Teaching Democracy: The Role of Political Science Education

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Abstract

Politicians and academics have pointed to the fact that young people are increasingly disengaged fromconventionalpoliticsintheUK.Thisisillustratedbythedramaticfallinelectoralturnoutand the ageing of political party memberships in recent decades. Yet recent research has shown that young people remain interested in politics even if they are put off by the political process. In the context of higher education (HE), political science programmes have seen a significant increase in applications (mostly from young people). While a lot of attention has been paid to citizenship education in secondary schools, surprisingly little emphasis has been placed upon the role of the tertiary section in teaching democracy. This article argues that political science education can play an important part in rejuvenating politics by adopting a constructivist approach, establishing synergies between pedagogical and participatory goals.

Keywords: political science; education; democracy

Introduction

In recent years politicians and academics have become increasingly concerned about the rise in political disengagement among young people (15 to 24-year-olds, inclusive) in the UK. In the 2005 general election, only 37 per cent of 18 to 24-year-olds voted compared with 61 per cent of the general population (Electoral Commission 2005). The existence of political apathy also seemed to be confirmed by rapidly falling and ageing memberships of political parties (Scarrow 1996; Mair and van Biezen 2001). While disengagement in electoral politics has increased in society as a whole (Power Inquiry 2006), this trend has been particularly marked in younger cohorts. Recent youth-centred studies have nevertheless shown that, while 'the majority of young people do not engage in formal political activities such as voting or belonging to political parties [electoral politics]', they remain interested in politics (more broadly defined) (Catan 2003, 2). In short, young people are still interested in political issues, but have become alienated from the political process and therefore seek to achieve their goals through new modes of participation such as consumer politics (Pattie et al. 2004; Sloam 2007). In Higher Education (HE), students (mostly young people) remain interested in political issues, as illustrated by the dramatic increase in the number of applications to political science programmes.

Education has long been viewed as a way to rejuvenate the linkages between the political system and its citizens. Political philosophers have long stressed the centrality of education for democracy (e.g. Dewey 1916; Mill 1973; Kant 1978). Although this theme has been investigated extensively at the levels of primary and secondary education ('Crick Report', QCA 1998), surprisingly little research has dealt with the tertiary sector. Research has shown that, even at university level, 'educational interventions with a focus on political engagement can significantly boost many dimensions of democratic participation, including expectations for future political activity' (Beaumont et al. 2006, 249; see also Longo and Meyer 2006). With this in mind, political science departments in HE can play a central role. This, then, raises the question: 'to what extent should the curriculum incorporate the notion of education for politics alongside that of education about politics?' (Smith and Ottewill 2007, 1, emphases in original). This article argues that, from a constructivist perspective, by allowing students to explore better their own political interests and understandings (through a bottom-up approach), political science educators can simultaneously

promote these twin goals. A constructivist approach to teaching in political science complements work on youth participation in politics that has called for a greater interaction with young people and greater understanding of young people's politics (Henn et al. 2002; O'Toole et al. 2003).

The study begins by investigating the changing background to political science education. It focuses on the political and social changes that have strongly influenced teaching in HE and—more specifically—political science. Afterwards, the discussion turns to the inter-related issues of political learning and participation in democracy. First, the nature of (political science) teaching and learning is examined, using learning theories to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of existing practice. Then, the article shows how political philosophy can bind together pedagogical research and studies on youth participation in democracy to form a new approach to political science education. The final section sets out this approach through the development of broad principles and specific recommendations, to guide the implementation of more effective teaching. In recent years political science education has suffered from an overly structured and top-down attitude towards its students. A constructivist approach can provide a spur to the development of more student-centred teaching methods to the benefit of both pedagogical and participatory goals.

Political and Social Change

While it is clearly not within the scope of this article to provide an in-depth analysis of political and social change over recent decades, it is necessary to highlight a few key developments. After all, it is impossible to disaggregate the process of learning from social and cultural developments within society. Authors from John Dewey (1916) to Jerome Bruner (1996) have shown that the learner is inextricably interlinked to his or her social and cultural environment. Dewey (1916) thus argued that education is not preparation for life; education is life itself.

Recent decades have witnessed an increasing individualisation of society both in terms of values (Inglehart 1977 and 1997) and lifestyles (Giddens 1991; Beck 1992). 'Individualisation, socio-economic change, and value change have weakened the relevance of the industrial cleavages upon which British party politics is still based, leading to a situation where young people are increasingly unable to relate to conventional politics' (Sloam 2007, 550). They have turned away from conventional politics towards single-issues politics, new social movements and new modes of political participation (Pattie et al. 2004). For young people, politics is often 'something that is done to them, not something they can influence' (O'Toole et al. 2003, 359). Politicians and political parties have found it increasingly difficult to engage with a more heterogeneous electorate, leading to the alienation of citizens from political institutions (Power Inquiry 2006), which has—again—been especially prevalent among the young. Added to this are changes in the news media—the main conduit between politicians, political institutions and the public— which have led to a situation where 'people are less likely to understand underlying issues or complexities in respect of politics' (Stoker 2006, 12). Young people's values, perceptions of politics, concern for political issues and modes of political participation have changed, but has political science education met this challenge? In teaching it is important to know your audience. Given the way that political and social change has impacted upon young people's ontological and epistemological views of 'the political', a more bottom-up approach to political science education would be timely.

Changes in HE and Political Science Education

In terms of HE, the increasing size and heterogeneity of the student body has furthered interest in the use of student-centred teaching. A greater emphasis on teaching reflection through peer assessment (and student evaluation) and the standard use of teaching training courses have provided a stimulus for the introduction of teaching methods that can adapt to the demands of a changing student audience. One might nevertheless question the extent to which new teaching methods have actually been put into practice (Lea et al. 2003).

More specifically, the individualisation of society referred to above and the penetration of market principles into public services have both contributed to the growing 'instrumentalization' and 'commodification' of the university sector. This is illustrated by government policy to increase dramatically numbers in tertiary education in recent decades (without a proportionate increase in permanent academic staff) and the introduction of top-up fees. HE institutions are assessed and evaluated on their ability to deliver a good product both in terms of research, teaching

and customer satisfaction. Although these changes have undoubtedly produced some positive results (such as the professionalisation of teacher training referred to above), their impact has been largely negated by other developments. On the one hand, the redefinition of students as consumers (paying for the product) has encouraged students to become 'strategic learners' (see Ramsden 2003). The inevitable degree inflation caused by growing student numbers made it more essential to get a Bachelor's degree to allow entry into well-paid jobs, and there is an increased 'sense among students that they are in college solely to gain career skills and credentials' (Colby et al. 2003, 40) On the other hand, the growth in student numbers and worsening of student–staff ratios (leading to greater teaching and administrative burdens) allied to greater pressure on research output (i.e. through the Research Assessment Exercise), has turned many lecturers into what one might term 'strategic teachers'. Strategic teachers will be tempted to use highly structured (behaviourist) approaches to teaching concentrated on getting information across as opposed to deeper forms of learning.

In the context of the broader civic mission of political science education, the growth of strategic learning and teaching has contributed to a focus on teaching about politics rather than teaching for politics. It has also led to the neglect of the changing nature of young people's politics, and its relevance for the teaching curriculum and teaching methods. With the increasing disengagement of young people from electoral politics, interest has nevertheless been revived in the part HE can play in creating good citizens. HEFCE (2007, 17, 38), the Higher Education Funding Council for England, has drawn attention to the 'key role' of HE:

in developing active citizens, and sustaining a civilised, more tolerant and inclusive society ... [since graduates are] more likely to vote in elections ... and are more likely to be involved in their communities through voluntary activities ... we want to focus more on our strategic support for HE to contribute to wider social agendas. This includes its contribution to civic life and developing civilising values.1

The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching in the United States similarly recorded that 'colleges and universities have a civic mission, which includes ... educating their own students to be effective and responsible citizens' (CIRCLE 2006, 1).

Despite the commodification of HE alluded to above, political science education still clearly has the potential to promote political engagement, as it can dramatically influence its students' understanding of politics and its relevance for their everyday lives (Bradley 2007). These students can, in turn, create a virtuous circle with respect to political engagement (i.e. through contact with their peers and society in general). The fact is that, despite disengagement with conventional politics, the number of people applying for political science degrees has markedly increased over the past 10 years. Working from UCAS (2007) figures, the number of home applicants for politics courses in UK HE institutions increased by 57 per cent between 1996 and 2005, over two and a half times the growth in applications to all degree programmes. Research on young people's politics has shown that 'knowledge', a belief in 'efficacy' and active 'mobilisation' are central in determining youth participation in democracy (Sloam 2007). Political science education can help in this respect. Conversely, learning as politics enhances learning about politics as students' active involvement in political issues promotes 'deep learning' (Biggs 2003; Ramsden 2003).

Political Learning and Participation in Democracy

While political science can certainly be taught in a variety of different ways, university departments have developed similar formats over time. In terms of the curriculum, they quite rightly seek to develop students' knowledge and analytical skills over the course of a standard three-year degree. In the first year, students are introduced to key political science topics, and given the basic tools for studying the discipline. In the second year, they are commonly offered a choice of electives that aim to utilise this basic knowledge in specific subject areas. Final year students often focus in depth on specialised areas of political science, and/or frequently engage in their own research in the form of an extended essay or dissertation. Although this typical approach gets the basics done, it is highly structured and largely behaviourist in its focus on achieving set outcomes. Following on from this, the assessment of student work is usually very structured and standardised. Essays and exams are, of course, a vital part of political science education, but too often other forms of evaluation, e.g. classroom assessment (see below) are ignored. There are some very good reasons why degree programmes cannot adopt a more student-centred perspective: poor staff–student ratios; research commitments; the need to link research to teaching. But there are also some bad reasons that encourage a top-down approach, e.g. college policies that promote the standardisation of teaching formats, outcomes and assessment. In sum, 'many institutions or educators claim to be putting student-centred learning into practice, but in reality, they are not' (Lea et al. 2003, 322).

The structured nature of political science education and the setting of strategic learning goals further encourage students to become strategic learners. This also encourages teachers to focus on the pragmatic task of getting the job done (teaching about politics) without feeling able also to deal with the more idealistic task of promoting democracy and democratic participation (teaching for politics). A lack of flexibility in assessment and an overly structured approach to teaching in addition lead to teaching methods that are too focused on learning outcomes rather than interaction. This is likely to hamper efforts to implement student-centred learning. Although some improvements have been made, Neil Stammers et al.'s (1999, 125) assertion that the discipline is falling short of 'achieving a pedagogy of academic, personal and interpersonal development designed to facilitate deep, active and reflective learning' still holds true. Given that class sizes are unlikely to improve and that college structures are unlikely to become less rigid (due to the intensive assessment of HE institutions), this article will suggest some ways to improve political science education within the current system and build active learning into the structure of existing programmes and courses.

Pedagogical studies have provided a range of teaching and learning theories that can help us analyse political science education. While these different approaches obviously overlap in our day-to-day teaching, they can offer a window to understanding the philosophical positions that underpin different teaching methods. The most central influence on the learning process in HE today is behaviourism. As a lecturer you have a clear view of the outcomes you wish to achieve, 'the sequence of events or "stimuli" to bring about this change, and the importance of rewards and penalties for motivating the learner' (Carlile and Jordan 2005, 14). The most famous example of behaviourism is the hierarchy of educational objectives developed by Benjamin Bloom (1956). Bloom's Taxonomy (1956) ordered six competences—from basic to advanced: 'knowledge', 'comprehension', 'application', 'analysis', 'syntheses and 'evaluation'—which can be identified by different skills (from simple 'recall' to 'critical analysis'), and assessed through relevant cues (from 'defining' to 'evaluating'). Behaviourism can work well for the imparting of basic knowledge and skills to assess students' grasp of the fundamentals. It furthermore gives purpose to the learning process. Orison Carlile and Anne Jordan (2005, 15) highlight the fact that 'some of the key developments in modern curriculum planning are Behaviourist'.

Behaviourism is commonly used (with some justification) in the structuring of first year political science courses and to establish a 'progression' in teaching methods into the second and third years, and is particularly relevant for the teaching of knowledge. The teaching of knowledge is indeed also important in terms of teaching for politics given the fact that 'civic knowledge promotes political participation ... the more knowledge citizens have, the more likely they are to participate in public matters' (Galston 2001, 224). Yet there are some obvious drawbacks to the behaviourist perspective: a tendency to encourage the passivity of the student; and the divorcing of teaching structures from student input. Robert Gagné and Karen Medsker (1996) epitomise this approach in their learning sequence model based on teachers' actions and learners' responses. Typically for behaviourists, they neglect to explore the actions of the learner and the responses of the teacher. In sum, behaviourism provides a top-down approach to teaching geared more towards knowing than understanding, and privileging structure (learning outcomes) over agency (teacher–student and student–student relationships). This raises some crucial questions. To what extent does a behaviourist approach help to reinforce an instrumental/strategic approach to teaching? Given the increasing heterogeneity of the student body, has this approach become outdated?

Cognitivist learning theory provides a counterpoint to behaviourism. While behaviourism tends to neglect the importance of mental activity, cognitivism is 'based on an investigation of human thought processes' (Carlile and Jordan 2005, 17). The goal of the cognitivist approach is to facilitate the use of 'long-term memory' and 'deep learning' (Marton and Saljo 1976; Ramsden 2003). Deep learning is achieved through the contextualisation of new information, relating course material to previous knowledge, practical examples and everyday experiences. This can be achieved through cognitive techniques like 'mind-mapping' (Buzan 1974). John Biggs (2003) argues that by focusing on what students do (a 'student learning focus') lecturers can promote what he terms 'deep understanding'. One obvious advantage of the cognitivist approach is that, by exploring the process of learning and students' learning experiences, more effective teaching methods are developed. There are nevertheless also disadvantages. An overemphasis on student learning can lead to the loss of a sense of purpose in a course or a curriculum. Furthermore, cognitivism—although student-centred—can also lead to strategic teaching, since an overemphasis on ways of learning may result in a situation where outcomes (here, the results of student assessment) are prioritised over student input into the learning process.

Like cognitivism, constructivism adopts a student-centred approach, stressing the role of the teacher as a ‘facilitator’ or ‘mediator’. Constructivist and social constructivist perspectives centre on the idea that students can learn more unaided or through interaction with one another than they can directly from the teacher. In a classroom situation, Lev Vygotsky (1934) therefore argued that it was the teacher’s job to facilitate student–student interaction. An important offspring of the constructivist approach to teaching is learning style theory, which points to different aspects of the learning process. David Kolb’s (1984) ‘experiential learning cycle’ consists of a learning experience that undergoes a process of reflection, leading to a conceptualisation of the learning experience, which is applied through active experimentation. The active experimentation further adds to the learning experience, and so on. The concept of experiential learning is crucial for engaging young people in a subject and encouraging deep learning. One of the central reasons for young people’s disengagement from the political system is politicians’ failure to connect on issues that have real meaning for their everyday lives (Power Inquiry 2006; Sloam 2007). Political science education could be accused, to a lesser extent, of making the same mistake.

While there is obviously significant overlap between the two approaches, constructivism (particularly social constructivism) differs from cognitivism in its emphasis on the connection between the learning process and the student’s broader social context.2 This leads to a focus on collaborative learning techniques where teacher– student and student–student interaction is viewed as a priority. For constructivists, the idea of perception is central: it determines how educators develop teaching practices and curricula (Prosser and Trigwell 1999) and the way in which students learn (Fleming 2001). Recognising the reality of intersubjectivity, a variety of methods is employed to engage the student. Teaching methods should correlate with the wide range of student learning preferences—categorised in the VARK system as visual, aural, reading and kinaesthetic (experiential) (Fleming 2001). Although political science education clearly needs the purpose and structure derived from behaviourism and the student learning focus demanded by cognitivism, a constructivist approach can help create a more interdependent relationship between the structure and agency of the teaching/learning process.

The differing approaches to teaching/learning articulated above are, of course, aimed at improving the efficacy of teaching—in our case of political science degrees at HE institutions. These pedagogical theories can also be combined with political theory to create positive synergies relating to the value of education and its role in increasing political engagement: learning about politics is necessary for understanding the nature of political action; learning as politics can motivate students by associating their learning with their interests and experiences.3 Political philosophers have long looked to education as a means for strengthening democracy. The Enlightenment emphasised the significance of learning and reason for self-emancipation and the balancing of interests within a liberal society, and philosophers such as Kant and J. S. Mill viewed education as essential for the operation of a political system (Baum 2003; Biesta 2007). Dewey (1916) stressed the broader civic mission of teaching and its contribution to the improvement of the human condition. More recent works have underlined the importance of social capital as the bedrock of democratic engagement (e.g. Putnam 2001), and have even highlighted the significance of education in fulfilling this function (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990).

But the most interesting aspect of political theory for (constructivist) approaches to learning is work that focuses on the importance of human interaction (especially communication and discourse) as the key to politics and democracy. Hannah Arendt (1969) emphasised the centrality of interaction for the human condition (Biesta 2007) and Jürgen Habermas’ (1984) ideas on interaction through communication have some practical implications for teaching politics in HE:

Following Habermas citizen education can be described as supporting active citizens to learn to develop valid reasons for their action ... about the means that make an action effective ... about the right goals for an action ... about the personal motives to engage in an action (Van der Veen 2007, 37).

Habermas’ focus on interaction and active communication can thus provide a bridge between political philosophy and theories of teaching. Here, language has a crucial role to play in enabling ‘understanding’ (Bourdieu et al. 1996). This is also supported by research on youth participation, which has highlighted the centrality of a two-way communication process in promoting knowledge, a belief in efficacy of action and—in turn—democratic participation (Sloam 2007). Furthermore, Habermas’ views fit well with the constructivist focus on ‘active learning’ and ‘problem solving’ found in teaching theory (Barr and Tagg 1995), so—from this perspective— also have a pedagogical purpose.

Political Science Education and Democratic Engagement: Recommendations

A constructivist approach has ramifications for the development of curricula, teaching methods and modes of assessment in political science programmes. While behaviourism offers purpose and cognitivism teaches students how to learn, (social) constructivism focuses on interaction. Obviously, this is not a new idea in teaching. It is reflected in the famous Chinese proverb: 'tell me and I forget, show me and I remember, involve me and I understand'. This article nevertheless argues that the constructivist approach is currently underutilised. Of course, there is a limited amount that lecturers can achieve—especially if not supported by departmental and college policy. This study, however, sets out some general principles and practical recommendations for HE teachers to strengthen the synergies between teaching about politics and teaching for politics. The basic philosophy is to support student-centred active learning, promoting interaction through a variety of teaching techniques. This is characterised by four general principles for communicative action in political science education:

1. To investigate students' own knowledge and understanding of politics. As it is crucial, from a constructivist perspective, to encourage interaction—and, given the subjective nature of students' perceptions of politics—political science education should make greater efforts to teach students in their own terms. Young people today have different conceptions of politics (O'Toole et al. 2003), are interested in a wider range of issues (White et al. 2000; Henn et al. 2002; Inglehart and Welzel 2005), and—utilising different modes of participation (Pattie et al. 2004)—have different democratic experiences to previous cohorts. The exploration of students' views, knowledge and experiences of politics—as well as the discursive context of their language (Bourdieu et al. 1996)—is therefore paramount.

2. To make students aware of their own participatory activities in politics (broadly defined). In Habermas' (1984) terms, some discussion is needed of students' own participatory activities (or even their inactivity), to link political science education to their own experiences and to promote democratic participation. Students should be required to analyse their own participation (or non-participation) and be encouraged to engage in participatory activities within courses, and teachers should draw on their knowledge of students' experiences to make courses relevant. The contextualisation of abstract concepts and complex political ideas—relating them to everyday life—enhances deep understanding and adds meaning to political science education.

3. To increase understanding of political science through greater interaction. Constructivists argue that students learn best through interaction—with each other and with the teacher. Therefore, activities that promote interaction (such as small group teaching) should be promoted, while passive learning should be minimised. The employment of a wide range of teaching techniques (that correlate to students' broad range of learning preferences (Fleming 2001)) also helps to trigger active learning.

4. To consolidate these objectives, curriculum, assessment and teaching methods should be 'constructively aligned' (Biggs 2003). To guarantee the optimum impact of the above principles, curricula, assessment and teaching methods should all pull in the same direction. For example, if the teaching methods of a course encourage active learning, the assessment should be based on the results of interactivity, i.e. students should not be able to do well in the course simply by attending a lecture series or reading the core texts.

These principles demonstrate the fundamental importance of establishing the relevance of politics and democracy for political science education. It is critical to find out what students think about politics, what issues concern them and what participatory activities they have experienced. The CIRCLE (2006, 2) report on the civic mission of HE in the US stressed that it was important 'to teach about and to study ... the full range of participatory acts ... [including] new forms of political engagement that are particularly popular among youth'. Young people care about different issues than they did in the past. Although traditional issues like healthcare and education remain important, new themes of individual interest (e.g. better facilities for young people), of generational concern (e.g. drugs, street crime) and of a post-materialist/international nature (e.g. the environment, fair trade) have increased resonance. Declining trust in traditional political institutions has been mirrored by greater faith in non-governmental organisations: around a third of young people have a lot of trust in Amnesty International and Greenpeace, yet only 17 per cent have a lot of trust in the UK parliament, 11 per cent in the UK government, 10 per cent in politicians and 6 per cent in political parties (Moore and Longhurst 2005, 28). For political science educators, 'it is important that they build bridges to students' own conceptions of appropriate political analysis and action' (Colby et al. 2003, 19), and to illustrate how political issues relate to public policy and electoral politics.

At a departmental level, serious efforts should be made to think about how the curriculum can be adapted to better reflect young people's politics. Politics departments should consider how their programmes can develop more common ground between teaching (which, for pedagogical and motivational reasons, should be tied as closely as possible to research) and students' conceptions of politics and democracy. At ground level, there are a number of pragmatic steps that teachers can take.

Course convenors should consider building in some flexibility to courses to allow students to help determine content. For example, they can devote the first one-hour seminar of every course to finding out about the students (their background and levels of knowledge) and their pre-held views on the central theme of the course. Another measure would be the introduction of participatory activities (not necessarily relating to conventional politics) as part of the course (some ideas are suggested below), which could last for one week upwards and be incorporated as an element of course assessment. This would contribute to learning about politics as well as for politics, and furthermore have the potential to promote the enhancement of campus life (Strachan 2007). Finally, for any course to have maximum effect, it should be constructively aligned (see below).

Students not only learn differently but perceive facts and concepts in a different way. They create their own knowledge and understanding, which is reinforced and experienced through multiple avenues (Fink 2003; Bernstein 2007). The key to creating synergies between teaching about and for politics is 'experiential learning', which:

engages students in a guided and facilitated process in which they construct new knowledge, skills and values ... reflect on their engagement and observations, conceptualize their experience in terms of their academic knowledge, integrate their learning into their academic and/or personal growth as members of the college community and increase their civic engagement (McHugh 2007, 1).

While experiential learning is quite rightly promoted through the use of 'service learning' (e.g. voluntary service) and internships (Battistoni 2000), this article concentrates on the various teaching devices that can be implemented within course modules. Educators can employ role playing and 'simulations' (Asal and Blake 2006), semi-structured debates or even 'short games' (Tobin 2004)—for example, a general knowledge test or a picture quiz4—to complement class discussions. Donald Bligh (2000, 219) characterises simulations and games as teaching 'in which a real situation is duplicated in its essential features ... [and] participants adopt an appropriate role or statuses to encourage understanding and empathy.

There are numerous teaching methods that can support interaction as communication (many of which will already be familiar to political science educators). For large-scale lectures, the range of suitable techniques may be more limited, but there are still possibilities for interaction such as multiple-choice quizzes (through the use of voting cards or other more sophisticated 'student response systems') and 'buzz groups' (short discussions in pairs) (O'Neill and McMahon 2005, 31). Interaction can, more generally, be promoted in the context of a lecture 'if the lectures are provocative enough to engage students actively in seeking answers ... stimulating them to reflect, make connections, and organize and draw conclusions from some body of knowledge' (Colby et al. 2003, 138). The opportunities for interaction increase in smaller lectures and broaden further in seminars. In these settings, interaction can be intensified through small group work (Bogaard et al. 2005), which can operate through the standard practice of discussing issues and reporting back to the full group, 'pyramids'5 and group presentations, and be guided by general questions, role play or case study analyses. Seminars may also be used for competitive debates (with the option of peer assessment) both to stimulate interest and promote democratic participation, e.g. a 'balloon debate'. While these debates should not be overused (as they tend to favour those who are already self confident),6 they can nevertheless help students appreciate different perspectives on an issue, 'understand the process of decision-making that often makes social and political issues seem distant and incomprehensible', and develop transferable oral skills necessary for business, politics and civic engagement (Siver and Veden 2007, 3–5).

Teachers should also think carefully about the media they use to convey information and promote discussion. Here, new technologies offer potential for 'improving the quality, flexibility and effectiveness of higher education' (Dearing 1997, 13.1). In particular, HE e-learning sites, such as 'Moodle', can be used for a multitude of purposes: acting as a resource for lecture notes and other course materials; 'directing students to problem-solving on themes, concepts and issues covered in the lessons' (Lee 2003, 68–69); linking to web pages that constitute multiple information sources (ibid.); stimulating interest through the use of a variety of multimedia links, e.g. YouTube clips of 'Yes Minister' (YouTube 2007); setting up discussion fora to aid collaborative learning (contributions to fora and

blogs can also be assessed). Finally, interaction can also be encouraged outside the classroom by introducing projects (individual or collaborative), or diary logs/journals (Gibbs 1995) that can be presented in seminar sessions.

One of the central principles of an interactive approach to learning must be the constructive alignment of course content and design with assessment (Brown 2001; Biggs 2002). In other words, assessment methods should match the aims and content of the course, which is particularly apt for the achievement of constructivist objectives. In general, a constructivist approach encourages a mixture of assessment techniques that demand not only the mastery of factual detail (disseminated in lectures and core texts), but also the results of interaction in seminars (Biggs 2002). We cannot expect students to engage in deep learning if the assessment allows them to get by with passive learning. Formative work is particularly useful for encouraging interaction. Non-assessed essays and presentations provide a good opportunity for students to receive feedback from both the teacher and their peers. Exams can still play a central role in the assessment process, so long as the exam questions target the analytical issues discussed in class as well as the necessary empirical data. Likewise, essays—especially extended essays and dissertations—should remain a key part of assessment (with feedback playing a critical role), as they can be used effectively to develop analytical skills and understanding. Following the idea of student-centred learning, interactivity and experiential learning can be further assisted by allowing flexibility in the choice of essay questions.

While exams and essays are a well-established part of the curriculum, this article argues for a greater emphasis on in-class assessment. This form of evaluation allows interaction in class to be directly rewarded and, thus, incentivises active participation in seminars. Thomas Angelo and K. Patricia Cross (1993, 4) stress the role of classroom assessment as 'an approach designed to help teachers find out what students are learning ... and how well they are learning it'—an approach which is 'learner-centred, teacher-directed ... and firmly rooted in good practice'. This need not be an arduous task as activities that are routinely used in formative assessment can be reordered as summative assessment. One obvious and common type of classroom assessment is the evaluation of oral skills. According to William Stafford (1997, 198), 'a group of students who have been taught oral skills, and who know their performance is being assessed, will participate more universally and more conscientiously in seminars'. This also fits with Habermas' contention that theories and factual claims in politics can only be arrived at through intersubjective understanding. Thus conceived, the assessment of oral skills can assist the learning of political science, allowing seminars to become a site for political engagement.

Finally, teachers in HE can utilise activities specifically designed to promote good citizenship. Many elements of citizenship education are, of course, already built into political science curricula, e.g. modules on democracy, political institutions and new social movements, etc. In many senses HE is fortunate in that—compared to primary and secondary education—teachers still have a large degree of control over curricula and courses. Course leaders are able therefore to encourage engagement in participatory activities in individual courses. To this end, the POLiS website on 'Teaching Citizenship in Higher Education' (http://www.soton.ac.uk/citizened) provides a good starting point. One activity, for instance, asks students to explore the participatory practices open to them on campus before analysing competing literature on the low electoral turnout of young people (Smith and Ottewill 2007, 4). By considering changes to the curriculum, teaching methods and assessment (in line with the constructivist methodology set out above), political science teachers can thereby provide a positive contribution towards both active learning and democratic participation.

Conclusion

This article has argued that the ideas of teaching about politics and teaching for politics are mutually reinforcing. Anne Colby et al. (2003, 20) state that 'there is considerable evidence that ... civic learning and academic learning more generally are at their most powerful when creatively combined'. By allying pedagogical research to what we know about youth participation in democracy, political science can broaden its conception of teaching outcomes. It can, thus, maximise its impact by combining the goals of teaching with a wider democratic mission. The article has shown that by adopting a less top-down and more interactive approach to political science education, we can not only encourage and enhance deep learning, but also play a part in promoting the democratic engagement of young people. The study explored political and social change and the impact this has had on HE. Political science education faces a generation of young people who are less engaged in conventional politics and are more individualised in their lifestyles, which is reflected by a more heterogeneous student body. Changes in society added to changes in HE has led to the situation where university education has been somewhat instrumentalised, increasing the abundance of both strategic learners and strategic teachers. By adopting a constructivist approach—constructively aligned curricula, teaching methods and assessment—in favour of active learning, and following

some of the recommendations made in the final section of this article, political science educators can help redress the balance.

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