

The House of Commons workshop approach

What did/do you do?

Developed a "House of Commons" style series of workshops for the Stage 3 Planning Theory and Politics course. It is a very political course that allows students to debate philosophical and political issues, from issues around social justice, to issues concerned with the environment and capitalism to more specific debates relating to exclusion, such as racism in the planning process.

Who is involved?

Dr Andrew Law. The aim of this approach was to try and include students who lean towards right-wing political views and who often find Social Science ideas hard to swallow because they view the disciplinary area as being generally left-liberal leaning.

How do you do it?

In week 1, students were asked to use the Political Compass website to understand their own political position. I asked students if they would be willing to share their political positions with the cohort. Those who did not want to share their political positions were asked to come to the front of the workshop session and remain neutral. And those who still had not decided or did not want to declare their position could also come to the front and become neutral commentators (although, importantly, both groups of these non-partisan students could still participate in the workshop discussions and debates). Generally however, most students found they had a political position and each year I have done this, there has often been a good balance of liberals, socialists, Tories, Greens and for the first time this year UKIP-ers (2014/15). In these sessions, my own position is that of Mr/Mrs speaker to let the student's debate with each other as much as possible. That is whilst I tell the students I have a political position, I try and avoid dumping it on the students as much as possible by remaining neutral (I always promise however, to tell them my political position at the end of the course, because they tell me that it is only fair!). However, and importantly, I also remind the students that whilst we are using categories of 'left', 'middle' and 'right' to define our sessions, this does not mean that we fit into nice political boxes; indeed, as the workshop nicely demonstrates, all human subjects have a mix of views that expand beyond neat political positions or categories.

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Teaching and Learning Case Study

2014/15

Dr Andrew Law
Architecture, Planning
and Landscape
(Planning Theory and
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Coherent Curriculum themes:

- Skills and employability
- Student engagement

Other keywords:

Workshops,

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Nevertheless, I have adopted these political categories as an approach for some of the workshops on the course for the reasons I shall now illustrate below. For international students with experience of political systems that do not include, for example, universal suffrage or elected parliaments, I explain to them in very broad terms the differences between political parties.

Why do you do it?

I do this for many reasons.

1) The process of lecturing/teaching social science is often understood to be a non-partisan process and I believe that there is an assumption amongst certain scholars that teaching must also be a 'neutral' process: a neutral process that is understood to be 'professional'.

2) However, as a post-structuralist social scientist, I would claim that such a position is epistemologically dishonest and actually masks the political and cultural make-up of the teacher who is always/already located within political and cultural discourses. Thus, in simple terms, whilst a lecturer might try and hide or bracket their own political position, such an approach is very difficult to do.

3) Moreover, I would even go further to contend that many social science subjects themselves – particularly Sociology, Human Geography and Town planning – already start from left leaning and liberal assumptions that are understood as simple axioms. In this regard, for students who lean towards more right wing perspectives, the arguments of lecturers and social science subjects more generally (particularly those that lead towards the human side of social science such as Sociology and Human Geography) can seem very difficult to swallow indeed.

4) Thus, as I have learnt over the years, students leaning towards a right wing perspective are often quite annoyed by what they see as 'left leaning lecturers' and left wing assumptions that are taken as a given in lectures. Such students have often complained to me also about lecturers who 'seem' to politically rant during sessions and who ignore their own positions; this leads to a form of political exclusion and I have read several feedback statements that complain about the opinionated nature of lecturers - including myself. I am not above this criticism.

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5) In general then, I feel that the social justice and environmental positions of social science academics are not respected by students who lean towards right wing perspectives and who often feel that their own conflicting opinion is not heard or respected in these sessions.

6) I have also found that students leaning towards a right wing perspective are even further entrenched by their sense that they do not have a space to discuss their feelings and ideas.

7) My "House of Commons" approach is inclusive. Whilst I am also a left-liberal leaning social science academic, like many of my colleagues, I feel that I will have more effect in persuading students of the validity of social science perspectives (which often lean towards social justice and environmentally conscious approaches), by including all students in the debate. This of course, does not mean that I hide my own perspective behind some shallow veneer of neutrality, but that I acknowledge very strongly the differences in opinions.

8) In my short career I have noticed that many academics (although not all academics) in the human social sciences do not want to deal with students leaning towards right wing ideas; some teachers have told me over the years that they will often dismiss or ignore students that express right wing ideas or opinions. Whilst I do not condone, offensive opinions in my sessions, I want to include right wing leaning students, and bring their opinions out into classrooms/workshops because I feel that these spaces of debate allow students to see the differences of opinion between people in wider society; moreover such spaces also allow both the students and the lecturer to challenge assuming and/or non-critical approaches.

9) Finally from the position of Town Planning, my workshops also demonstrate that students going into the profession are not of one singular approach. Indeed, the House of Commons workshop demonstrates the differences in opinion between students, and also illustrates the differences of political opinion in the Town Planning Profession. Interestingly, I have surprised my colleagues, (although not all) when I have told them that there are indeed quite a large cohort of young right-wing leaning students that are excited about a career in Town Planning. Indeed, in many respects the profession itself, with its strong statist roots naturally seems like the profession for more left leaning liberal students, but this is certainly changing.

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10) Finally then, I have found that students will respect my own position and the effect it has on the social science approaches I take (because one's own politics is not separate from the social science research process) if I am ultimately inclusive of their own political subjectivity (and even if I do not agree with the student or students in question).

Does it work?

I think it works. I have had the following feedback regarding the "House of Commons" workshops. Students have told me they feel included and that their own view is respected and they have a chance to participate. The students, who lean towards right wing perspectives, in particular feel respected, and understand that even if I do not agree with their views they are nevertheless included in the sessions and that as a University lecturer I am in the first instance a democrat. Again this does not mean, however, that I try to affect some faux-neutrality or faux non-partisan objectivity. Indeed, the students generally get a sense of my own political position, even if I try and mask or bracket it as much as I can. As I am suggesting here, from a post-structuralist perspective, the idea that the lecturer can be ultimately neutral is indeed highly problematic. However, as I have sought to suggest here, whilst I reject a neutral teaching stance, I make it my duty to be as inclusive as possible and to listen to the views of students as much as possible, even if they completely jar with my own perspective. Finally, I have also noticed that international students with experience of political systems that do not include, universal suffrage or elected parliaments, have also found these workshops highly enlightening. Indeed, whilst many of these students are highly aware of what a certain form of western 'democracy' might look like, the workshops allow these students to see a version of 'democracy' in process. Interestingly these students have often told me that the sessions have reinforced and/or challenged why they think the particular version of western democracy that we explore in the sessions works or does not work. In this regard, I believe that sessions allow students (both domestic and international) to experience first-hand a living example of the 'highs' and 'lows' of a certain (albeit) singular notion of 'western' democracy.

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