

Embedding Transferable Skills and Enhancing Student Learning in a Political Science Research Methods Module: Evidence from the United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT U.K. government policy is placing a heavy emphasis on “essential” and “employability” skills in an effort to help individuals cope with changing social and economic circumstances. Delivery of these skills falls to a range of education providers. This is a particular difficulty for university lecturers who teach non-vocational students who are increasingly concerned about their ability to compete in the job market after graduation. Transferable skills are therefore a key issue in student learning and support in U.K. political science, as well as other disciplines. Through assessment of one U.K.-based political science research methods module, this article suggests effective group-based ways of embedding such skills for political science students in a way that puts the student, and not the teacher, at the center of the learning process. These ideas are confirmed by survey evidence. In particular, student group research projects underline the idea that instructors should go beyond the classroom to help students apply theory. Importantly for both U.K.- and non-U.K.-based lecturers, the assertion can now also be extended to include transferable skills in addition to learning and applying theory.

Transferable skills have become a key area with which university lecturers in the United Kingdom have recently had to engage comprehensively. Modules are expected to provide students with skills that they can deploy in their future careers. In large part, this process has been driven by government, both in the United Kingdom as a whole and across the United Kingdom’s devolved governments (Department for Employment and Learning [DEL] 2006; Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills [DIUS] 2007; Department for Employment and Training [DET] 2007). Providing transferable skills is seen as a way of both helping individuals compete in a rapidly changing social and economic environment

and helping promote the United Kingdom’s economic competitiveness (DIUS 2007, 3–5). Indeed, one skills strategy highlights a number of key areas for action, including the development of the “essential skills” of increasing numeracy and information technology skills and the “employability skills” of teamwork, problem solving, and flexibility (DEL 2006, 4). However, emphasis on these areas is not just a policy-driven pressure; U.S. experience has shown that students there also demand such transferable skills (Takata and Leiting 1987, 144). While many university modules provide generic skills such as “critical thinking” or “oral and written presentation skills,” other modules more explicitly attempt to deliver transferable skills from which students can benefit in their post-university careers.

This article assesses attempts to deliver transferable skills through student-centered group research and other innovations in one such U.K. undergraduate module called “Skills and Methods in the Study of Politics.” Delivering transferable skills is particularly important when the degree with which the student will

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graduate is non-vocational. Assessing the effectiveness of doing so is also important, because discussion of group-based approaches in the political science education literature have tended to focus on student learning rather than delivering transferable skills. Such questions are often examined in relation to postgraduate research methods, but seldom at the undergraduate level (Thies and Hogan 2005). These issues are important for both U.K. and non-U.K. political science lecturers. The article progresses in two main sections. The first section briefly outlines contextual issues related to teaching skills and methods to politics students. It highlights a number of key developments and initiatives in the 2008–09 iteration of the module and sets out a number of student concerns prior to the beginning of the module. The second part of the article reports the findings of a survey of the 2008–09 student cohort that assessed whether or not the aim of increasing students' levels of confidence with practical research skills had been achieved.

CONTEXT

"Skills and Methods in the Study of Politics" focuses on research methods in political science.¹ It is a compulsory, second-year, core undergraduate module for both students in politics and students following a joint honors program with a politics component. Between 60 and 70 students enroll in this course every year. In 2009, discussed here, the module was team-taught and had two lecturers/tutors, including myself. I took over as module convener in academic year 2007–08, replacing a retiring colleague who had convened and taught the course alongside a number of other colleagues in the previous few years. 2008–09 was therefore the second year that I convened the module.

The module is methodologically pluralist and clearly sets out the uses of both qualitative and quantitative research in, for instance, challenging political assertions and testing theories and assumptions about how politics operates. Most important, and with the U.K. government's skills agenda for higher education in mind (see, e.g., DEL 2006; DET 2007; DIUS 2007), the module is deliberately cast as a way to provide a range of transferable research skills attractive to both public and private sector employers. As Mason (2002) pithily indicates, teaching transferable skills raises the question of "how to teach the tools of an uncertain trade for use on an unknown job." In line with the most directly applicable skills strategy (DEL 2006, 4), the key learning outcomes for the module involve achieving intellectual skills such as critical thinking, data analysis, numeracy, teamwork, and problem solving.

To ensure constructive alignment between these aims and learning outcomes, the module outcomes related to skills are achieved through a central element of assessment. Students work on a group research project, worth 35% of their total grade, in which they are asked to use the methods outlined in lectures and tutorials to research a particular issue related to politics or policy. This project has two key components: designing and undertaking the actual research (25%) and presenting the findings to an audience of peers and experienced political researchers (10%).² The module handbook explicitly outlines the research project as the type of project on which public or private sector employers—such as the U.K. civil service—might expect graduates to work. Groups are given set questions to research. In 2009, research areas included students' interest in politics, public attitudes toward environmental policy, attitudes toward media coverage of politics, and students' attitudes toward data protection policy. Ten groups of six to seven students were formed and supervised by the two module

lecturers. Although students received advice when necessary, each group was solely responsible for the research design applied to the problem at hand. This format approximates the research process in the way that Hubbell (1994) and Takata and Leiting (1987) suggest is vital for student learning. Under this approach, students gain basic knowledge of a subject through traditional lectures and then progress to become critical, higher level thinkers able to analyze evidence; synthesize, create, and evaluate ideas and content; and apply and reflect upon different methods. In other words, this process leads students through the various levels of Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives (Bloom 1956; Dymoke 2008). Such an approach has previously been successfully used in the political science classroom (Gregory, Mattern, and Mitchell 2001), while an emphasis on skills has separately been shown to be effective in cementing learning about research methods in cognate disciplines (Levine et al. 1980).

Research methods modules are often difficult to teach, with students perceiving a range of problems such as the difficulty of the modules, the language and practice of research, and superficial teaching that is either not specific to the discipline or teacher-rather than student-centered (Bridges et al. 1998; Buchler 2009; Halfacre et al. 2004; Murtonen and Lehtinen 2003). Hubbell (1994) also encountered challenges because of the compulsory nature of the module and the fact that, due to the nature of its content, it was unlikely that students would sign up for it as an optional module. Qualitative discussion with students in two early tutorial groups highlighted a number of further concerns about adopting a module introducing methodological approaches to politics with which students were unfamiliar. These concerns included:

- Students' general level of skills
- Students' ability to follow the statistical and quantitative elements of the module
- The necessity of working with others as a team in the group research project

The module underwent a number of developments in 2008–09 based on both experiences in the previous iteration of the module and the desire to cement the development of a new pathway in methods-based modules in politics. First, to more accurately reflect the skills required in the workplace, the group presentations were made using Microsoft PowerPoint. This approach replaced the more academically oriented poster presentation of previous years. Second, to reflect increasing concern with research ethics in both academic and nonacademic life, student groups were required to apply to the school's research ethics committee for approval of their proposed research design. Third, we sought to address the issue of how quantification and computer work—considered essential skills—could be included in such a research methods module. Too much computer and quantitative work risks deterring those students not comfortable with such approaches, while too little risks providing them with inadequate information and barring their ability to carry out projects successfully (Rodgers and Manrique 1992). While students may become aware of the theory of data analysis through lectures, experience in 2007–08 highlighted a lack of computing and hands-on data analysis skills among students. This knowledge gap hampered some students' project execution in 2007–08. The major intervention in 2008–09 was therefore to introduce, at student request, two hands-on data analysis workshops using Microsoft Excel to provide basic

Table 1

Attitudes toward Data Workshops, by Percentage ($N = 31$)

STATEMENT	STRONGLY DISAGREE	DISAGREE	NEITHER	AGREE	STRONGLY AGREE
Workshops provided skills that I did not have	7	10	16	45	23
Workshops provided useful data analysis skills in general	—	—	16	48	36
Workshops useful for gaining experience of political research	—	—	13	48	39
Workshops enabled easier analysis of data for group project	—	10	13	48	29
Workshops have given me more confidence in analyzing quantitative data	—	10	23	42	26

hands-on quantitative skills. This aspect of the class was explicitly linked to the provision of key skills in the group research project. Such a basic quantitative provision echoes the practice of others who have adopted a similar group research-based approach to learning (Gregory, Mattern, and Mitchell 2001, 120–22).

Finally, “Skills and Methods” is currently being used as the base module in an effort to generate a political science research methods pathway. This path would lead students to complete a further in-depth quantitative methods module and an individual quantitative research project in their final undergraduate year. While I hope that students will want to take these courses after their first direct experience with a methods module, students are nevertheless also given a brief introduction to the subsequent quantitative module, “Making Politics Count” by the module convener.

There are therefore a number of issues related to student learning and support that are important for the “Skills and Methods” module to assess. To what extent did the data workshops, group research project, and the module overall either make students feel more comfortable with the essential and employability skills outlined previously? And to what extent has the module been successful in encouraging students to follow a skills-based pathway in their study of politics?

SURVEY RESULTS: DID THE MODULE ACHIEVE ITS SKILLS AND LEARNING AIMS?

To provide evidence on whether or not the module achieved its aims as a result of these 2008–09 developments, I carried out a survey of the 2009 student cohort. To maximize responses, questionnaires were circulated in class after one of the group research project presentation sessions. The survey had a response rate of 53% ($N = 70$). This number unfortunately reflects declining attendance toward the end of the module, but it is nevertheless acceptable for such research.³ Because of the requirement to obtain ethical approval for their own research projects, students were fully aware of ethical considerations. They were, however, informed that participation in the survey was voluntary, given an explanation for the conduct of the research, and assured that no individuals could be identified from the responses. Completion of the questionnaire was considered an expression of informed consent. All data were rounded to the nearest whole number because of the small number of respondents.

Students had a range of issues about which they were concerned at the beginning of the module. Findings from qualitative discussions with two early tutorial groups were tested by the survey. In terms of skills, 46% reported concern about the level of

skills they had, although 38% felt that they had enough skills to compete in the job market. In terms of statistical concerns and group work, results essentially confirmed the sentiments expressed in the qualitative discussions held with tutorial groups at the start of the course: 45% indicated that they were worried about working with others in the group research project, while 54% indicated that they were worried about being able to follow the statistical and quantitative elements of the module.

As noted earlier, the major innovation in 2008–09 was the introduction of two data analysis workshops of two-hours duration each. The first workshop introduced hands-on data analysis, including data input, and univariate analysis up to and including the various measures of central tendency, such as establishing the mean on an interval-level variable. The second workshop progressed to examine bivariate cross-tabulations of data and the presentation of data in graphical format. At each workshop, students were presented with a comprehensive workbook and guide to analyzing data using Microsoft Excel. In all, 81% of respondents attended the data workshops. Table 1 suggests that the data workshops were relatively successful in achieving their aims. More than two-thirds of respondents indicated that these workshops provided skills that the students did not already have, and more than four-fifths indicated that the workshops provided useful data analysis skills and were useful for gaining experience in political research. Importantly, over three-quarters of respondents indicated that the workshops enabled easier analysis of the data collected in their projects, and more than two-thirds indicated that their confidence in analyzing quantitative data had increased. Responses also indicated that the most useful workshop was the second workshop on bivariate analysis and graphs.

Table 2 reports the extent to which students felt that the group research project achieved its aims in relation to providing transferable skills that would likely be of use in future employment. On the whole, it can be argued that the group research project did achieve these objectives. Virtually all respondents agreed that the project was useful in providing direct experience of the political research process. Almost three-quarters indicated that the project had provided skills likely to be useful when searching for employment. The presentation exercise was also perceived as helpful: 87% agreed that this exercise provided useful presentation skills experience. To the extent that these achievements are clouded, just over half of the respondents agreed that the project provided skills that the student did not already have.

Questions about the group research project also investigated the learning experience of students in an attempt to tap into whether such an approach had improved their understanding of

Table 2

Attitudes toward Group Research Project and Skills, by Percentage (N = 37)

STATEMENT	STRONGLY DISAGREE	DISAGREE	NEITHER	AGREE	STRONGLY AGREE
The group research project provided skills that I did not previously have	3	16	30	43	8
The group research project was useful to gain direct experience of undertaking political research	—	—	3	65	32
The group research project has provided skills that will be useful in searching for employment	—	5	22	60	14
The group presentation exercise was helpful in providing presentation skills experience	—	3	11	65	22

Table 3

Attitudes toward Group Research Project and Student Learning Experience, by Percentage (N = 37)

STATEMENT	STRONGLY DISAGREE	DISAGREE	NEITHER	AGREE	STRONGLY AGREE
The group research project has helped me better understand how political research is conducted	—	3	11	65	22
I enjoyed being involved in actually designing and undertaking political research	—	5	11	70	14
Our group worked well together	8	14	16	38	24

the research process, thereby helping them become critical and high-level thinkers in relation to research skills (Bloom 1956; Dymoke 2008; Hubbell 1994). Table 3 suggests that this aim was largely achieved. Eighty-seven percent agreed that the group research project had helped them to better understand the political research process. Moreover, students seemed to welcome this challenge, with almost 85% indicating that they enjoyed their involvement in designing and conducting a political research project. Race’s (2007) work points to the importance of student motivation in their transformation to higher level learners. Intrinsic motivations play a key role in this process (Light and Cox 2001, 50). One such intrinsic motivation may be enjoyment. Race, for instance, points to the “natural joy of learning” (2007, 16). That such a high proportion of respondents indicated their enjoyment of the process of designing and undertaking research is indicative of at least one step on the way to forming the critical learners that the module aimed to create.

This is not, however, to say that all went well with the groups. A small proportion of students indicated problems with their group working well together, which some students also reported during the module. Nevertheless, working in teams is a standard practice in most employment situations, and problems with “freeriding” are also not uncommon. Advised by their supervisors, groups were able to work well together by the end of the module. This suggests that the groups effectively applied problem solving to the necessary interpersonal teamwork skills and echoes the steadily increasing degree of group cohesion that Takata and Leiting observed in their work on small group learning with sociology students (1987, 148).

By the end of the module, I hoped that students would have progressed in terms of developing the essential and employability skills. Students clearly felt that such a progression did take place. Indeed, 75% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement

that the module provided skills that would improve career prospects, and 86% agreed that their overall level of skills had improved. Importantly, 83% agreed that the module had given them more confidence in understanding and following statistical and quantitative elements of political research. Similarly, 67% agreed that they would now feel more confident about working with other people on group projects.

In addition to the group project and data workshops, I also conducted teaching through the more traditional means of lectures and tutorials. Which elements of teaching were most effective in providing students with transferable skills? The experience of other political science group projects would suggest that the group-based approach is the most highly effective strategy for learning (Gregory, Mattern, and Mitchell 2001; Halfacre et al. 2004). Students were therefore asked to rate each element of teaching on a five-point Likert scale. The pattern of responses confirms the effectiveness of the group project in delivering skills-based learning, as well as the effectiveness of the new data workshops in delivering skills students could use on their projects. Indeed, 68% indicated that the group project had a positive effect in providing them with skills, and 62% indicated that the data workshops had a similarly positive effect. Despite providing the theoretical basis for these transferable research skills, more traditional methods of teaching fared less well. Although 59% thought tutorials had a positive effect in delivering skills, this number dropped to just 51% when assessing the effectiveness of lectures in delivering transferable research skills.

The effectiveness of the group project in embedding skills was supported by the group presentations of student research project findings. The module lecturers who supervised the groups assessed each presentation rigorously according to a set range of criteria that have now been used for two years. The presentations were also observed by an experienced information services lecturer who

had assisted in delivering the data workshops. Students clearly put a lot of effort into these projects—most likely more than they do on the average undergraduate politics module. Significantly, embedding skills through a student-centered group research project did not lead to a decline in academic standards. Both examiners were very impressed by the group presentations, and the external examiner, who ensures quality, pointed to the “consistently high-quality” presentations and “imaginative and effective” use of PowerPoint to present research findings in his report. No research presentation achieved less than 75%, while grades for the PowerPoint documents submitted for assessment ranged between 65% and 75%, placing all ten groups at the top end of the marking scale, with most falling in the high 2:1 category of mark used in the U.K. system.

The final question examined was the extent to which students are likely to follow further research methods-based modules in their future pathway. Thirty percent of respondents indicated that they intended to take the quantitative “Making Politics Count” module. Reasons for doing so underlined the efficacy of the group research project in developing quantitative skills and emphasizing the importance of skills for employment, with the former being the most-often cited reason (57%) and the latter the second-most-cited reason (38%). Increasing take-up of such skills-based module options among non-vocational political science students is therefore likely to require underlining the importance of skills at regular intervals while at the same time continuing to provide student-centered research experience that allows students to see the benefits of such modules and approaches for themselves.

CONCLUSION

U.K. government policy is currently placing a heavy emphasis on “essential” and “employability” skills in an effort to help individuals cope with changing social and economic circumstances. Delivery of these skills falls to a range of education providers, including those in higher education. However, emphasizing the importance of skills is a particular difficulty for university lecturers who teach non-vocational students increasingly concerned about their ability to compete in the job market after graduation. Transferable skills are therefore a key issue in student learning and support in the field of political science in the United Kingdom. This article suggests effective group-based ways of embedding such skills for political science students in a way that puts the student and not the teacher at the center of the learning process. These ideas are confirmed by survey evidence. Indeed, the new innovation of a data analysis workshop appears to have been effective in achieving its aims. In particular, the group research project has underlined Halfacre et al.’s assertion that “to provide [political science] students a better opportunity to understand and apply theory, instructors must take learning beyond the normal confines of the classroom” (2004, 297). Importantly for both U.K.- and non-U.K.-based lecturers, this assertion can now also be extended to include transferable skills, as well as learning and applying theory. Although not all political science modules may be amenable to such an approach, some certainly will be. This approach not only

benefits students in the longer term, but may also help policymakers see the benefits of non-vocational courses in delivering a skills-based policy agenda. ■

NOTES

I would like to thank Sydney Elliott, who co-taught the module with me in 2008 and 2009, and Yvonne Galligan, who initially highlighted concerns with hands-on data skills.

1. This course will henceforth be referred to as “Skills and Methods.”
2. The remainder of the student grade is drawn from individual work in the form of an essay (55%) and a tutorial assessment grade (10%).
3. Gregory, Mattern, and Mitchell’s (2001) study on group-based research learning was based on 31 students, Takata and Leiting’s (1987) project was based on 14 students, and Halfacre et al.’s (2004) study was based on a small team of six students.

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