taking up his position at TCD, the author held a full-time pre-doctoral research position in the US from 2008 and received his PhD from Nuffield College, University of Oxford.

² See BESS Programme Outcomes here: http://www.tcd.ie/bess/programme_eval/index.php (Accessed 30 July 2012)

³ See PPES Programme Outcomes here: http://www.social-phil.tcd.ie/PPES/PPES_programme_eval.php (Accessed 30 July 2012).

learning-outcomes based approach as ‘part of a broader agenda which is radical in its intentions’ (Scattergood 2008: 3).

This agenda seeks to inject coherence into the delivery of higher education and regards learning outcomes at all levels as a key vehicle to achieve this objective. Whereas before such specified outcomes were used primarily as a tool to define qualifications, they are now embraced as concrete points of departure for shaping all aspects of the education process from course objectives, content, and delivery to assessment strategies. At a more conceptual level, it also seeks to bridge recognition of prior learning with the concept of lifelong learning, a key component of EU directives. Drawing on Hubball and Burt, this approach offers a compelling four-fold rationale, it (1) informs the learners of what they can expect to achieve; (2) communicates curriculum goals in a meaningful way to diverse stakeholders; (3) provides a yardstick device by which to determine successful learning; and (4) guides teachers in their modular design (European Union 2005).

In assessing the learning outcomes of PPES and BESS, at its broadest level the emphasis is primarily on transferable skill sets including effective communication, appropriate use of ICT tools, team work, and the demonstration of ‘flexibility, adaptability and independence’. However, these generic outcome indicators are underpinned by more specific learning outcomes relating to disciplinary content (application to the fields of business, philosophy and the social sciences), lifelong learning (‘engage the pursuit of knowledge in greater depth and over time’) and contextual studies (‘engage productively with a changing social, cultural and technological environment’).

As such, although displaying a high level of generality, the learning outcomes operate at different levels of specificity and provide aspirational (if untestable) learning goals for students of all abilities. This is consistent with an overarching descriptor that must accommodate a variety of disciplinary content offered across diverse faculties, as opposed to a more vocational or special purpose programme. The downside to such generic standards may be that they can convey little of the nature and quality of the programme (European Union 2005).

It is also crucial that learning outcomes are as clear and unambiguous as possible (European Union 2005). In this regard, it is generally inadvisable to use terms such as ‘know’ or ‘understand’ which are not explicit or measurable (Lahiff and O’Farrell 2006 [2009]: 19). The BESS and PPES learning outcomes avoid this pitfall and employ a range of active verbs to specify action and demonstration of student learning. Following Bloom et al.’s (1956) hierarchical taxonomy of verbs, the learning outcomes span the full gamut of levels and skill from the most complex evaluative verbs (e.g. critically evaluate) to the least complex such as ‘*identify...the substantive theories*’ and all levels inbetween including active verbs associated with comprehension, application, analysis and synthesis. For instance:

Identify, critically evaluate and synthesise the substantive theories, frameworks and models, both qualitative and quantitative, that are used in fields of enquiry related to philosophy and the social sciences;

A key critique of learning outcomes is that they are premised on the basis of transparency or at least ‘sufficient transparency’ when in fact it is claimed this is unrealisable in practice (Allais 2012: 335). A critical appraisal of the BESS/PPES learning outcome above, for

instance, raises valid questions: which are the substantive theories, frameworks and models?⁴ Is it better to start with topics or theories? How much depth would constitute critical evaluation? (Allais 2012: 347-8). However, such potential pitfalls should be surmountable if programmatic learning outcomes are formulated with care and provide sufficient guidance to learners, stakeholders and teachers. We will return to this and other critiques of the ‘learning outcomes approach’ below in relation to module design.

2.2. Module alignment

TCD reflects the dominant model in contemporary Higher Education of ever-expanding modularised curricula (O’Neill 2009: 2). The advantages of this system are flexibility and student choice, especially in the context of a broad-based education such as the BESS and PPES programme. Conversely, the risks of high degrees of student choice at the programmatic level include reduced curriculum coherence and complications in terms of planned progression (Bennett et al. 2000). As such, alignment between programme and module may be as much the result of happy coincidence as design.

Until recently, this characterisation appears to be applicable to TCD (Scattergood 2008: 2). As the designer of PO4700, my point of departure was not so much the programme learning outcomes of BESS or PPES but rather the design approaches taken by my colleagues. Indeed, I did not review the overarching programme descriptors for inspiration but rather the syllabi of colleagues in the department. This is consistent with what Fraser and Bosanquet term a product-focused, teacher-centred curriculum where ‘a larger focus on the degree programme is sketchy’ (Fraser and Bosanquet 2006: 272).

The question then becomes the extent to which PO4700 maps onto the learning outcomes of the BESS/PPES programmes in terms of both general and specific definitions. At a general level, the module emulates an outcome-based approach to curricula, with learning expressed in terms of outcomes to be demonstrated. Substantively, a similar focus is placed on identification, critical evaluation and application of substantive theories. Drawing again on Bloom’s taxonomy, concrete as opposed to more ambiguous verbs are employed. In turn, different levels and skills are catered for from evaluation to analysis, comprehension and knowledge. Appropriately, the learning outcomes on the module descriptor are more limited in focus and specific to the course content. It is also worth noting that the threshold level of module learning outcomes is generally at the more complex end of the spectrum. A notable deficit in the outcomes, however, is the use of verbs denoting affective learning which arguably forms an integral component of lifelong learning (Osters and Tiu 2008: 4).

Modules will not and should not map identically onto overarching programme descriptors. However, a more systematic appreciation of the three strands – knowledge, skills and competences – that characterise guidelines at the EU, national and institutional level would be beneficial. For instance, at present, many of the generic and transferable skills specified at the programme level are implicit but not explicit in the PO4700 module descriptor. The module descriptor would be enhanced by building-in more focus on *process* activities and effects to complement the current *product* emphasis on learning outcomes.⁵ Navigating a

⁴ For instance, there is debate within the social sciences as to whether game theory constitutes a substantive theory as such or is more a methodological approach. In other words, who gets to decide whether a theory is ‘substantive’ or not?

⁵ For a review of these two different models see Neary (2003).

traditionally polarised debate between product and process curriculum models will occupy us in the next section.

3. Designing PO4700: a theoretical mapping

Contemporary research on curriculum design has been heavily influenced by a sometimes polarising debate between those that advocate curriculum as *product* and curriculum as *process* (Ross 2000; Knight 2001). It is this spectrum of opinion which broadly frames the analysis of PO4700. However, it is worth emphasising at the outset that the division between ‘product’ and ‘process’, while broadly instructive (and helpfully provocative) may be overstated. The question of whether it is possible to pursue a pragmatic, integrative approach drawing on both approaches underpins this discussion.

The module descriptor for PO4700 certainly conforms to a general understanding of curricula as product (Barnett and Coate 2005). It is developed from a generic template supplied by departmental colleagues and been tailored by the teacher as the subject expert, with content a highly significant aspect of the design. As such, the module design sets some broad parameters for implementation and learning. This is consistent with what Fraser and Bosanquet (2006) term a product-focused, teacher-centred model. This structural model is implicitly endorsed by TCD and the Department of Politics and views the curriculum principally in terms of content, aims and learning outcomes.⁶ As such, any deviation towards a more process-oriented focus in PO4700 has occurred within the bounds of a fundamentally product-centred understanding of curriculum.

The process-model critique in its extreme incarnation rejects a learning outcome approach on the grounds that it denies the complexities of learning, imports a host of unrealistic assumptions, and imposes a reductionist efficiency-oriented model, providing little insight into the quality of education (Knight 2001). Process-oriented scholars advocate a model focused on ‘what people do, not, as with outcomes thinking, about abstractions, nor, as with [rational curriculum planning], about logical accounts of what they *ought* to do’ (Knight 2001: 378). For instance, Knight argues curricula coherence should be maintained through orchestration of learning *processes* across a programme as opposed to a rigid focus on learning outcomes.

While acknowledging that learning outcomes in themselves are ‘limited, modest and prosaic devices’ (Scattergood 2008: 2), they provide a useful baseline in PO4700 for signalling the broad intentions associated with the course. The design of the module can be framed loosely by what Biggs’ (1996) terms ‘constructive alignment,’ an alignment of course objectives and the targets for assessing student performance. According to this model, (1) intentions are made transparent and communicated to the learner, (2) the teacher selects and uses teaching methods consistent with those intentions, and (3) assessment reflects those intentions (Lahiff and O’Farrell 2006 [2009]: 16). Biggs (2003: 29) places particular emphasis on the module objectives: ‘get them right, and the decisions as to how they are to be taught and how they may be assessed, follow.’ It is worth noting, however, a few limitations and caveats with this approach. First, there is the assumption of transparency; that the learner will grasp the intended meaning attached to learning outcomes (Allais 2012: 350). Second, the assumption of linearity or an ‘ideal sequence’ is problematic on at least two counts: denying the

⁶ Perceptions of teaching colleagues are a highly significant factor in understanding the teaching and learning relationships within higher education institutions. See Prosser et al. (1999).

contingency inherent to the realities of teaching, as well as under-specifying the importance of agency; and, the ability of the teacher to deliver quality instruction.

In terms of teacher agency, this limitation seems to be acknowledged by advocates of constructive alignment. Biggs (1996: 360) writes, '[the] key issue is whether the teacher can operationalise desirably high levels of understanding in ways that denote performances that can be elicited by teaching/learning activities, and that can be assessed authentically.' The agency of the teacher is therefore crucial and cannot be assumed away. Academics can perceive their role in curriculum development as either narrow or expansive, that they can 'deliberately design courses that are likely to promote [surface or] deep approaches to learning' (Subic and Maconachie 1997: 23). Whether such decisions flow automatically from module objectives is deeply debateable. Certainly, the experience of delivering PO4700 suggests not. Indeed, implicitly, the module description for PO4700 may be said to reflect my own underlying preferences for an open-ended and expansive teaching approach.⁷ However, actualisation is impacted by multiple contextual factors during the course of instruction.

In framing the design of PO4700, I would propose relaxing some of the assumptions on both sides of the divide. Constructive alignment provides a useful way of thinking about curricula development concretely. However, a more pragmatic approach accepts that learning outcomes can only convey intentions in general terms and their use should be flexible enough to allow for 'those [outcomes] that emerge in the practical realities of teaching' (Hussey and Smith 2003: 359). In turn, rather than a notion of linear progression, it is helpful to think of the learning process in cyclical terms – 'as an ever-expanding spiral of understanding' (Hussey and Smith 2003: 359). Underlying these statements is an acceptance that not all learning can be expressed in terms of outcomes to be demonstrated and their limitations need to be acknowledged.

Curricula design and module descriptors such as the one supplied for PO4700 will provide useful but only partial insight into the learning and teaching process. Its actualisation will reflect the underlying preferences of individual teachers. The teaching approaches adopted in delivering PO4700 intentionally try and push towards innovative methods, underpinned by scholarship.

4. Learning and teaching approaches

In outlining the teaching and learning approaches adopted for PO4700 it is important to address the question of objectives. Again, it is teacher agency which may be the crucial variable here. As Biggs (1996: 353) acknowledges, 'high level engagement ought not to be left to serendipity, or to individual student brilliance, but should be actively encouraged by the teacher.' In a wide-ranging survey, Entwistle (2005: 72) found that teachers almost invariably describe their objectives as passing onto their students a 'distinctive way of thinking.' In another study, it was found all teachers say they teach for 'understanding' (Perkins and Blythe 1993: 4-7). What does this mean in practice? How might the mode of delivery achieve these objectives? And, as Farrington (1991: 16) concludes, might there be

⁷ The description opens with a challenge to the discipline, implicitly disputing a functionalist account of international relations: 'Although a 'common sense' view of world politics is often presented in non-academic contexts, there is little agreement among experts on what international relations is, and how we should think about the discipline.' Indeed, one departmental colleague took issue with this formulation in their feedback.

‘more rhetoric than reality involved in claims about student centred learning methods in Further Education.’

To begin, it is instructive to nail down what is meant by student-centred learning. Lea highlights a number of key attributes: active rather than passive learning, an emphasis on deep as opposed to surface understanding, increased responsibility and accountability on the part of the student, an increased sense of autonomy in the learner and interdependence between teacher and learner defined by mutual respect (Lea et al. 2003: 322). It is well established in the literature that the *quality* of students’ learning outcomes – including the extent to which they achieve these valuable learning skills – is significantly affected by whether students adopt a deep or surface approach towards learning (Biggs and Coluns 1989). The teaching approach adopted by the teacher is likely to be decisive in this regard.

For PO4700, given the advanced nature of the course, and the complex level of understanding demanded, it was crucial that students were encouraged to be self-reflexive. To achieve this, a standard lecture format was rejected on the grounds that it promotes passive over active learning, does little to challenge students’ surface interpretations of the material, and, indeed, may encourage dependence as opposed to interdependence in the student-teacher relationship. Instead, comprehensive lecture slides were provided to the class in advance to accompany the weekly readings. These slides were designed in a weekly lecture format.

Rather than a lecture format, the class of 50 students was split into two smaller groups of 25, with an average attendance of approximately 16 students per group meeting weekly for one hour respectively. These sessions took the form of student-led discussion seminars. As with a standard tutorial format, the objective was to advance beyond a passive learning setting to encourage students to vocalise their interpretations of key concepts and theories, to debate and challenge the established wisdom in the literature and so on. To further promote student-led discussion and inject a sense of ownership over proceedings, the teacher implemented an innovative system of online student preparatory work (or ‘study briefs’) and peer-assessment, the results of which then structured class discussion. The study brief system is described in detail in the module descriptor.

A number of quality controls were put in place. First, it was emphasised that the study briefs be viewed with a critical eye so that students did not necessarily take their peer’s claims at face value. Second, given the novel nature of the exercise, the teacher provided a ‘best practice’ example on the first study brief to be posted.⁸ Third, to ensure substantive and constructive comments, students were requested to provide their full names and all comments were moderated prior to online publication.

The study brief system and its utility as a tool of formative assessment is further developed in Part II. Suffice to say here, as a student-centred teaching and learning approach it appealed on a number of fronts. While learning outcomes informed the questions set each week and the general orientation of student inquiry, the mode of delivery took on more process-orientation. By engendering a sense of ownership over inquiry and taking advantage of a range of delivery devices, including the internet, the teacher sought to increase the probability of higher learning objectives being addressed.

⁸ The first anonymised study brief and commentary can be found here: <http://tompegram.com/teaching/po4700-study-briefs/group-1-tuesday-1500-arts-4050b/michaelmas-term/week-4/is-more-security-better/>

At a more abstract level, drawing on Knight's (2001: 377) conception of curriculum as process, the study brief system was an attempt to normalise a community of practice 'in which group work and peer evaluation are normal, interpersonal contact is common and networks of engagement are extensive.' This teaching approach was also reasonably-time efficient, meeting the expectations of students for quality tuition without imposing too onerous a burden on the teacher.

Part II: Constructing an Assessment Instrument for PO4700

Part II examines the assessment instrument designed for PO4700. It begins by describing the assessment and how it aligns with the module and overarching programme. It then turns to a discussion of the theories of learning and assessment that usefully frame the choice of assessment methods and their respective strengths and limitations. The final section offers critical evaluation of the success of this assessment method in light of the teacher's experience and student feedback.

5. The assessment: module and programme alignment

The most common forms of assessment in Higher Education are summative (determine the extent to which the student has attained the learning outcomes and generally leads to a grade) and formative (used to provide feedback to the student on their learning but generally does not impact on their grade) (Craddock and Mathias 2009). Different modes of assessment may serve a range of purposes: specifying how satisfactory performance in the course of study is to be demonstrated; providing some benchmarks for comparing standards across students and HE institutions; and, enhancing student learning as they progress through a course of study. They are also viewed as a means to facilitating life-long learning (Boud and Falchikov 2006).

These broad objectives are reflected in the programme learning outcomes within which PO4700 falls. The BESS/PPES programme makes explicit reference to a range of demonstrable learning outcomes in line with EU guidelines on knowledge, skills and wider competences. The programme identifies a range of both content and process-focused learning outcomes potentially open to both quantitative and qualitative assessment approaches. The module descriptor also lists a range of learning outcomes with a strong emphasis on knowledge-based learning outcomes. The lack of process-oriented activities and effects is a deficit in its design and reflects the extent to which assessment remains viewed in rather narrow terms (i.e. purely summative), as well as entrenched institutional constraints.⁹ Other constraints affecting assessment design include the subject taught, class size, time available, collegiality of colleagues, and students' demands (Gilles et al. 2011).

All of these external factors have played a role in shaping the assessment instrument for PO4700. In accordance with standard institutional practice, summative assessment takes the form of one final year exam (60% of the final grade) and two assessed essays at the end of each term (40% of the final grade). However, in addition, the teacher has placed considerable emphasis on formative assessment as an integral component of the course in the form of the study brief system described in the preceding section. As Biggs (1996: 356) writes, in 'deciding the assessment tasks, it is necessary to judge the extent to which they embody the

⁹ For a discussion of the barriers and constraints that often serve to constrict assessment-related decisions see McGoldrick.

target performances of understanding, and how well they lend themselves to evaluating individual student performances.’ The underlying objective of PO4700’s assessment instrument has been to ensure coherence, and that the types of knowledge, levels of understanding, and skill sets specified are both coherent and mutually reinforcing – the final objective being quality learning.

6. The theoretical contours of assessment in PO4700

Assessment has been described as ‘the Achilles heel of quality’ (Knight 2002a). Although somewhat underspecified in the literature, in recent years a concerted effort has been made to put the spotlight on a ‘scholarship of assessment’ (Rust 2007). This (overdue) shift in attention recognises that assessment has too often been approached as somehow separate, as opposed to integral, to the learning process and the quality of student learning (O’Farrell 2009: 15). Proponents of curriculum alignment have strongly advocated for assessment methods to be integrated into the design process at an early stage (Diamond 1998). In turn, scholars have exposed the shortcomings of standard assessment practices, especially an overreliance on summative methods, and called for greater attention to integration of learning, teaching and assessment via ‘process’ as well as ‘product’ learning (Craddock and Mathias 2009: 135).

Drawing on this literature, three key considerations animate the design of PO4700’s assessment instrument. First, the mode of assessment has an important impact on the learning experience of students. Second, assessment of student performance is a necessary and important activity of educators. And, third, much debate around assessment is at heart a ‘debate about what should be assessed’ (McDowell 2010: 263-4). In thinking through appropriate assessment design, a natural place to begin is with PO4700’s learning outcomes. Outcome criteria, however, can provide only partial guidance on the most appropriate modes of assessment. Drawing on the tenets of constructive alignment, an important aspect to this framework is the idea that the student *constructs* his or her learning through relevant learning activities (Lahiff and O’Farrell 2006 [2009]: 16). Thought has been given to the student’s experience of assessment in PO4700 and how alternative *active* assessment methods can promote good learning.

The drawbacks of relying purely on summative assessment methods are well documented in the literature. Exams are nevertheless the bedrock of assessment practices at TCD. Exams should track closely the outcome criteria as specified in the module and programme. In turn, standardised testing facilitates comparability of achievement and thus student mobility and quality assurances across HE institutions (Gosling and Moon 2001). However, the use of exam assessment has been subject to sustained criticism (Knight 2002b). Craddock and Mathias (2009: 133) suggest that summative assessment can be detrimental to learning, especially when poorly designed. Rust (2007: 233) goes so far as to say that ‘much current practice in the use of marks...is not only unfair but is intellectually and morally indefensible.’ In terms of PO4700, the assessment method is in line with standard practice at TCD. However, attempts have been made to take a pragmatic approach towards formative assessment, taking into account the expectations of multiple stakeholders.

Knight (2000) conceptualises this as a trade-off between assessment for the purposes of external stakeholders (high stakes, summative assessment) and other modes of assessment which by their very nature need to be low-stakes complex assessments (often formative). He also advocates the use of peer and faculty assessment practices. This is a helpful point of

departure for formulating an assessment strategy that is cognisant of external constraints but also points towards a conception of ‘assessment for learning’ rather than simply ‘assessment as measurement’ (Juwah et al. 2004). In PO4700, formative assessment generally takes the form of feedback to students on progress and how to advance further. It does not form part of their summative grade. Formative assessment has been hailed as essential to learning by scholars in the field (Bennett 2011). Despite some sceptical voices warning of the dangers of conformative, even deformative, assessment in this area (Torrance 2012), the value of formative assessment, if properly designed, seems self-evident.

A key interrogative that recent research has raised and any formative assessment strategy must address is the following: is feedback alone enough (Crisp 2007)? To formulate it another way, how can formative assessment strategies bridge the gap between feedback given and feedback used by students? Good feedback practice would help and Rust (2007: 231) provides a series of useful criteria. However, ensuring feedback is meaningful; that it is acted upon by students is a key challenge and one which should temper assumptions of the automatic efficacy of formative feedback (Torrance 2012: 326). Such considerations have informed the study brief system used in PO4700 (see Appendix B). Quality feedback forms the backbone of the method coupled with a number of strategies intended to increase student ‘ownership’ and motivation, as well as ensure clarity in terms of task *and* quality criteria. Chief among these strategies is the use of peer assessment.

The literature on the innovative use of peer assessment, especially in the context of formative assessment, is an increasingly diverse one. Peer assessment is ‘the assessment of the work of others of equal status and usually has an element of mutuality’ (Wilson 2003: 49). Research in the area suggests that engaging with peer assessment can be a key way of enhancing student learning (Cartney 2010: 552-3). Peer assessment has a number of potential advantages over purely teacher feedback. It facilitates students’ estimation of the worth of peers’ work, increases the volume (and with appropriate moderation) the quality of feedback, instils an ability to make judgements based on explicit criterion, translates those judgements into constructive feedback, increases the self-esteem of students through peer-debate in context of more symmetrical power relations, and promotes critical reflection and appropriate use of constructive criticism received.

In a topic such as international relations these benefits are particularly pertinent. The content under analysis on a weekly basis rarely lends itself to binary understandings. Students are expected to critique assumptions from a variety of critical theoretically-informed perspectives and are encouraged to have the ‘courage of their convictions’. From a pedagogical perspective, therefore, the use of peer assessment may enhance knowledge, creativity, resourcefulness and motivation. It also clearly has application in terms of lifelong learning. Students who intend to use their learning to pursue careers in global affairs not only benefit from a sound education in international relations theory and application but also the practical skills of argument construction and, indeed, diplomacy in navigating diverse opinions and responding to criticism.

In sum, both summative and formative assessment methods have a role to play in PO4700. Inevitably, learning assessments will be approached by the various stakeholders as a means to an end with extrinsic rewards. However, learning assessments may also be designed to engender other objectives, including the intrinsic rewards of good learning.

7. The assessment method: a critical evaluation

In developing an assessment method, the issue arises as to how we are to judge whether or not the *quality* of the learning process has improved? Most studies look at improved test results. However, does this provide insight into the more challenging criteria of promoting student understanding and autonomy in learning? It would seem logical that student feedback would form an integral part of the development process. However, this is actually far from the norm. Bovill (2011) finds that students are consulted less often than employers and other stakeholders during the curriculum design process. This section will rely on a range of evidentiary sources, including summative results, end of semester questionnaires, and the results of a survey conducted among PO4700 students.

Overall student satisfaction for PO4700 was excellent – ranking it third highest in the department for Hilary Term 2012.¹⁰ A score of 1.26 for the question ‘Overall, I found this module...’ on a scale between Excellent ‘1’ and Good ‘2’ represented an improvement on the result for Michaelmas Term which stood at 1.63.¹¹ Possibly, this represents a process of learning among the students as they accustomed themselves to the benefits of the study brief system. Particularly high scores related to feedback being ‘very helpful’ (1.11), module organisation (1.32), lecturer enthusiasm (1.06), stimulation to think critically (1.26) and encouragement to contribute (1.16). A process of learning is also apparent in the qualitative feedback received. In Term 1 (see Appendix C), the novelty of the online study brief system is captured in the feedback with one student stating: ‘encouraging discussion of weekly study briefs online...which was something I had never experienced before in this university, and I found it incredibly helpful.’ Other student feedback noted: ‘study briefs are a bit scary at first, but I actually quite like them.’ The most common complaints related to the volume of readings, the complexity of the material and a shortage of contact time.

In contrast, the feedback at the end of Term 2 (see Appendix D) suggests students were engaging actively and enthusiastically with the study brief system, not only recognises its intrinsic worth as an aid to deep learning and its positive feedback effects on preparation for the high-stakes summative assessments that bookended each term. It is important to note that study briefs addressed questions designed in the manner of an exam question posed in the syllabus under each week’s topic heading. Qualitative feedback recognised the study brief system as having ‘encouraged critical engagement [on] topical and stimulating subject matters.’ Other feedback noted ‘clear objectives’, ‘good feedback on essays’, and encouragement ‘to contribute and ask questions.’ The use of the study briefs freed up class time for student-led discussion which one student found to be ‘excellent as it is interactive and allows people to share different points of view.’ Feedback noted that the study brief system ‘encouraged constant engagement with the material and with classmates throughout each term’. Study briefs and online commentaries provided invaluable props for encouraging student participation and instilling a sense of ownership over the material.¹² Suggestions for course improvement were consistent with Term 1.

¹⁰ See Survey Evaluation Results, Semester 2, 2011/12, available at: http://www.social-phil.tcd.ie/downloads/Evaluation_results_top_3_2012_HT.pdf (Accessed 30 July 2012).

¹¹ The scores are based on the question ‘Overall, I found this module:’ the mean module score for Political Science was 2.02 for Hilary Term 2012. The score is between Excellent ‘1’ and Good ‘2’ on the scale. The other points on the scale are Satisfactory ‘3’, Poor ‘4’, and Very Poor ‘5’.

¹² A technique used on a number of occasions was to invite questions from the students and then request one of the ‘Study Briefers’ to offer an answer. In the event that the Study Briefer looked for instruction from the teacher, one strategy was to say, “Well, what do you think? You’re the expert.” This tactic often elicited high-quality discussion.

In discussion with colleagues, scepticism was voiced regarding participation in the absence of some kind of instrumental incentive. As this was a pilot scheme, no grades or penalties were attached to non-participation. Nevertheless, almost *all* students submitted their assigned study brief and took the task seriously. Participation fell off somewhat when it came to the weekly online commentary on study briefs, with some students regularly engaging in peer-review, others infrequently contributing to the online discussion and a minority leaving no comments. Overall, 67% of the class left an online comment on a study brief, of these 59% were female, and 56% of the class left three or more comments over the two terms. The maximum number of comments left by any individual student over the year was ten. Interestingly, lack of participation in the weekly online study brief peer-review, with few exceptions, appears to correlate with poorer performance in the PO4700 summative assessments. In contrast, of those students who excelled overall for PO4700 (i.e. received first class honours), all participated frequently in the online commentary.

In this formative exercise then, grade incentive does not appear to have been a necessary condition for motivating students to participate. From the questionnaires, some explanatory factors emerge, including: teacher commitment to student learning, with one student noting that teacher encouragement ‘provides an incentive to work hard for his class.’ Another asset was that readings were regarded as relevant and interesting: with one student stating that this contributed to them ‘always [getting] more work done for this course than for my others.’ Interestingly, the fact that the course ‘is theoretically very difficult and dense’ (in their words) may have also acted as an incentive to engage more fully – contingent on some *quid pro quo* from the teacher. In line with the learning objectives, the weekly discussions of theory and its application were framed as complex, open-ended and dynamic, with an emphasis on critical judgement based on explicit criteria. Application of theory to concrete problems served to accentuate this teaching philosophy. For instance, in one session, students were separated into three groups and tasked with debating different positions on whether the international community had a duty to intervene in the Syria crisis. This exercise privileged the quality of argumentation over whether or not the answer was ‘right’ per se.

To dig deeper into the benefits and limitations of this formative assessment exercise, the teacher conducted a qualitative survey among students in PO4700, inviting responses to the following questions:

1. What motivated you to actively participate in the online discussion at www.tompegram.com?
2. What are the key benefits/concrete outcomes for you from having participated in this teaching method?
3. What are the key drawbacks for you from using this teaching method?
4. Did this mode of engagement help you to develop confidence in expressing ideas? If so, how?

The results of this survey are instructive, a summary of the answers to each question are provided here.

What motivated you to actively participate in the online discussion at www.tompegram.com?

Many students attributed their participation to a desire to improve their final grade. Rationales for how this formative exercise would achieve this instrumental end included demonstrating to the teacher that they had understood the course material and were able to

engage critically with the material. Students also noted participation online as beneficial to keeping up with the readings and understanding the material, providing additional incentive to do the reading and actively engage in class discussion.

Although many students noted that there was no grade penalty for non-participation (and suggested such a sanction should be imposed), a degree of compulsion does seem to have been in evidence. Students noted that participation was expected in the course and therefore online participation was as viable a way to fulfil this requirement as in the classroom. Interestingly, one student notes ‘an element of reciprocity’ among his peers in recognition of the efforts the teacher made to ‘make the class as interesting/approachable as possible.’ In particular, rapid approval by the moderator of online comments and incorporation of claims into lecture slides were appreciated.

The opportunity to see the opinions of their peers in ‘real time’ and in response to their own study briefs provided additional incentive to participate. Many students noted that the study briefs plus comments acted as a repository of information and a helpful resource to understanding the material. Indeed, with the appropriate caveats noted in the syllabus descriptor regarding the accuracy of peers’ claims, students recognised the value of this online catalogue of discussion for revision purposes as the summer exams approached. Also, the questions of the study briefs did replicate exam questions in a topic that would potentially arise in the summative assessments.

Finally, many students noted the novelty of the exercise as a motivating factor. There was gradual recognition that active online participation would translate into more interactive discussion in class. Some students embraced this discussion format as superior to the standard lectures they were used to, as one student puts it: ‘just listening to a lecturer for an hour is useful, but active debate over issues discussed in class is just more interesting/fun.’

What are the key benefits/concrete outcomes for you from having participated in this teaching method?

Benefits of participation noted by students included critical engagement with the readings. As opposed to purely absorbing information and facts, One student states that while reading she would be ‘questioning the assumptions and potential flaws in the paper so that I could articulate some kind of original opinion and contribute meaningfully to the online discussion.’ Various students noted that it forced them to be more precise in their thinking, to approach material critically and with certain analytical questions in mind. Another benefit was that the task of commenting on study briefs would often lead students to seek out additional readings beyond the syllabus to provide additional empirical support for a claim or in order to reinforce or confirm an intuitive interpretation of the material.

A further benefit was peer-to-peer learning. Many students noted that through the study brief system it was possible to gauge their performance relative to their peers. The injection of a low-stakes amount of competition appears to have provided additional incentive to contribute original or creative arguments to the discussion. That said, it is also important to note that some students were discouraged from participating for fear of embarrassing themselves in front of colleagues. However, levels of anxiety were reduced as students became more accustomed to the norms of the system and the civility of the debate.

Student feedback also reflected on the real world application of peer-assessment. Its interactive nature and orientation towards application of theory to concrete problems in global affairs was viewed as beneficial for professional development.¹³

What are the key drawbacks for you from using this teaching method?

One potential drawback identified by students was that having articulated a position online they were less inclined to verbally voice an opinion in class. However, this deficit was counteracted by the teacher's incorporation of their commentary into class slides and discussion. As one student puts it, 'so just because you had written a comment, did not mean you were 'off the hook.'

Among those students who did not participate regularly, a common drawback was that it was time-intensive, that it was sometimes hard to find anything original to say, and that, in the words of one student, the 'pay-off was not worth it.' Other drawbacks included an over-emphasis on student-led discussion in class over teacher instruction. Certainly, the study brief system works on the condition that the students do the required readings prior to class and review the study briefs with a view to developing an initial overview of the topic and materials.

Did this mode of engagement help you to develop confidence in expressing ideas? If so, how?

The majority opinion was that online participation had had a beneficial impact on self-esteem and confidence in articulating an idea or position within a semi-public forum (the online forum was under password protection but students were identified to each other by name). Reasons advanced for this positive effect include the informality of the exercise and the feedback received from peers and the teacher. Underlying the beneficial impact of feedback is the importance of *constructive* criticism, with students recognising the value of student online responses to their claims, be they in agreement, disagreement, or pointing out alternative interpretations. Students also noted an increase in confidence in analysing the work of others – a valuable skill in itself. That said, as noted above, a significant minority of students did not participate at all during the year and an important disincentive was anxiety provoked by the potential for embarrassment.

Teacher moderation is also crucial to the process, in particular constructive validation, correction, or reinterpretation of student's online comments during class. The low-stakes informal nature of the exercise also contributed to student confidence. The fact that it was online, as opposed to in class, also encouraged those students who are less vocal in person to express their ideas in writing first. As the term went on, a critical mass of group participation also appeared to propel the initially reluctant to take part. As one student puts it:

This method levels the playing field in a sense because everyone is expected to contribute. Therefore, it becomes less intimidating to express opinions because it is established as a norm of the class that everybody engages in, as opposed to...being the privilege of a few confident students.

8. Final thoughts

¹³ Indeed, one student states that they have been 'inspired to pursue a career in the field of international relations.'

In sum, as evidenced in the above discussion, the benefits of the study brief system appear to outweigh the negatives. It provides evident additional value to an assessment strategy based purely on a summative template. Areas which require attention include: (1) the collective action problem, how to incentivise greater participation taking into account the variety of student responses to this kind of semi-public peer-assessment. In particular, the question remains as to how to incentivise less confident students to engage over time. This is consistent with scholarship that emphasises the deeply emotional nature of assessment processes (Cartney 2010: 560). And, related to this point, (2) how to tailor such formative assessment options to address the relatively poor performance of students with learning difficulties, notably dyslexia (Craddock and Mathias 2009: 128). Both of these considerations will factor into future modification of the study brief system. Future modification will also respond as best as possible to the useful feedback provided by the many students who enthusiastically engaged in this pilot project, within the parameters of assessment practices at Trinity.

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