**Adapting conventional delivery to suit larger cohorts: turning seminars into workshops**

**Abstract**

Teaching a hugely popular postgraduate political economy module to 50 international business students (mainly Chinese) had always gone well, based on lectures and seminars with assessment via a 3,000 word essay broadly capturing module content. But with a three times larger cohort in 2017 things went wrong. The innovation is to replace seminars with team-taught 2 hour workshops, fewer targeted readings and specific questions for groups to answer, plus a shorter more issue specific assessment. How will this go? The paper highlights problems with the traditional approach and speculates on whether the proposed changes will bring better outcomes.

**Keywords**: Lectures seminars workshops

**Introduction – success breeds complacency?**

The module International Political Economy and Business has historically been a successful core component in the first term of the MSc International Business and Strategic Management at the University of York’s Management School, with excellent pass rates and top ranking student evaluations. This is in spite of the subject matter being extremely challenging and completely new to most IB students, the majority never having encountered a politics or international relations module before. The rationale for inclusion in an IB degree is that essentially this module teaches students about the international and global environment within which business and in particular multinational enterprises operate (Baylis, Smith and Owens, 2016; Dicken, 2015). Module content includes the role of the state in international relations, IR theory, especially the impact of post-Cold War Neoliberalism (Woods, 2014; Gray, 2009; Mason, 2010), and the role of institutions in the global economy (UN, IMF, World Bank, OECD, G8, G20, EU, ASEAN, AU, WTO, plus emerging Asian institutions, the New Development Bank, Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank). As well as exploring governance issues and corporate social responsibility (Karaibrahimoglu, 2010; Rasche, et al 2017), the module considers corporate ethics, environmental sustainability and tensions between shareholder capitalism and stakeholder models, and competition between private and public goods.

This is huge undertaking in a 10 week term with a further four weeks for students to undertake a 3,000 essay designed to test the extent to which learners have met learning outcomes, including a broad critical understanding of how the international political economy works and how it might, in a more sustainable future, work better. For nine years this module has been extremely successful, based on nine two hour lectures, themselves highly interactive and strongly thematic each week. Small group one hour seminars followed, consisting of wide-ranging discussions around a number of reading texts and several different, if thematically coherent questions. Participation in both lectures and seminars was always reasonably good, underpinning an excellent learner experience evidenced in module feedback. Assessment results were always good too with average scores for essays of around 61/100.

Encouraged by the popularity of the module and its emphasis on corporate ethics and protecting public goods - environment, food and water security, health, education, gender equality and human rights (Kaldor, 2007) - the School decided to put this module into another degree programme, MSc Management. The rationale for this was that the module fits the ambition of York Management School to support ethical business and sustainability, and to cultivate an appreciation of global citizenship among our graduates.

**Large cohort concerns**

Together with the rising number of postgraduates across the School’s PG portfolio, including this political economy module on another programme led to a massive increase in numbers that had a huge impact on module delivery. The lectures appeared to be just as successful as in previous years, but the seminars proved immensely problematic for various reasons. The large numbers made tracking students difficult. Even having six different one hour seminars intended for 25 students each quickly broke down. This was already a big increase on previous years where typical seminars were 15 students. We found students switched seminars, some would end up with over 30, others with just ten or eleven. Some students absconded from seminars altogether. The seminars themselves, being so large, meant weaker or less communicative students ‘hid’ – failed to prepare and never contributed, leaving sometimes just the usual – often non-Chinese – students to take the lead in preparing and contributing.

It seemed to us that poor or lazy preparation was considerably more problematic or more prevalent than in previous years. Our worst fears were realised with remarkably poor assessments, the average mark dropping to 52 while the mean stayed close to 60, meaning the high marks remained, but we had in 2017 an extremely long tail of very poor performance, well below normal expectations, and well below M-level standard.

**What to do?**

This necessitates a post-mortem among the team delivering the module and some radical decisions to try to reverse the decline in performance and to improve module delivery and meet the challenge of a much larger number of students, once more with the overwhelming majority coming from China.

This session aims to discuss the problems described above, share experience and elicit comments and suggestions on the remedial measures being considered for the next delivery of this module. Current planning envisages the following.

Lectures shall remain more or less as they are with nine two hour sessions, one per week, covering major themes in the module in blocks. These are loosely based on chapters from the course book and a few other specially chosen texts, often chapters, sometimes journal articles or items from quality news sources, including video clips. The lectures are highly interactive with many questions to elicit student responses, short clips from YouTube, and PowerPoint slides that use pictures as prompts and often involve building up live content elicited from students. The lecture style is decisively not to deliver a two hour talk with 40-50 detailed slides, an approach completely inimical to my preferred teaching style. In particular, few slides, many picture and few words is much preferred and more successful in getting contributions from the ‘audience’.

First major change is to abandon the six seminars a week and use six hours of tutor time in paired workshops of two hours each – one per fortnight. Contact time remains the same – 28 hours. The two hour workshops, one per fortnight, are led by two tutors and two graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) all in the lecture theatre together. Tutors therefore will be required for just 10 hours in workshops, or potentially 20 if we run workshops every week – still a saving on lecturer time.

Any ‘saved’ lecture time can be spent offering tutorial time when formative assessments are due.

The workshops themselves should be based on very specific readings supported by two questions for each reading. All students should prepare group work of answers to the questions in max. 2 PowerPoint slides or poster presentations. In the workshop the tutor or GTA visits all groups to inspect and comment on their work. The best examples may be selected for ‘presentation’ to the entire cohort.

The assessment is also planned for change, from a 3000 word essay (in reality usually 3,300 words). We envisage setting six questions from which students should answer three, each 800 words, fully referenced and essay standard. In this way we expect students to demonstrate learning and critical analysis from across the module content.

In this conference discussion, it would be good to get comment and feedback and indeed alternative suggestions that might be used or incorporated into the running of this module.

**Accentuating the positive: student contributions to module content**

As a postscript – I would hope to preserve in the module an exercise that has been running for five years in which individuals or groups are invited to deliver a 15 minute presentation answering the following question: Describe the impact of contemporary economic globalisation on a developing country of your choice.

This has been a hugely successful non-assessed component of the module, a voluntary contribution, providing a content resource to the module VLE consisting of presentations, associated reading texts and reading lists on some 20 different countries (Sweeney, n.d). This student-focused learning has no doubt helped to bring very positive student evaluations for the module, and enhancing the learner experience.

**References**

Baylis, J, Smith, S. & Owens, P. (Eds.) (2016) Globalization of World Politics Oxford: OUP

Gray, J. (2009) False Dawn: the delusions of global capitalism Cambridge: Polity

Karaibrahimoglu, Y.Z *et al*. (2010) ‘Corporate social responsibility in times of financial crisis’ *African Journal of Business Management* 4(4) 382-9

Klein, N. (2007) The Shock Doctrine London: Penguin Allen Lane

Legrain, P. (2002) Open World: The Truth about Globalisation London: Abacus

Mason, P. (2010) Meltdown: The end of the age of greed. Verso.

Rasche, A. et al (eds.) Corporate Social Responsibility: Strategy, Communication, Governance. Cambridge: CUP.

Sweeney, S. (n.d., forthcoming) ‘Student Engagement: Developing Key Skills and Encouraging Learner Contributions to Module Resources’. TBC.

Woods, N. (2014) International Political Economy in an Age of Globalization pp.243-257 in J.Baylis, S.Smith and P.Owens (eds) Globalization of World Politics Oxford: OUP.