Student Input into Teaching Materials

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STEPHEN MCGLINCHEY, MAR 26 2015

Each year, lecturers receive a gamut of feedback from students. This typically arrives in the form of questionnaires, regular feedback in class, complaints, requests and so on. Also, there's feedback that is discerned from a lecturer getting a pulse from a room as they teach and seeing what is sinking in and what is not – and what seems stimulating and what seems boring. So, nothing new here. All part of the daily life of the lecturer, and a good thing too.

Last year, I tried something new (at least to me). In my year two undergraduate module,*US Foreign Policy: From Cold War to Terror War*, I allowed the students to independently determine (or 'choose') one part of the module's content. I figured this was a nice way to give the students some control, but also to get a different kind of feedback over how I selected/prioritised certain facets of US foreign policy and whether those were in need of diversifying.

The format is as follows: The module is based on a range of case studies that contribute to a building analysis of the US and its role in the world. We examine case ranging from the 1940s (the development of containment policy) right through to the present day (the war with ISIS). So, I felt that this approach was selective on purpose, and would invite a wide range of issues/cases that I had 'left out' to be incorporated. So I was faced with two choices:

- Should I determine a shortlist of potential approved topics that the students could choose from by popular vote? These would be cases that I had elected not to cover in the module, but that were helpful in underlining/expanding the key arcs of the module.
- Should I leave it completely open to the students to shortlist their own topics, then organically arrange a vote?

In the end, I went for the second option. I allowed the students to develop a long list of topics all by themselves. Then after receiving 9 topics I eliminated two (transparently via discussion) that were too off centre, and we consolidated another couple and made a shortlist of 6. Then, the students voted and the topic with the highest votes won.

Trying something new was not easy, but it worked out (phew!). The students chose excellent topics for the shortlist, and the winning topic was the impact of the Space Race on US Cold War politics. Not only was this an interesting angle I'd never thought of as a distinct case study – I also thoroughly enjoyed writing and research the materials on this which comprised of a lecture, a workshop, and a corresponding exam question. So, I learned something new and the case worked out so well that I built it into the module proper for the following year. A victory for trusting the student voice!

As we all know, things that work one year don't always work the year after. There are so many variables with each cohort. However, with last year's success in mind, I followed the same procedure this year in inviting the students to choose a case. Once again they shortlisted excellent topics and ultimately chose the US approach to Militant Islam in the Middle East. And, once again it fed well into helping put a new angle on several themes of the module – and in helping me design and deliver content and assessments on an issue that I'd shied away from engaging with directly thus far.

In sum, trusting the student voice (with a tiny bit of steering so they don't end up choosing a topic beset with pitfalls like the JFK assassination or the Roswell cover up!) has paid off in multiple ways for me, and hopefully for them too. I

plan to do this as a fixture on this module now with two good experiences to draw upon, and while it may not suit every module I will keep the option in mind to roll into other courses that I teach.

About the author:

Dr Stephen McGlinchey is the Editor-in-Chief and Publisher of E-International Relations and Senior Lecturer of International Relations at UWE Bristol. His publications include *Foundations of International Relations* (Bloomsbury 2022), *International Relations* (2017), *International Relations Theory* (2017) and *US Arms Policies Towards the Shah's Iran* (Routledge 2021, 2014). You can find him on twitter @mcglincheyst or Linkedin.