

## **Using process-based work and self-reflection in a Level 2 undergraduate Theory & Practice of History**

A few years ago, the University of the West of England, Bristol (UK) overhauled its level 2 undergraduate core course. Traditionally, core courses at Level 2 in the UK teach historiography and tie this to methodology. So, for example, a seminar on Ranke will be accompanied by a discussion of empiricism, and students will be required to write an essay about Ranke (or Annales, Marxism etc.). These courses are very unpopular, and students often struggle to see their relevance. In particular, we found that the large numbers of students on courses that used empirical approaches towards history were very reluctant to engage with other approaches.

We took the decision to plan in a different way, thinking about what we wanted students to be able to *do* (rather than know) when they entered their final (dissertation) year. We then designed a course that took the students through the activities they would have to carry out in planning and writing their dissertation. They were set a series of practical exercises, which they had to apply to their other work in other Level 2 courses. These exercises were designed to illustrate how the methods that historians use are related to their conceptualisations of the past.

The link with other courses ensured that students could see the relevance of the work. It also required students on heavily empirical courses to think about other ways of interpreting those periods and topics. So, for example, we asked students studying Nazism to read correspondence on coal outputs in pre-war Germany ‘against the grain’, or to interpret election campaigns as cultural rituals. We also required the students to reflect on what they were learning, and how they learned it. Overall, we wanted students to recognise that writing history is a practice, not a body of knowledge.

The following paper discusses the pedagogic issues underlying the decisions we took in designing the course. It mostly consists of student comment on what they gained from the course. It was written as part of an internal discussion within UWE about helping students to learn, rather than just teaching them stuff. Consequently, some parts of the paper are clearly oriented towards our internal discussion. Overall, however, it provides eloquent testimony to how students – eventually – come to learn through doing, and recognise the transferability and value of what they have learned.

## **Theory & Practice of History: core Level 2 undergraduate course.**

*This module has not only taught me that achieving academic success is important, but more that it's the process towards that goal that is the achievement, the self development into a more aware, logical, intelligent and self motivated person.*

(Student's Self reflective essay)

### Context

In the History School, we have attempted to develop a distinctive pedagogic approach. It has been dominated by the idea that students should become reflective learners, able to work effectively as individuals and in groups, and to develop expertise in how to address problems, not just expertise in subject-specific content.

The Single Honours History award has a core principle running through it: that students should progressively acquire the ability to select, interrogate and use information effectively and flexibly, and that they should be able to recognise and describe the processes they use to do this.

- Level 1: Key skills embedded in every module. Highly structured and guided. Focus on basic skills of locating and presenting information.
- Level 2: Process-based module, at the centre of a web of standard modules. Highly structured set of exercises, but carried out through open workshop discussions and practical projects. Focus moves towards selection and interrogation of data, and more flexible forms of presentation.
- Level 3: Special Subject and dissertation – independent work supported by small workshops of 7-12 students.

All History Staff are now required to teach on either a Level 1 module or the Level 2 core module.

### Management of change

Management of the introduction of the current system was cautious. At the start of the process, we listened to what the stakeholders had to say:

- students – they didn't come to university to take study skills or life skills classes.
- staff - no compromises in subject specialism. Colleagues did not want to see the focus on History removed from the heart of the History award. However, they were willing to see whether changes would achieve positive outcomes for progression. The comparative data suggests that they have.

This current system was introduced following a year of monthly planning meetings with Level 1 module leaders, followed by another year of trialling and reflecting on strengths and weaknesses.

The Level 2 module was designed by an individual, with input from supportive colleagues; discussed at length with the whole School; and then delivered by a team already committed to the general principle of a practice-based module.

Staff and students were willing to participate in change, because *embedded* study skills and employability skills can be demonstrated to have positive outcomes for academic work too.

*This paper focuses on the Level 2 module at the centre of the History student's progression towards becoming an independent and self-reflective learner.*

The Level 2 module: 'The Theory & Practice of History'

The module combines a process-based intellectual critique with independent practice-based learning. It also directly enhances academic outcomes and group identity. The underlying pedagogic issues informing its design were:

1. **Process-based module.** In other words, students are required to analyse what Historians *do*, rather than what they *say*, and to apply this to their own practice.
2. **Provide a bridge from directed learning at Level 1 to independent learning at Level 3,** and provide a workshop space for students to reflect on the processes of selecting, interrogating and using information effectively. It is only compulsory for Single Honours students and those Joint Honours students planning to do a History dissertation at Level 3.
3. **Relevance** The module sits at the centre of the web of other History modules that students will be studying at Level 2. It therefore has immediate relevance and usefulness for them, because they reflect on the work they are doing in another 'linked' module. This also improves their understanding in the 'linked' module, thereby enhancing progression rates.
4. **Group membership** The module directly assists in group identity and group working, because students work in a seminar sub-group with others also taking their linked module.
5. **Progression and Retention** The opportunities to revise and review work provide disengaged students with the chance to re-engage before it is too late.

*During the course of this year I have failed to fully apply myself. Although I have managed to get essays in on time, my attendance has been poor and I've had real difficulties with motivation and happiness...The course has seriously prepared me for the dissertation. Perhaps not in the same way students who have applied themselves more fully have learnt, but I have learnt lessons that were of more immediate importance to me ...while I have not progressed academically this year, I do feel like I have progressed in my attitude towards, and concept of, History as a subject and an interesting field of study. (Student's self-reflective essay)*

6. **Employability.** The module requires students to produce a report using a format suitable for the workplace, and to develop a range of skills – including teamwork; statistical analysis; internet-based research – that are directly relevant to a workplace environment. We felt that this was more cost-effective, and more efficient in terms of tracking learning outcomes, than a work placement scheme would be – particularly given the enormous range of career destinations for students with History degrees.

## Curriculum

The key point is that the curriculum reflects the *processes* of carrying out historical work in a dissertation. By following this curriculum, students become critically aware of what their practices entail. Consequently, their academic work improves, but they also learn to analyse the work they're engaged with, and to recognise that it can be broken down into distinct, transferable, skills:

*I don't think it was until I had written this [reflective piece] that I realised how the course had been set out... I can see, by writing this in the order that I did the work, that the module was set out much like how our dissertation planning is going to be next year. Beginning with finding sources and interrogating them, right through to setting out a plan of the work.* (Student's self-reflective essay)

The topics covered are:

- using primary sources,
- theories of history,
- using secondary sources,
- methods of accessing and assessing primary data [project],
- planning and writing up a dissertation, and
- self reflection.

In each case, students are asked to:

- carry out a practical exercise, based on content from another History module;
- provide a brief account of what they learned/found out about the past from doing this;
- then provide a deeper consideration of what they learned/found out about the relevant *method or way of interpreting* the past from carrying out the practical exercise.

**Employability** was also a consideration in designing the projects. The project work offered students the choice between three methods of accessing primary material about the past – internet-based research; oral interview; and statistical analysis. Students were advised that 'The purpose of this work is for you to use, and reflect upon, the research method. What you find out is less important than what you learn about the method by using it.'

However, students were also encouraged to think about how they could apply these insights in workplace situations.

*The project seems to me to have been designed to highlight the weaknesses of search engines and it definitely did. .. Prior to the project there were many sources I may have considered using for information but... I have realised that a lot of them are simply not authentic enough.* (Student's self-reflective essay)

*I knew how to use statistics when they were already provided for me but I did not really know how to use datasets to produce my own statistics and correlation analysis. ... I have learned in using the software and doing the project that it is an easier way of using data than I originally thought I am now much more inclined to use than I would have been previously.* (Student's self-reflective essay)

## Teaching methods

Seminars are based around workshop activities – small-group tasks and discussion, followed by plenary report-backs.

In all the work in seminars, students work in a sub-group of between three to five other people, who are all taking one of the other History modules in common. This is their ‘linked module’ group. The tasks, as far as possible, involve applying a method or theory to the work that students are doing in their ‘linked module’.

Learning is enhanced by the small group discussions, but also by the comparative perspectives that emerge in the plenary sessions. Applying the same tasks to different modules reveals that particular approaches are more suitable for investigating some issues than others, and questions are more fruitful in some contexts than others.

At regular stages – starting off weekly, then becoming more widely spaced – students are required to submit work online, onto the Blackboard site. These online submissions build up the student’s portfolio, which carries 75% of the marks on this module.

If a student submits work conscientiously for the entire portfolio, then the student will get a pass mark for the portfolio. The *experience* of working through the portfolio conscientiously is fundamental to the learning process.

Students also have to fill out logs as they work through the portfolio, recording their thoughts about the work they’ve been doing and what they’ve learned. This provides the basis for a piece of self-reflective work at the end of the year.

## Assessment

- Primary sources assignment – 1,000 words. 10%. End of Teaching Block 1  
This assignment is designed to develop students’ ability to select materials and formulate appropriate questions for themselves.
- Secondary sources assignment – 1,500 words. 15%. Middle of Teaching Block 2.  
This assignment is designed to develop employability skills – specifically, the ability to research and present information in a way that is useful in the workplace. Marks are allocated for presentation as well as for content.
- Portfolio – minimum of 7,500 words. 75%. Beginning of summer exam period.  
Students get feedback on the portfolio as they submit it, and have the opportunity to revise their entries in the light of feedback before the final portfolio is submitted. However, the final two submissions – the reflective work and an account of planning a proposed dissertation – may not be revised.

**88.46% of students taking this core module passed at first opportunity this year.**  
(This figure includes as referrals those students who had Extenuating Circumstances, who will have another first opportunity at a later date).

## Outcomes

*The best way to indicate what the module achieved in enhancing student experience and self-awareness is to cite the students themselves. All the following quotations are comments from students in their self-reflective essays, submitted as part of their portfolio work at the end of the year. A lengthier collection of quotations, and the full set of essays, are available.*

*Students were asked to comment on what they'd learned, and how they'd learned it.*

### **Reflection and process-based work are important to student success**

...in many ways I think this module has by far been the most important to me, and has allowed a much needed step back, from which you can examine exactly what it is you're doing and why.

I wish that i could start the module fresh because reflecting back upon it...I think the module has eradicated my immaturity when approaching my academic studies as well as achieving the goal of improving my academic work.

### **Learning to learn**

To summarise then I think that through my log entries over the course of the year, I can highlight various times when my ... approach to learning, has increased or changed. In my case this increased understanding has often been achieved when I have initially approached tasks in the wrong way and have therefore been able to learn from my mistakes.

I found the Oral History project very interesting, as I found I learnt much better if I was experiencing the problems of oral history, rather than just reading about them in a book. This suggests to me that although I have to read around the subject to enhance my understanding, I learn better if I actively learn.

### **Workshop-based seminars and reporting back through online portfolio**

... exercises undertaken in these sessions were beneficial and required considerable thought. That has been a key part of this course, it is rare that answers are factual, most involve you having to think deeply and compile your own interpretations.

It took time for me to get used to submitting the vast majority of work online. This was an entirely new concept for me, as none of my other modules are online. However, once I got used to this, the module became a lot easier, and I ended up enjoying the format of submitting short and regular pieces of work at the beginning.

### **Small group work within seminars: the 'linked module' groups**

Debates with my team over a beer have been stimulating and of course a lot of fun!

The 'linked module' idea at first seemed somewhat pointless, however I feel that it has been one of the better tools in helping my understanding ...because it allows you to apply the theory to a subject ... I have also worked well with other people doing my linked module, actively having historical debates outside of classes, something which I probably would not have done before. Speaking to peers is a very useful way to enhance understanding and also to hear different interpretations.

### **Guidance towards independent work**

I think a lot of my initial difficulties with reading primary sources came from the fact that I have a scientific background, and so struggle to do anything other than read what is put in front of me...However, the Primary Sources Assignment of the first semester, which gave me a chance to choose my own historical question and the theory of history that I would attach to it, gave me the freedom that I needed to start to understand how to read primary sources in different ways, and I was very pleased with the results.

It took me a long time to understand how theories of history are not isolated points of learning, they are meant to be applied to history and society in general. ...My understanding began to change after the Primary Source Assignment, when we had to formulate a question to ask of our source. This is when my understanding of dissertation work changed as I realised a historian's job is to ask questions and use primary sources to help answer them.

### **Improved academic performance**

...throughout this year I have become aware of different techniques historians use. The benefit has been noticeable too. At the start of the year my marks were in the 50's and 60's but they have steadily increased as I have added more versatility to my history repertoire. I have recently had a few marks in the 70's and my last grade for my linked module was 78.

The module, without a doubt, has, perhaps unknowingly at the time, greatly improved my standard of work in my linked module

### **Employability**

These methods will help me produce work at a better standard in regard to my other history modules. In addition to this, I can use this to help me boost my career after university.

Another part of the course, which in reflection has definitely moved me on a stage..., is the secondary sources essay. I have realised the skills involved in producing a survey report. The process of collating information and organising is a skill that I believe will be useful in nearly any course or occupation.

## Conclusions

### **1. The distinctive elements in the module were:**

- Embedded into award field – not a separate generic module
- Direct application to student's work in other modules
- Focus on process, not content
- Self-reflective element
- Workshop-based seminars organised around doing, not knowing.
- Team work.
- Online portfolio of work, with constant feedback and opportunities to review and resubmit work.
- Inclusion of tasks appropriate to workplace environment

Based on one year's experience, it seems the module managed to achieve a wide range of student experience and 'facilitated learning' outcomes, while enhancing progression rates.

### **2. Dynamic combination of elements**

It is the *combination* of these elements that produces the learning processes that the students themselves have so eloquently identified. Process-based questions without reflection and group work linked to their other modules, would become arid; practical application gives relevance and develops real skills; constant feedback is essential if students are to experience the module as a learning journey about which they can subsequently reflect.

### **3. Generic elements**

A significant factor in the module's success was that it was directly embedded into, and relevant to, the subject. Generic 'student experience' content would not be appropriate, and would be unpopular with both staff and students.

However, the *approach* used is not subject-specific. This module unpicks the key processes used by Historians, but the same approach can be adopted by other disciplines. For example, the primary source work in History could be mirrored in seminars highlighting the range of underlying theories in other disciplines (eg theories of science, jurisprudence, information, business etc), with practical tasks to illustrate how these inform different ways of working (eg in physics, law, IT, management).

### **4. Problems with comparability for joint honours students.**

Joint Honours students in History can avoid the core L2 and L3 experiences. Ideally, this Level 2 provision would be matched by similar modules in other half of award, so students must do one or the other. But note also this comment from a student, who elected to take the History Level 2 module: *'I'm a joint honours student. In my other course it was compulsory to take the pre-requisite for a dissertation regardless of whether you intended write one in that subject. Hence a lot of things were repeated.'*

### **5. 'Facilitated Learning' is not 'Pastoral care'.**

There has been some slippage in some discussions about a 'facilitated learning' module to focus on counselling rather than pedagogy. This module demonstrates that self-reflection and PDP work most successfully in an academic context. (I have written a separate paper on pastoral care.)

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