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Teaching less popular modules, putting ideas into practice

Philip Warwick
Durham University Business School
Durham University, UK
philip.warwick@durham.ac.uk

Abstract

Most programmes contain one or two modules that are very unpopular with students. These 'problem subjects' are often core modules considered by academics to provide important foundation knowledge, for example statistics and research methods modules or subjects requiring a different knowledge base to the rest of the programme. This paper critically reflects on our experience with a slightly different type of problem subject, Public Sector Management, an optional module that was so unpopular with students that it had not run for several years. Ideas and best practice guidance from teaching and learning literature (in particular Warwick & Ottewill 2004, and Fallows & Ahmet 1999) were reconsidered in this new context with the ideas feeding into a significant process of module redesign. In the redesigned module, more emphasis is placed on demonstrating the relevance of the teaching material and helping the students to experience the subject rather than simply studying it. Further, we demonstrate value in identifying an aspect of the problem subject that will be more appealing to students than the previous offering; in this case the opportunity to look at issues through a management consultancy lens. The article argues for the importance of reconsidering problem subjects as key challenges that can act as a spur to innovation in the design and delivery of these modules.

Keywords: Problem subject, public sector management, redesign, engagement, innovation

Introduction

It is very likely that at some point in our academic careers, most of us are going to be asked to teach a module that is known to be unpopular with students or thought to be difficult by our colleagues. Even if we escape that fate, we may be asked to advise someone who is teaching such a module. We suggest that the redesign and delivery of such problem subjects to secure student engagement and satisfaction is an ongoing issue requiring substantial innovation.

In 2015-16, we worked to revitalise a module in public sector management which, as a result of its unpopularity, fell into the category of difficult to teach modules. We explain why we felt the need to revisit earlier work on problem subjects and how we set about redesigning the dormant and unpopular module. Our analysis and self-reflection therefore focuses upon how this process of revitalisation spurred innovation in the redesign and delivery of the module and of our personal teaching practice. In the conclusions we consider the outcome of our resigned module and discuss the wider implications of engagement with perceived problem modules.

Problem subjects

There are a range of ways of defining and thinking about difficult to teach, unpopular subjects. Arnold and Truran (1999), refer to *unpopular* modules, Fallows and Ahmet (1999 p17) refer to subjects where students' *learning interests lie elsewhere*, while Cole (2002) writes about modules where students are *less engaged* because they think the subject is not related to their career aims. Often, the discussion is of compulsory or core modules that impart foundation knowledge on which students will later build. Academics generally think these modules are more important educational building blocks than do their students (A'Brook & Weyers, 1996; Johnson & Olekalns, 2002). Warwick and Ottewill (2004) synthesised several of these ideas and used the umbrella term, *problem subject*, to cover the combination of circumstances in which a module may be difficult to teach.

The experiences referred to in Warwick and Ottewill (2004) relate to a management module for student nurses, which was redesigned to overcome some of the problem subject issues. The management module had been based on what the nursing education funding body thought nurses needed to know about health service management, but it was taught it in a way that might have been suitable for a group of students who had chosen to study health management. Perhaps because the student nurses had a very different view of management to aspiring managers, the module was deeply unpopular. Other modules referred to in Warwick and Ottewill (2004) included: statistics, quantitative methods and research methods; communication skills for engineers and anything with study skills in the title. Of course, what might constitute a problem subject is likely to vary over time and even between institutions or cohorts of students. What we are interested in here is how the characteristics common to such modules act as a spur to innovation in the redesign and delivery of teaching.

Characteristics of Problem Subjects

Problematic modules share some characteristics: they often have different epistemological frames of reference to other subjects being studied (e.g. statistics for social scientists); students studying them may have weak or non-existent foundations of knowledge on which to build (e.g. research methods) or they may feel they have insufficient time to do justice to the subject matter. Problem modules can also be studied by large groups of students from diverse backgrounds with varied reasons for taking the module, for example some first year foundation modules in a range of subjects (Fallows & Ahmet, 1999). Last, and perhaps most importantly, there are occasions when students dismiss the content of a problem subject as irrelevant. This may be because it is not related to their career aims (Coles, 2002) or they cannot see how it fits with other elements of the curriculum (e.g. a management module for nurses). Consequently, students may take little interest in the subject(s) and may resent the time spent away from modules they perceive to be closer to their chosen subject areas (Johnson & Olekalns, 2002).

As these examples illustrate, problem subjects are by no means confined to a small number of disciplines. They can be found throughout the full array of higher education courses and programmes.The public sector management module referred to in this

paper was not a classic *problem subject*; it was not a compulsory core module, instead it was an option that did not run for four years because persistently low numbers had led to the option being withdrawn.

As business school faculty members with previous careers in the public sector, we felt it that it was important that the Business and Management degree programme covered public sector management issues for a number of reasons. Firstly, the public sector (as measured by government spending) accounts for around 44 percent of GDP in the UK and more than 50 percent of GDP in eight European Union countries (The Economist, 2015). We felt that the Business and Management programme should contain a module that covered issues specific to this important sector. Secondly, we were aware that the public sector employs around 20 percent of UK graduate leavers (High Flyers, 2016). Thirdly, many Business School graduates are keen to work in consultancy, accountancy and the professional services sector; around 19 percent of the total consultancy business in Europe and up to 50 percent in North America derives from public sector contracts (O'Mahony & Calvert, 2013). Therefore, in the knowledge that many of our graduates will either secure employment in the public sector or spend a significant amount of time working on contracts with public sector organisations, we felt they should have the opportunity to know about the public sector before they encountered it in their future employment. The issue we faced was how to make a module on public sector management more appealing and more clearly relevant to an undergraduate audience, many of whom hold a very negative perception of the sector and have little interest in studying public sector management issues.

The student nurses' management module referred to in Warwick and Ottewill (2004) was redesigned to challenge preconceptions of the subject, emphasising relevance, drawing on the student nurses' own experiences during their nursing placements and designing activities that enabled the students to experience management dilemmas rather than simply studying them. The authors report that, prior to redesign 63 per cent of the students completing end of module evaluations thought that the module was only moderately or not at all useful. Following the redesign the module was very well received, 75 per cent thought that it was useful or very useful (Warwick & Ottewill, 2004 pp343-344). We hoped that we could achieve a similar turnaround with the Public Sector Management module in 2015-16; if not with that level of success, to at least

attract sufficient students to ensure that the subject is part of our degree programme. The rest of the paper goes on to explain what we did and why we did it.

What did we do?

We drew inspiration for the revisions to the module from several sources, in particular best practice in teaching difficult and unpopular subjects (Fallows & Ahmet, 1999) and the broader discussion of the utility of public administration (Fenwick & McMillan, 2014). Fenwick and McMillan refer to public administration as unfashionable and not sufficiently sexy as a subject area to attract undergraduate students. They posed the question, why would an undergraduate invest a significant sum of money on tuition fees to study a subject of very uncertain benefit (Fenwick & McMillan, 2014 p200)? Finally we noted the tongue in cheek but pertinent advice of our colleagues on the undergraduate programme committee, namely why not change the name of the module? Inspired by the need to make the module as relevant as possible to our students we set about designing a new module called *Consulting in the Public Sector*, determined to make the module as engaging as possible for our undergraduate students. We aimed to demonstrate what was interesting and valuable about the material at every opportunity.

In the redesigned module we were keen to ensure that we incorporated some of the ideas referred to above. First we needed to challenge the preconceived notions of irrelevance and attempted this by demonstrating issues with multiple case study examples. This developed the relevance and application of the module content whilst also demonstrating its importance. The case studies used related to institutions that had shaped the students' lives (e.g. education, healthcare and transport policy) and would continue to do so, as well as drawing out important differences from other types of organisation they had studied in other modules as part of their degree programme.

Second, we aimed to draw on our own as well as the students' own experiences of public sector services. We had both previously worked extensively in public sector roles and were keen to share our understanding of some of the challenges involved in managing in this different context (Stevenson, 2013). Perhaps more importantly, the students opting to study the module were internationally diverse, around half were non-

UK students. This allowed us to highlight the continuing importance of the public sector not just in the UK, but also in a range of countries from the relatively high tax and spend economies, like the Nordic countries, to relatively free market economies, like the US, and the centrality and importance of the state (and state-owned enterprises) in countries such as India and China. This created scope to develop valuable peer learning experiences (Boud, Cohen and Sampson, 2014) as well as opportunities for personal reflection and debate for the students.

Finally, in order to develop the use of management consultancy in the module title, we were keen that students would work on a range of problems in seminar sessions that would simulate a series of consultancy projects. We wanted students to *experience* public sector management issues, rather than simply to *study* them. One of our intended outcomes was that by the end of the module, students would be equipped with some consultancy skills to work with or for the public sector, including team working. For this reason we allocated them to four teams and asked them to perform the practical exercises in their teams.

In making these adjustments and including the group tasks, we hoped to benefit from some of the increased student engagement noted by proponents of enquiry-based learning (Barrett and Moore, 2011). Whilst not adopting a full problem-based approach as advocated by Hmelo-Silver (2004) or Savery (2006) we wanted to introduce real world problems to allow for active exploration of issues rather than passive reception of ideas (Carriger, 2016). Further, we were keen for this to introduce a crucial element of enquiry-based learning (Kahn and O'Rourke, 2005), such that students would explore the topics (and different international contexts) in the more practical context of the seminar tasks.

In the seminars the students were encouraged to think of their teams as consultancy firms. These teams were given a fortnightly consultancy task that was assessed and given a score out of ten, contributing points to a consultancy league table. The teams were asked to write briefing notes, interpret government policy documents, debate international approaches to funding healthcare, provide consultancy advice to a fictitious local government organisation, trade union and emerging economy governments and design ways of securing engagement and public participation in consultation exercises.

This application of understanding encouraged a far deeper engagement with quite dry policy documents and debates than might have been achieved in a more conventional seminar discussion. Further, the aim of the league table was to keep the students engaged with the tasks using some gentle peer group pressure. In designing these activities, we hoped to benefit from what Alford and Brock (2014) identified as a way of teasing out some of the conflicts, dilemmas and paradoxes inherent in the public sector.

The two formal assessment tasks were split between a report based assignment and an exam that picked-up on a range of public sector issues covered by the module. The exam included a pre-seen question which allowed the students to use their research skills to look into an issue not covered by the taught part of the module. In both cases, the assessments continued to encourage students to engage in forms of consultancy, interrogating topics and applying what they had learned whilst developing skills relevant to their employability.

We had hoped for 20 students, in the end seventeen students opted to take the module in 2015-16 and subsequently 25 in 2016-17. Those students who completed the end of module evaluation questionnaire gave the module an 80 per cent approval rating. All those who completed the module in 2015-16 agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, *overall I am satisfied with the quality of the module.* Comments on the evaluations suggested that they liked the practical nature of the assignment and the seminar tasks. Typical comments were: *seminars were fantastic*, *with a different structure to any other module*; and *seminars were fun and engaging*. The least popular element of the programme was the fact that the students were not allowed to choose their own team members. In the words of one evaluation comment it was not as much fun, *having to chivvy and nag people to do the seminar tasks.* We were pleased with this outcome and also took some satisfaction from the assessed work, which was at a very good standard, many of the students demonstrating a deep level of understanding that we believe had been facilitated by engagement with the subject material, particularly in the seminar tasks.

Conclusions

Unpopular, difficult to teach modules are a feature of most academic programmes. In an era where students are increasingly regarded as consumers (Bunce, Baird & Jones, 2016) and where academic colleagues are increasingly rated according to student evaluations (Feldman, 2007) it is tempting for senior educators to dodge unpopular subject areas, leaving the teaching in these areas to newer recruits who have less say over what the teach (Warwick & Ottewill, 2004). We would advocate an alternative approach to problem subject modules, namely that programme teams should take collective responsibility for demonstrating the relevance of the subject material and that senior and experienced members of the team should take the lead role in redesigning and teaching such modules. The approach taken to teaching problem modules should be to emphasise the relevance of the material and, taking a leaf out of enquiry based approaches to learning, real world situations should be used to engender active exploration of the subject material (Carriger, 2016) enabling students to experience the issues, wherever this is possible. We strongly believe that our Business School students were motivated to engage with the material as a result of working on problems and scenarios in a pseudo work type environment, rather than studying issues in a purely academic environment.

With this public sector management module, we decided that we needed to redesign the content to make it as relevant as possible, emphasising its utility to the students and helping them to actively experience the subject rather than sit passively and listen. There is still work to do on this module in the years ahead. Further iterations will, for example, seek to make the module fit together more cohesively. However, we think that, by concentrating on demonstrating the relevance and emphasising the applicability of the subject material, we have succeeded to some extent in reinvigorate this problem module through our redesign and can see that this approach may be useful for others to consider. Those student evaluations that we have received seem to reflect an appreciation of the practical, skills based content of module. We are pleased that our pedagogical innovations in the design of and delivery of this module seems to have been well received by the students who have selected to study it as an optional module.

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