

The EU Challenge: Teaching an Institution in Crisis

Written by Jocelyn Mawdsley

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JOCELYN MAWDSLEY, MAR 10 2016

I doubt I'm the only lecturer of EU politics to look at colleagues teaching political theory with a certain degree of envy these days. It might have been a wiser choice, after all, to have become an expert on Kant, rather than the EU. While the multiple crises hitting the EU have certainly dealt a blow to the perennial student complaint that the EU is boring, even keeping on top of everything that is happening ourselves, let alone finding good ways to teach an institution in crisis to our students, is taxing. There are multiple practical challenges: the out-of-date lecture notes need updating, that article that seemed so good last year now feels out of date, and the (usually great) textbooks just cannot keep up with the speed of the changes. Nevertheless, crisis and the need to adapt our EU teaching also brings opportunities.

Perhaps one such opportunity is that explaining both the multiple crises and the EU's flawed responses to them, demands a more critical examination of what the EU has become, than the established menu of integration theories, institutions and policies required. Owen Parker has argued for instance that teaching 'crisis EU' opens up space to include more critical approaches to theorising the EU's development alongside the traditional canon. Here on E-IR, Peter Vale has also asked whether the teaching of EU politics has traditionally lacked sufficient critical interrogation of the EU. The crises are also useful ways of helping students understand the practical implications of some difficult questions. What does the refugee crisis tell us about Europeanisation for example? How does the Greek sovereign debt crisis help us understand how concepts like democracy and citizenship work at the European level?

As Heidi Maurer and I have argued elsewhere, European Studies has always lent itself to innovative assessments that can help strengthen students' employability skills as well testing their understanding of key concepts. The crises are offering fantastic case studies for Council simulations and other similar activities that students are far more likely to identify with, as the real life negotiations, and their policy consequences, play out across our media. At Newcastle where our students prepare group briefing papers on an issue currently facing the European Council, students have commented that the constantly changing situation has given them some insight into what it would be like to be an official dealing with those agendas. Perhaps teaching and assessing 'crisis EU' might make the sometimes dry content of EU politics seem more immediate and less academic to our students?

For those of us based in the UK, teaching the EU this year has felt particularly odd because of one self-inflicted crisis for the UK and the EU – the spectre of Brexit. For myself, knowing that by the time I next teach my second year EU politics module, the UK may have voted for Brexit has been a strange feeling. I've been aware of the British students considering which way they might vote – indeed at various moments, tensions between those on each side of the argument have been obvious. As Helen Drake argued on the LSE Brexit blog, particularly for those of us who are British citizens, the potential consequences of a Brexit for both British universities and the teaching of and research on the EU are unclear. It would certainly mean another rewrite of the lecture notes! While it would be academically rather interesting to see how an invocation of article 50 might work (Steve Peers looks at some of the possible issues), I must confess to hoping that this is one EU crisis that I will not need to be teaching next year.

About the author:

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