The state of the profession: Overview of teaching, assessment and professional development praxis in Ireland's politics departments

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Background

The global discourse on higher education advocates excellent learning experiences for students. Such excellence is largely dependent on the quality of teaching and requires the promotion of continuing professional development as well as the adoption of new teaching and assessment techniques.

A scholarship of teaching and learning in Irish political science has emerged but to date no single one study has captured the overall practice of teaching and assessment amongst political science faculty across the island. A recent study addresses this gap by providing evidence on teaching tools, assessment techniques and professional development in Ireland's politics departments (Harris and Quinn, 2015). It also examines the extent to which contextual issues affect the teaching of political science in Ireland through questions on class sizes, budgetary cuts and pedagogical autonomy.

The findings presented draw on a 2014 survey which generated usable responses from 43 faculty members representing the full gamut of professional, institutional, generational, disciplinary, and gender differences.

Which are the most used teaching techniques?

In keeping with other disciplines in the social sciences, the traditional lecture is seen as part of political science's 'signature pedagogy'. Recently greater emphasis has been placed on the use of active learning approaches such as simulations, problem based learning, experiential learning etc. that give students the opportunity to actively engage with academic material. Also there has been greater promotion of the use of ICT. Consequently, we anticipated that faculty would use a wide range of teaching and assessment techniques in their classrooms and through the survey asked colleagues questions about the techniques. Participants were also asked about their professional development activities. We expected that those who participated in such activities would be more likely to use active learning teaching techniques and a diversity of assessment tools.

Our study found that the lecture is still the most popular teaching technique used in the undergraduate classroom (Table 1). Class size and teaching loads influence the use of lectures as a teaching tool with those relying heavily on lectures tending to teach larger groups. There are strong differences between the use of lectures with undergraduate and postgraduate students. Surprisingly, those who use lectures 80 per cent of the time in their postgraduate teaching are more likely (60 per cent) to have completed an accredited course on teaching and learning (Harris and Quinn, 2015)

Virtual learning environments (VLEs) are the most popular ICT-based teaching technique. Few respondents frequently use podcasts (10 per cent). Interestingly, those with heavier teaching loads (more than 150 hours) were more likely to use active learning techniques such as PBL, role playing/simulation and scenarios. There were also experience and gender differences. Those with 11-20 years' experience were more likely to use the forms of active learning discussed. Women were more likely than men to rely heavily on lectures with their students but they were also more likely than their male colleagues to use active teaching techniques such as PBL, simulations and service learning.

Table 1. Teaching tools in undergraduate and postgraduate teaching 2014.

Teaching tool	Undergraduate teaching				Postgraduate teaching			
	Fre-quently	Occas-ionally	Rarely	Never	Fre-quently	Occas-ionally	Rarely	Never
Lectures	98	0	2	0	*59	17	15	10
Virtual learning environment	79	10	7	5	*73	10	7	10
Tutorials	55	14	14	17	*22	15	12	52
Seminars	*46	29	10	15	*61	24	2	12
Group Presentations	33	33	10	24	33	21	17	29
Problem-based learning activities	19	24	26	31	*15	20	24	41
Role playing/simulations	10	24	26	40	12	10	26	52
Workshops	10	21	31	38	**10	30	13	48
Case Studies	*17	32	32	20	*37	24	17	22
Podcasts	10	7	19	64	7	9	16	67
One to one meetings	7	34	31	29	24	40	7	29
On-line discussions/blogs	7	29	29	36	7	26	21	45
Guest Speakers	5	50	21	24	12	43	14	31
Service learning/practicum	5	12	10	74	***3	5	13	79

Note. All figures are percentages; based on 42 respondents.
*one non-respondent **two non-respondents *** three non-respondents.

Source (Harris and Quinn, 2015)

What assessment techniques are common?

The traditional essay is the most frequently used form of assessment. The next most frequently used strategies were presentations and reviews at both levels. Use of online discussions or blog posts as assessment tools was surprisingly low with 60 per cent of those teaching undergraduates and 63 per cent of those teaching postgraduate classes never using these assessment tools. Experience and gender affected the choice of assessment tools. Those with between 6 and 20 years' teaching experience used a wider range of assessment strategies regardless of the extent of their professional development. Female faculty use a wider range of assessment tools than their male colleagues at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Table 2 portrays a general sense of the assessments used at various levels

Table 2. Assessment tools in undergraduate and postgraduate teaching 2014.

Assessment tool	Undergraduate teaching				Postgraduate teaching			
	Fre-quently	Occas-ionally	Rarely	Never	Fre-quently	Occas-ionally	Rarely	Never
Essay	35	6	1	0	34	2	1	3
Presentations	19	12	3	8	24	10	3	3
Reviews	*9	11	7	15	15	6	5	13
Learning journals	*6	5	7	24	6	5	4	24
Online quizzes	3	4	9	25	0	0	6	34
Online discussions	1	8	8	25	0	5	10	25
Reports	5	10	7	20	5	9	4	21
Group Projects	*8	10	11	13	7	9	9	15
Orals	0	8	3	31	2	2	3	32
Posters	1	4	6	32	2	1	4	33
Quizzes/Tests	2	7	11	22	0	2	6	34
Others	*5	5	1	17	4	4	3	15

Note. All figures are percentages; based on 42 respondents.
*three non-respondents **fourteen non-respondents .

Source (Harris and Quinn, 2015)

Contextual Issues

All respondents enjoy pedagogical autonomy, that is they make the decisions about the choice of tools and techniques they use. The questions about budgets, student numbers

and student diversity elicited varying responses. Almost half of the female but only over a quarter of the male respondents stated that changes in these spheres affected their choice of teaching and assessment tools.

Despite austerity measures, only 56 per cent indicated that teaching loads had increased. Respondents are experiencing greater diversity of ability among students (56 per cent) which affects teaching decisions, as highlighted in the following comment: *'material for tutorials needs to be simpler. Additional materials for more capable students made optional. More material on Blackboard and Facebook. At postgrad [level this] means providing some basic introductions; also sample reviews and presentations so that students can see the level or work expected'.*

Conclusions

The research revealed a mix of conventional and modern teaching and assessment techniques. The traditional lecture and essay are most frequently used in undergraduate classrooms. Active learning approaches are used less frequently but there is an evident willingness to adopt such approaches and to use them on an occasional basis. The papers presented by colleagues showcase the range of innovative methods used. Interestingly, neither class size nor accredited professional development seems to influence the decision to use active methods.

Finally and significantly, professional development is actively embraced by political science faculty in Ireland (90% have engaged in some form of professional development and 44% have completed accredited training). This demonstrates that teaching matters in Ireland's political science community and suggests a strong commitment to excellence in teaching in an educational landscape where cutbacks and constraints have become the norm.

Reference:

Harris, Clodagh, and Quinn, Brid (2015) "Tools, techniques and training in the teaching of politics in Ireland", *Irish Political Studies* 30 (2).