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Teaching, assessment and professional development: praxis in Ireland's political science community

Dr Clodagh Harris, Department of Government, University College Cork.
Email: clodagh.harris@ucc.ie

Dr Brid Quinn, Department of Politics and Public Administation, University of Limerick
Email: brid.quinn@ul.ie

Abstract

Reflecting international and national policies, the strategies of individual educational institutions seek to ensure excellent learning experiences for students. This paper explores the strategies used by political science faculty on the island of Ireland to achieve excellence in their teaching and learning.

Drawing on the work of Hartlaub and Lancaster (2008), Henderson *et al* (2011) and Moore (2011), it uses a survey to gather data on the pedagogical techniques and assessment tools most frequently used by political scientists in their undergraduate and postgraduate classrooms. It also documents the influence of professional development, length of service, annual teaching loads and other contextual issues on their choice of techniques and tools.

It finds that that a mix of traditional and modern approaches to teaching and assessment are used. The lecture and the essay are the most popular teaching technique and assessment tool in the undergraduate classroom. However more active learning approaches such as simulations, scenarios and PBL are used by many or some faculty and there is evidence of a wide use of group activities. Some clear gender differences are observed in terms of professional development, teaching techniques and assessment tools.

Finally, the results suggest a strong commitment to innovation, pedagogic adaptability and continuing professional development at a time of educational constraints and cut-backs.

Introduction

The discourse of excellence has become a *lingua franca* in institutions of higher education which seek to ensure excellent learning experiences for their students. Such excellence is largely dependent on the quality of teaching, irrespective of institution or discipline. The imperative for excellence is dual – driven from the top through pronouncements and exhortatory documents and driven from the classroom through exemplary praxis and processes within the disciplines and the flourishing scholarship of teaching and learning. Significant also is continuing professional development for faculty but approaches vary widely as do the content and status of faculty development/education initiatives. Fink (2013) identifies levels of national effort, from 'little or no faculty development activity' in Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, Asia, and most of southern and eastern Europe to 'universal activity; participation mandated for new teachers' in Commonwealth countries and northern Europe. Similarly, Pleschová (2014) and Pleschová and Simon (2009) highlight the variation in educational development opportunities for political science teachers in Europe. Saroyan and Frenay (2012) compare Canada and Europe; Ishimaya reviews the USA's development activities for emerging academics while the ICED (2014) charts the preparation of university teachers in 23 countries. These studies accentuate the variation in provision, recognition and requirements in educational development for faculty both within and between countries and continents.

In Ireland, as elsewhere, a scholarship of teaching and learning in political science has emerged, that examines the theory and praxis of teaching, assessment and learning in institutions of higher education. Yet, to date no one study has captured the overall practice of

teaching and assessment amongst political science faculty across the island. This study contributes to addressing that gap by providing evidence about the tools, techniques and faculty training/development which shape the experience of political science students. It is timely, since Slowey *et al*. found that 95 per cent of the Dublin region's academics who define themselves as participating regularly in professional development say they 'would like access to research on teaching and learning in their discipline' (2013: 36).

Drawing on the work of Hartlaub and Lancaster (2008), Henderson *et al* (2011) and Moore (2011), the study uses a survey to gather data on the pedagogical techniques and tools most frequently used by faculty in political science departments on the island of Ireland in their undergraduate and postgraduate classrooms. It also documents the influence of professional development, length of service as a full time lecturer, annual teaching loads and other contextual issues on their choice of teaching techniques and assessment tools. Unlike Stammers *et al*.'s referential study in the UK (1999) it deliberately does not focus on student skills but concentrates on the educational development and teaching practices of faculty.

The article begins with a discussion of national and international policy documents and higher education strategies on teaching and learning before moving to a review of the academic literature on active learning, teaching techniques, tools and assessments in higher education and in political science in particular. Then the research methodology and the survey instrument used are presented and the findings outlined and discussed with suggestions for further research.

Teaching and Learning in universities: the *zeitgeist*

The cultural context in which teaching and learning takes place is continually changing. The demands of society, governments, students and academic institutions reflect attitudinal, social, political and economic flux. Government priorities, higher education regulatory and accreditation criteria, funding levels and quality assurance, assessment and certification frameworks all affect teaching and learning. These external forces shape the professional milieu in which faculty operate. Within that milieu, the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) contributes to the articulation, characterisation and assessment of the effectiveness of teaching and learning. But it is not only within the profession that teaching and learning are highlighted. The growing significance accorded to teaching and learning is evident in the strategies of individual universities and in the range of government strategies and professional bodies setting standards, championing excellence and disseminating best-practice. The approaches include national strategies, national fora, awards systems and professional bodies. Examples include Ireland's Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning; the UK's HEA Academy's Strategic Plan 2012-2016; the Australian government-established Office for Learning and Teaching and Canada's professional body, Teaching and Learning Canada (TLC/EAC). Furthermore, in order to achieve its ambitious *Europe 2020* agenda, the EU has recognised the role of third level education, highlighting not only its economic and instrumental functions but also underlining the importance of the quality of teaching. A high level European group asserted that 'the essential challenge for the higher education sector, generally speaking, is to comprehensively professionalise its teaching cohort as teachers' European Commission (2013:12). Thus, the esteem of teaching is being increased and the significance of teaching is being externally and internally recognised and analysed. Faculty are not only expected to exhibit disciplinary and pedagogical expertise but also to foster particular graduate attributes and transferable skills. Consequently, university

teachers strive not only to achieve excellence and effectiveness but also to substantiate those attributes.

The broad exhortations to excellence outlined above are accompanied by specific ambitions articulated by individual universities. Table 1 summarises the ambitions for teaching and learning set out by the different universities on the island of Ireland

Insert Table 1 here

The various strategies share common aspirations to excellence and innovation in teaching and learning and emphasise continuous professional development.

These ambitions echo the global discourse of higher education (see, for example, Ramirez *et al*., 2014). This study examines how academics' professional training and experience affect their teaching and measures the influence of contextual factors such as annual teaching loads, student diversity and budget cuts on teaching approaches. It gathers first-hand data on the teaching and assessment tools and techniques most used in university classrooms and the factors which influence teachers' strategies. It thus provides valuable insights into *how* the current cohort of political science students on the island of Ireland are being taught and the degree to which factors such as class size, professional experience, professional development in teaching and learning and other contextual issues affect teaching and assessment. Such inquiry contributes to the scholarship of teaching and learning in the discipline.

The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) in Political Science

Scholarly analysis of teaching in political science is a relatively recent development partly because 'teaching has always been seen as "less glamorous" than research albeit that most professional political scientists teach more that they research' (Goldsmith and Goldsmith, 2010: 61). There is also what Pleschová (2014) describes as the 'perception conundrum' with

research perceived as more highly valued than teaching, for career advancement. As outlined earlier, national and international strategies and policies to enhance teaching and learning practice in higher education institutions as well as increased competition for student numbers have pressured the discipline to focus on teaching and learning. This reorientation has coincided with increased academic scholarship on teaching and learning. As is often the case in the discipline, the USA has led the way with the APSA teaching and learning conference. In the European context, Britain which has been described as the most professionalised in the discipline (Mény, 2010: 19) has been at the forefront with the PSA specialist group on learning and teaching.

The significant contribution of the ECPR's standing group on teaching and learning politics and its precursor, EpsNet (the European political science network) have been influential, as has BISA's Learning and Teaching group. The profession in Ireland has come to the table a little later than others. Its national professional association, the PSAI, convened a specialist group on teaching and learning in 2009 and shortly afterwards established the PSAI prize for excellence in teaching and learning. Yet, many of the political science community on the island have been actively involved in SoTL for some time, often through affiliations within their disciplinary specialism or through national and international workshops on teaching and learning. This is evidenced by the burgeoning number of publications in the field in Ireland. Some research has focused on pedagogical approaches in the wider discipline (Murphy & Reidy, 2006; Coakley & Laver, 2007; Harris, 2012), personal pedagogy (Gormley-Heenan, 2012) and curricular content (Rickard & Doyle, 2012). Other studies have examined particular innovative techniques in praxis (Harris, 2010; Buckley, 2011; McInerney & Adshead, 2013; Donnelly & Hogan, 2013; Mariani *et al*., 2013) or curricula and pedagogical approaches for particular groups (Buckley *et al*., 2011; Buckley, 2015; Harris, 2015, Quinn, 2013). This article takes a macro approach looking at teaching and assessment practices in

the discipline and the degree to which they are influenced by a range of factors such as class size, professional development, length of tenure, external environment, and so forth.

Political science curricula tend to be wide-ranging, making comparisons complex. The range of courses taught within the discipline implies pedagogic eclecticism. Political theory lends itself to a philosophical approach; country studies may be descriptive and case-based whereas political behaviour modules champion quantitative approaches to analysis and international relations classrooms often use simulations. However, Garret notes that the large lecture, small group sessions (seminars or tutorial) and private study constitute the signature pedagogy of political science (cited in Murphy & Reidy, 2006), where signature pedagogies are the characteristic forms of teaching and learning in a discipline (Schulman, 2005: 52).This study will ascertain whether this is the case regarding political science in Ireland.

In keeping with other disciplines in the social sciences and humanities, political science has traditionally relied on the lecture to impart information and knowledge to groups of students. The lecture's popularity as a teaching technique is 'attributed to its efficiency as a *method of instruction*. It is inexpensive, since one instructor can teach a large group of students, and familiar to students and teachers alike' (Omelicheva & Avdeyeva, 2008; 603). However, critics of the traditional lecture argue that it; 'sometimes fail [s] in generating enough stimulating active learning in students' (Pleschová 2014: 139); positions students as passive receptors of learning; 'is inappropriate for developing high-level cognitive skills' (Omelicheva & Avdeyeva, 2008: 604); and is 'insufficient alone to teach a group of students with varied learning preferences' (Shellman & Turan, 2006:20).

Recently, greater emphasis has been placed on the use of active learning approaches that give students the opportunity to actively engage with academic material (Meyers & Jones, 1993). A 'core concept' in the constructivist movement, active learning is based on the premise that 'learning is a dynamic process that engenders the active engagement and participation of the

learner' (Duarte, 2013: 2) and there is agreement that it is better at promoting and enhancing student learning than passive approaches such as lectures (Meyer & Jones, 1993; Shellman & Turan, 2006; Ishiyama, 2013).

Techniques that promote 'active student learning' include simulations, problem based learning, experiential learning interactive classroom technologies, service learning, debates and group projects (Ishiyama, 2013; Duarte, 2013). These require students to do more than merely memorise and reproduce information. Instead they provide students with 'an opportunity to meaningfully talk, interact, write, read and reflect on the content, ideas and issues of an academic subject (Meyers & Jones, 1993: 6). Compared with passive approaches, active learning places greater emphasis on critical analysis and evaluation as well as on students' examination of their own values and attitudes (Bonwell & Eison, 1991 cited in Ishiyama 2013).

In their study of the teaching techniques and tools used by political science lecturers in undergraduate classes in the USA, Hartlaub and Lancaster asked faculty about the percentage of traditional lecturing used and surveyed them on the frequency with which small group exercises, simulations and service learning were incorporated in their teaching (2008: 378). Henderson *et al*. (2011) develop a more comprehensive list of learning tools. Our research draws on these studies and asks faculty in political science departments across the island of Ireland about the percentage of their class time devoted to lecturing and the frequency with which they use small group exercises, problem based learning, simulations, service learning, debates and interactive classroom technologies in both their undergraduate and postgraduate classes. Work placement learning is omitted as this is usually organised at a school or university level and tends to be a stand-alone module in an undergraduate programme.

Hartlaub and Lancaster (2008) did not ask participants about the assessment tools they use in their classrooms. With the greater emphasis in the profession on active learning and the variety of teaching and assessment techniques involved as well as developments in ICT, we hypothesised that faculty would use a wide range of assessments to evaluate student learning. To this end, participants in this research were asked to indicate the assessment tools they use from a list that included: essays, presentations, book/article reviews, learning journals, participation in on line discussions, report writing, group projects and posters. This list grew from that used by Henderson *et al*. (2011), thereby underscoring the appropriateness of the list items. A question pertaining specifically to on line teaching methods was adapted from Moore's research (2011) and also included. Thus the survey used tried and tested approaches to gather data on the use of a comprehensive range of assessment tools.

The Hartlaub and Lancaster study also sought to explain the differences in the techniques and tools used, by examining the impact of professional training, that is the type of institution from which the faculty member graduated, current professional situation and other personal characteristics such as gender, number of years as a full time lecturer and political ideology on their pedagogical choices (2008: 377). In this study, the influence of personal and professional characteristics such as gender, the length of time teaching as a full time instructor and levels of engagement in professional development activities is examined. Participants were not asked for their personal political preferences or ideological positions as they were deemed to be less relevant in an Irish context. Also such a question could have negatively impacted on response rates as it would be perceived as an unjustifiable intrusion in a relatively small community. Similarly the question on professional status was excluded due to the size of the discipline in Ireland. Including this question could have made it easy to identify individual members of the profession.

Drawing on the work of Gruber (2012) participants were also asked to rate themselves according to broad characteristics of effective university teachers. Lammers and Murphy note that '… an instructor's profile of teaching techniques is not as indicative of student learning as the quality and context with which the techniques are used' (2002: 64). Accordingly, this study also seeks to ascertain the extent to which contextual factors influence the teaching techniques and tools used. This is examined through questions on class sizes, budgetary matters and the degree of pedagogical autonomy

Desimoine (2009) asserts that 'professional development is a key to reforms in teaching and learning'. For Pleschová and Simon, 'educational development is increasingly seen as playing a strategic role' (2009: 2). Therefore, a question on professional development was also included. Recognising that good teachers are those that 'reflect on their teaching and continue to engage in professional development activities' (Ramsden *et al*., 1995 cited in Duarte, 2013: 2), participants were asked about their professional development activities such as completion of accredited teacher training programmes and or attendance at workshops, teaching and learning conferences or seminars. We anticipated that those who participate in such activities would be more likely to use active learning teaching techniques and a diversity of assessment tools than those who did not.

Methodology

To identify the tools and techniques used by faculty in Irish universities and to map the range of faculty training, an online survey was designed. The survey was piloted at the PSAI's Annual Conference in October 2013 where constructive feedback was received from participants. This enabled refinement of the initial survey tool. For the final version, the 17

survey questions[1] covered topics such as teaching techniques, tools and assessment practices (8 questions); contextual issues including professional development (5 questions) and personal characteristics and professional experience (4 questions). To find out about the use of particular pedagogical techniques and tools, faculty were asked 'which of these tools do you employ in your teaching and to what extent?' Specific questions were included about the assessment tools most frequently used. Data were also gathered about class sizes, teaching experience and the gender of respondents to identify whether such factors had an impact on the choice of tools and techniques. The work of Hartlaub and Lancaster (2008) and Henderson *et al*. (2011) provided insights for the scope and structure of some questions. But the range and focus of questions were tailored to the Irish context, based on feedback from colleagues at the PSAI conference, our own experience as teachers and insights from our involvement in the PSAI Teaching and Learning specialist group.

The survey was designed to be administered using Survey Monkey, a mechanism selected because of its ease of use and likelihood of achieving a reasonable response rate. Since faculty in the political science communities in both jurisdictions frequently network and collaborate, it was decided to seek data from all universities on the island of Ireland, notwithstanding differences in the administration of education between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland

To determine the survey population we identified the universities that have political science, politics, public administration departments/ schools etc. as illustrated in Table 2 below.

Insert Table 2 here

[1] For a copy of the survey see http://www.ul.ie/ppa/staff/dr-brid-quinn

Drawing on departmental web-sites and our familiarity with the community of practice (teachers of political science in Ireland), a list of faculty who teach relevant subjects was compiled. For the purposes of identification and simplification we restricted our focus to units rather than individuals.[2]. Our survey population included early-career and long-tenured faculty, disciplinary authorities and generalists. To be included, all had to be full time lecturers in their departments/schools. The survey was distributed by e-mail on March 21st 2014, with a link to the relevant Survey Monkey site. To ensure a reasonable response rate, the authors contacted one faculty member they knew in each university requesting them to champion the survey within their own departments. A follow–up e-mail was sent to all recipients one week after the survey had been distributed and this elicited further responses. In all, forty four online responses were received, but one (the test version) was inadmissible. Three other faculty members contacted the authors to explain their inability to respond and one e-mail had bounced automatically. Thus, 47 communications were received from the survey population of 123. This is quite a satisfactory response rate, lying as it does between the exceptionally high overall response rate of 60% for Stammers *et al*.'s study (1999), Slowey *et al*.'s response rate of 25 - 30per cent and the Hartlaub and Lancaster rate of 18 per cent. A deliberate decision was made not to break down the response rate by institution or seniority because, given the relatively small size of Ireland's political science community, reporting such details might have made it possible to identify individual respondents. However, we can state that the 43 questionnaire respondents reflect the full gamut of professional, institutional, generational, disciplinary, and gender differences. Thus, there is no discernible response bias. The data were analysed and insights were gained not only about the frequency of use of particular tools and techniques with both undergraduate and postgraduate

[2] The authors acknowledge that there are political scientists who teach in the field but who are not based in Departments that are primarily political science departments/ schools.

groups but also about the factors such as gender, length of service and class size which the literature suggests affect pedagogical choices. Discussion of the various factors and their influence is contained in later sections.

The study while generating unique and valuable data about the teaching of politics in Ireland has some limitations. Although a methodologically high response rate was achieved, an even higher response rate was anticipated because of the connectedness of Ireland's political science teaching fraternity. The survey did not distinguish the varying ways in which degree programmes are organised in different institutions, a factor which could influence teaching and assessment approaches. Specific issues arise when surveying academics since even within a close disciplinary community there can be differences of interpretation which are not uncovered when an electronic survey is the primary research tool. Furthermore, as Slowey *et al*. assert, a 'survey can of course only reflect the views of those who chose to respond' (2013: 19). The data for this survey has been deliberately aggregated so there is no identification of the specific contexts which have shaped responses and perceptions among participants. Had such data been revealed, a more nuanced interpretation would be possible but the confidentiality assured to participants might have been compromised. Future studies should include a higher proportion of open questions so as to gather more perspectives and insights.

Findings:

This section begins with a brief profile of the respondents. The majority of our forty three respondents were male (69 per cent) and had either 1-5 or 11-15 years experience as full time faculty members (see figure 1).

Insert Figure 1 here:

Data were collected on the number of hours spent teaching through a question which took cognisance of that fact that class contact hours require significant preparation and that academics have significant administrative and supervisory commitments. With regard to the number of hours spent teaching each year, not including preparation hours, supervision or marking, the bulk of participants from both genders taught between 120 and 160 hours per year (40 per cent).

Teaching Tools

The lecture is still the most popular teaching technique used in the undergraduate classroom (see table 3), a fact that supports the findings of Hartlaub and Lancaster (2008: 380) and Stammers *et al* (1999:120). The majority of respondents (59 per cent) agreed that they use lectures over 61 per cent of the time with their undergraduate groups with 40 per cent of respondents noting that more than 80 per cent of their undergraduate teaching consists of lectures. Only three respondents use lectures less than 20 per cent of the time with undergraduate classes.

Class size seems to influence the frequent use of lectures as a teaching tool for undergraduates. Those relying heavily on lectures (over 80 per cent of their undergraduate teaching tend to teach larger groups. The majority of their classes contain over 51 students. By contrast, those who use lectures less than 20 per cent of the time have few large classes, with the majority of their classes containing 25 students or less.

As might be anticipated there are strong differences between the use of lectures with undergraduate and postgraduate students. The majority of respondents (53 per cent) indicated

that they use lectures less than 40 per cent of the time with their postgraduate groups and only 5 respondents (12 per cent) said they used lectures more than 80 per cent of the time with their postgraduate students.

Annual teaching loads also appear to affect the amount of lecturing used in undergraduate and postgraduate classrooms. Those who only use lectures 20 per cent of the time in their undergraduate classes tend to have fewer teaching hours (under 120 hours). By contrast, almost half of those who use lectures 80 per cent of the time have teaching loads of 150-160 hours per annum. Those who use lectures 20 per cent of the time in their postgraduate classes tend to have fewer teaching hours compared with those for whom lectures account for 80 per cent of what they do in class.

Regarding the impact of professional development activities on classroom activity, it was found that, approximately three quarters (78 per cent) of those who use lectures either 61 per cent or more of the time in their undergraduate classes have participated in one-off workshops on teaching and learning; 35 per cent of them have completed accredited courses on teaching and learning and 39 per cent have made conference presentations on teaching and learning. 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 compared with 31 per cent of those who use lectures less than 20 per cent of the time in postgraduate settings. The figures for those attending conference presentations on teaching and learning are 40 per cent and eight per cent respectively.

Insert table 3 here

Other teaching tools frequently used in the undergraduate classroom include the Visual Learning Environment (VLE) (79 per cent), tutorials (55 per cent), seminars (46 per cent), and group presentations (33 per cent). More active learning approaches are used less

frequently: problem based learning (19 per cent), role playing/simulations and scenarios (19 per cent), workshops (10 per cent), and service learning/practicum (five per cent). However, respondents do admit to using active learning approaches occasionally: PBL (24 per cent), role playing/simulation and scenarios (50 per cent), and service learning/practicum (12 per cent).

Virtual learning environments (VLEs) such as Blackboard and Moodle are the most popular ICT based teaching technique. Few respondents frequently use podcasts (10 per cent) and online discussions fora/blogs (seven per cent) in their undergraduate classes. However, 29 per cent of respondents claim to use online discussions occasionally. The picture is somewhat similar in the postgraduate class room where online resources with the exception of VLEs are rarely used. Over 70 per cent of respondents have never used podcasts in the postgraduate classroom and only seven per cent of respondents said that they frequently engage postgraduate students in online discussions. Instead the tools most frequently used with postgraduate students include: VLEs (73 per cent), lectures (59 per cent), seminars (63 per cent), case studies (37 per cent), and group presentations (35 per cent). Lecturers are almost three times more likely to invite guest speakers to speak to postgraduate classes whereas undergraduates are twice as likely to have frequent tutorials.

Insert table 4 here

It would appear that neither class size nor professional development in the form of accredited courses has an impact on the use of active learning approaches such as PBL, role playing/simulations, scenarios and service-learning practicum in the undergraduate classroom. The same is true by and large for teaching hours. Interestingly, in the case of PBL, role playing/simulation and scenarios, those with heavier teaching loads (more than 150 hours) were more likely to use these techniques. This is commendable considering the

onerous time demands involved. Those who had undertaken some form of professional development in teaching and learning were more likely to use PBL than those who had not. However it did not have an effect on use of role play/simulations, scenarios and service learning/practicum. Interestingly those with teaching experience of 11-20 years were more likely to use all the forms of active learning discussed.

Finally there seems to be a gender effect with regard to the teaching tools used. Unlike the Hartlaub and Lancaster study which found that male faculty more likely to use lectures in class, this research found that women are more likely than men to rely more heavily on lectures with their undergraduate and postgraduate students. However it also revealed that they were also more likely than their male colleagues to use active teaching techniques such as PBL, simulations and service learning in their undergraduate and postgraduate classrooms. In contrast, the Hartlaub and Lancaster (2008) study noted no detectable gender differences in the use of simulation exercises and service learning (their survey did not include a question on PBL).

Assessment Tools

The evidence gleaned from the survey shows that fairly traditional modes of assessment predominate. There are strong similarities between the assessment tools used in the undergraduate and postgraduate classrooms as tables 5 and 6 below illustrate. When teaching undergraduates all but one of the respondents use essays frequently or occasionally as do 36 of the 40 responders regarding postgraduate teaching. The next most frequently used strategies were presentations and reviews at both levels. This reliance on traditional (i.e., non-technology based) forms of assessment echoes the findings of the UK's JISC research (Ferrell 2012). The focus on traditional forms of assessment may be linked to increased class size and student diversity as respondents included comments such as 'Yes - you move

towards exams and essays as main modes of assessment as this is easier with such large numbers'; 'mass production' and 'the range of formative assessments I use has widened. I find I need to assess factual knowledge as well as discursive ability because of the diversity of students'. Others have noted that larger classes have made groupwork 'largely impossible', led to more intensive use of VLEs and MCQ assessments and reduced interaction with final year undergraduates.

Insert table 5 here

Group projects are used frequently in just under 19 per cent of undergraduate classrooms and 18 per cent of postgraduate classrooms. Although more than 80 per cent of respondents use VLEs, participation in online discussions or blog posts as assessment tools were surprisingly low with 60 per cent of those teaching undergraduates and 63 per cent of those teaching postgraduate classes never using these assessment tools. Figures for the use of learning journals/ logs were similarly low with rates for the 'never' category being 57 per cent and 62 per cent respectively at the different levels.

Those having participated in accredited courses showed higher frequencies of the use of presentations, reviews and learning journals. However, those with between 6 and 20 years' teaching experience used a wider range of assessment strategies regardless of the extent of their professional development. Gender patterns were also evident with female faculty using a wider range of assessment tools than their male colleagues at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. At undergraduate level this may well reflect class size, of the classes with more than 100 students, 69 per cent were taught by male respondents.

There is no issue concerning classroom autonomy and selection of assessment tools as all faculty responded that they themselves decided which pedagogical tools to use. The variety

of assessment tools evidenced in the responses suggests that there is a drive towards assessment *for* learning (i.e., assessment designed to improve learning) as well as the assessment *of* learning (i.e., assessment designed to judge learning, (Crisp, 2012)). However, it is possible that institutional reporting requirements and formal documentation implicitly favour assessment *of* learning and this is an issue that could be examined in further studies.

Insert table 6 here

These findings on the assessment tools used in Irish universities suggest a strong emphasis on the declarative and procedural dimensions of learning with a lesser focus on assessing the conditional, reflective and metacognitive dimensions of learning (Henderson *et al*., 2011). Yet despite the prevalence of increased class sizes and diverse student cohorts, it is laudable that such a significant proportion of faculty incorporate so many group activities which are labour intensive.

Professional development

Professional development regarding teaching and learning is clearly a priority for respondents with 44 per cent having availed of accredited courses. Almost three quarters of the cohort have attended one-off workshops while just under 40 per cent have attended conference presentations and almost one fifth have engaged in some other form of teaching and learning training.

Insert figure 2 here

Professional development has been availed of at all career stages as figure 2 demonstrates with attendance at accredited courses being more prevalent in the early to mid-career stages. Workload does not seem a determining factor in involvement in professional development. Of the 17 respondents who attended accredited courses, twelve teach between 120 and 160

hours per academic year. The pervasiveness of professional development activity among Irish political science teachers augurs well both for the student experience and for a possible reduction in the perceived gap in status between teaching and research.

Contextual issues

An increase in teaching loads has not been universally experienced with just 56 per cent of respondents answering 'yes' when asked whether teaching loads had increased. This probably reflects the changes in enrolment patterns since in most colleges undergraduate classes are larger and postgraduate classes smaller in recent years. This change in class sizes determines the choice of tools and techniques. One respondent noted that s/he uses 'fewer time intensive' teaching methods such as service learning as a consequence of higher teaching loads.
Respondents have experienced greater diversity of ability among students (56 per cent) and this affects teaching decisions. The following response encapsulates the changes resulting from the diversity of ability among cohorts: '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'.

Some respondents commented on the impact of cut-backs and change on their teaching modes – as summed up in the following comment: 'Catering for larger classes (undergraduate) and smaller classes (PG) and the increased diversity of students has required different tools'. The influence of contextual issues on selection of teaching and assessment tools is not as strong as might have been expected. Over 45 per cent of respondents answered no and a further 19 per cent answered 'don't know' when asked whether budget changes, increased student numbers and diversity affected their choice of teaching tools. A gender

dimension was also evident with 46 per cent of female respondents and just 27 per cent of male respondents changing their approach as a result of the contextual factors

When asked to rate the characteristics of effective teaching the majority of respondents ranked ‘teaching as encouraging activity and independence in learning’ either first (44 per cent) or second (41 per cent). This was followed by ‘teaching as motivating learning’ 37 per cent of respondents cited this as their first preference while 32 per cent of them gave it their second one. Only two respondents ranked ‘teaching as establishing interpersonal relations’ highly, that is their first or second preference. These responses indicate the importance attributed to the student learning experience and chime with international trends (Fink, 2013).

Conclusions

This study was designed to explore the tools, techniques and professional development activities prevalent in politics classrooms in universities on the island of Ireland. In considering the external forces which contextualise university teaching in Ireland, it was found that there is a strong emphasis on both fostering and demonstrating innovation and quality as indicated by national and institutional strategies and developments in praxis. These priorities accord with the recurrent themes in the international literature on the scholarship of teaching and learning. Reflecting these insights, the study used a survey tool to capture the prevalent practices in selected aspects of pedagogy in Irish universities in spring 2014 as well as information on professional development, teaching loads and the characteristics of effective teaching. Because the political science community in Ireland is relatively small, caution must be exercised in generalising from the survey. Nevertheless, the study provides evidence and enlightenment about pedagogy and praxis.

The research revealed that a mix of conventional and modern teaching techniques is used but that the lecture is still the most popular teaching technique in the undergraduate classroom

(even among faculty who have engaged in accredited professional development). This reliance on the lecture as a predominant teaching tool in undergraduate classrooms reflects class sizes and received practice. Notwithstanding the widespread use of the lecture, the survey found that faculty use a varied range of other teaching tools at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels, the most popular being VLEs and group-teaching tools. Guest speakers are used more frequently at postgraduate level than with undergraduate students. The more active learning approaches such as simulations, scenarios and PBL are used less frequently but there is an evident willingness to adopt such approaches and to use them on an occasional rather than regular basis. It is noteworthy that neither class size nor accredited professional development seems to influence the decision to use active methods (with the exception of PBL). Faculty's willingness to use and adapt inter-active and labour-intensive approaches in a climate of increasing demands is indicative of their dedication and flexibility.

The choice of assessment tools echoes the teaching approaches with fairly conventional approaches used frequently, particularly in large undergraduate classes. There is, however, evidence of a varied repertoire of assessment approaches with wide use of group activities. An observable trend is the use of a greater variety of assessment tools by those with between 6 and 20 years' teaching experience. There are also clear gender differences in choice of assessment techniques. While the essay is the most frequent choice of both sexes, female faculty use presentations, logs and reports to a significantly greater extent than their male colleagues. Overall, there is a blend of assessment techniques which champion higher-order skills and transferable skills.

Another positive outcome from the study is evidence that professional development is actively embraced by political science faculty in Ireland despite increasing class sizes and reduced financial resources. The proportion of respondents (90 per cent) who have engaged in some form of professional development is very high in the discipline and reflects Fink's

assertion that 'faculty development has become well established and has grown into a semi-mature activity with higher education internationally' (2013: 8). It surpasses the outcomes of the Slowey *et al.*'s survey where 27 per cent of respondents 'regularly' and 49 per cent 'occasionally' engaged in structured professional development activities. The results of our study indicate a strong valuing of, interest in and commitment to professional development within the discipline. While the percentages engaging in accredited professional development are very similar for the sexes, there is an interesting gender dimension to involvement in shorter training interventions with more women attending such events. This occurs despite the fact that more of the female respondents had more teaching hours than the male respondents. This Irish data accords with Myers' assertion that 'female faculty in higher education are more likely to practice the SoTL as they inform and improve their in-class behaviours with external pedagogical resources' (2008:41).

Despite the language of managerialism in which discussions on education in Ireland are frequently couched, there was unanimity within both jurisdictions regarding the issue of pedagogical autonomy. All respondents indicated that they make the decisions about the choice of tools and techniques so they can tailor their teaching to the specific cohorts and topics they teach. The questions about budgets, student numbers and student diversity elicited varying perspectives and impacts. Almost half of the females and only over a quarter of the male respondents stated that changes in these spheres affected their choice of teaching and assessment tools.

While the study generated rich and insightful data, further research is merited on a number of the topics covered. It would be informative to document the full range of teaching tools and assessment techniques which faculty employ. Qualitative data on why they make particular choices about teaching and assessment would be instructive, as would data on the way faculty link teaching and research. Research is also required on institutional reporting and quality

assurance requirements. More disciplinary insights would also prove useful, for example, curricular content on cognate programmes and modules and the threshold concepts that faculty highlight. Information about the content and impact of different training interventions and the barriers to engaging in such opportunities would be illuminating. The type of institutional support that exists to enable faculty to engage in professional development and the recognition that is given to such activity could also be usefully documented.

This study demonstrates that teaching matters in Ireland's political science community. It suggests that there is strong support for the teaching mission of universities and a commitment to innovation, pedagogic adaptability and continuing professional development in an educational landscape where cut-backs and constraints are the norm. The study also affirms recent developments in SoTL amongst political science faculty in Ireland and connects the reality of teaching politics in Ireland with the actuality and ambitions of educationalists elsewhere.

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Table 1. Higher Education Institutions' declared commitment to the pursuit of excellence in teaching and learning (as of August 2014)

Institution	**Commitment (policy document)**
Dublin City University	'The pursuit of excellence in teaching, learning, research and innovation is central to DCU's Vision and Mission' (Strategic Plan p 31)
National University of Ireland, Maynooth	'NUI Maynooth will consolidate its international reputation as a university known for outstanding teaching, excellent research, its global outlook, effective engagement with the society it serves'(Strategic Plan, p. 12).
Trinity College Dublin	'Excellence in teaching and learning' is the title and focus of the Education section of the plan (Strategic Plan, p.8)
Queens University Belfast	'In looking forward, Queen's will maintain a clear and consistent strategic direction focused on excellence in learning and teaching, excellence in research and leadership in corporate social responsibility '(Corporate Plan, p. 5)
University College Cork	We will continue to pursue excellence in teaching, learning and the student experience (Strategic Plan, p. 15).
University College Dublin	'The success of this strategy will depend on the fundamentals: excellence and innovation in teaching and learning' (Strategic Plan, p. 18)
National University of Ireland Galway	'A commitment to excellence in teaching, research and scholarship' (Strategic Plan, p. 17)
University of Limerick	We will identify the personal skills and perspectives required to make the University a centre of teaching and research excellence'(Strategic Plan, p. 10)

University of Ulster	Corporate Goal 1: Excellent, Accessible Teaching And Learning (Corporate Plan, p. 4)

Table 2: Institutions and Units surveyed.[3]

Institution	**School/Department**
Dublin City University	School of Law and Government
National University of Ireland Galway	School of Political Science and Sociology
Queen's University Belfast	School of Politics, International Studies and Philosophy
Trinity College Dublin	Department of Political Science
University College Cork	Department of Government
University College Dublin	School of Politics and International Relations
University of Limerick	Department of Politics and Public Administration
University of Ulster	School of Criminology, Politics and Social Policy.

[3] Email details of individuals working as full time lecturers in these departments/schools were gathered on March 3rd 2013.

Table 3: Which of these tools do you employ in your undergraduate teaching and to what extent?

Which of these tools do you employ in your undergraduate teaching and to what extent ?

Answer Options	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely	Never	Response Count
VLE	33	4	3	2	42
Case-studies	7	13	13	8	41
Group presentations	14	14	4	10	42
Guest speaker	2	21	9	10	42
Lecture	41	0	1	0	42
Meetings	3	14	13	12	42
Online discussions/blogs	3	12	12	15	42
Podcasts	4	3	8	27	42
PBL activities	8	10	11	13	42
Research papers	19	14	5	2	40
Role playing/simulations	4	10	11	17	42
Scenarios	4	11	13	14	42
Seminars	19	12	4	6	41
Service Learning	2	5	4	31	42
Reading	26	12	3	0	41
Core Textbooks	24	11	4	3	42
Tutorials	23	6	6	7	42
Workshops	4	9	13	16	42
Other	4	6	0	15	25
				answered question	**42**

Table 4: Which of these tools do you employ in your postgraduate teaching and to what extent?

Which of these tools do you employ in your postgraduate teaching and to what extent?

Answer Options	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely	Never	Response Count
VLE	30	4	3	4	41
Case-studies	15	10	7	9	41
Group presentations	14	9	7	12	41
Guest speaker	5	18	6	13	41
Lecture	24	7	6	4	41
Meeting	10	17	3	12	41
Online discussions/blogs	3	11	9	19	41
Podcasts	3	4	7	29	41
PBL activities	6	8	10	17	40
Research papers	24	8	4	5	40
Role playing/simulations	5	4	11	22	41
Scenarios	3	6	11	20	40
Seminars	25	10	1	5	40
Service Learning	1	2	5	31	39
Reading	29	9	0	3	41
Core Textbooks	17	8	9	8	41
Tutorials	9	6	5	21	40
Workshops	4	12	5	19	40
Other	1	4	2	17	24
				answered question	**41**

Table 5: Which of the following assessment tools do you use in your undergraduate classes and to what extent?

Which of the following assessment tools do you use in your undergraduate classes and to what extent?

Answer Options	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely	Never	Response Count
Essays	35	6	1	0	42
Presentations	19	12	3	8	42
book/article reviews	9	11	7	15	42
Learning journals/logs	6	5	7	24	42
Online quizzes or testing	3	4	9	25	41
Online discussions	1	8	8	25	42
Reports	5	10	7	20	42
Group projects	8	10	11	13	42
Orals	0	8	3	31	42
Posters	1	4	6	32	42
Quizzes or mid-term tests	2	7	11	22	42
Other	5	5	1	17	27
				answered question	**42**

Table 6: Which of the following assessment tools do you use in your undergraduate classes and to what extent?

Which of the following assessment tools do you use in your postgraduate classes and to what extent?

Answer Options	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely	Never	Response Count
Essays	34	2	1	3	40
Presentations	24	10	3	3	40
Book/article reviews	15	6	5	13	39
Learning journals/logs	6	5	4	24	39
Online quizzes or testing	0	0	6	34	40
Online discussions	0	5	10	25	40
Reports	5	9	4	21	39
Group projects	7	9	9	15	40
Orals	2	2	3	32	39
Posters	2	1	4	33	40
Quizzes or mid-term tests	0	2	6	34	40
Other	4	4	3	15	26
			answered question		**40**

Figure 1: Gender and years as a full time lecturer

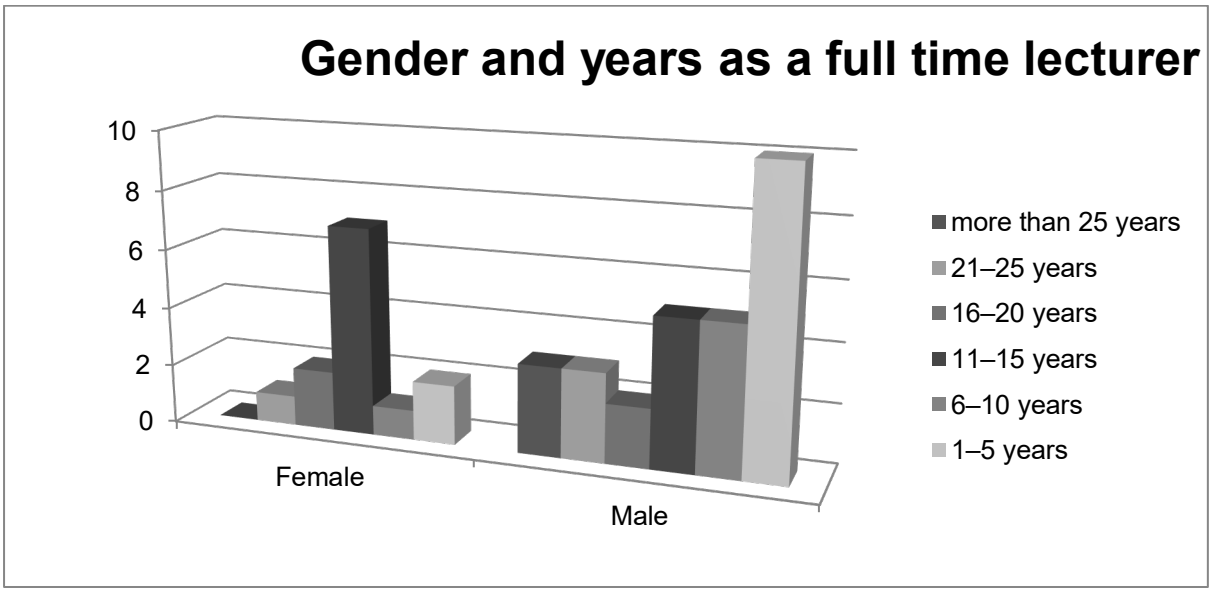


Figure 2: Professional development in teaching and learning.

