University of Kent

Kent Academic Repository

O'Mahony, Jane (2020) *Teaching the EU in Brexit Britain: responsive teaching at a time of uncertainty and change*. Journal of Contemporary European Research, 16 (1). pp. 37-50.

Downloaded from
https://kar.kent.ac.uk/80012/ The University of Kent's Academic Repository KAR

The version of record is available from
https://doi.org/10.30950/jcer.v16i1.1082

This document version
Publisher pdf

DOI for this version

Licence for this version
UNSPECIFIED

Additional information

Versions of research works

Versions of Record
If this version is the version of record, it is the same as the published version available on the publisher's web site. Cite as the published version.

Author Accepted Manuscripts
If this document is identified as the Author Accepted Manuscript it is the version after peer review but before type setting, copy editing or publisher branding. Cite as Surname, Initial. (Year) 'Title of article'. To be published in ***Title of Journal*** , Volume and issue numbers [peer-reviewed accepted version]. Available at: DOI or URL (Accessed: date).

Enquiries
If you have questions about this document contact ResearchSupport@kent.ac.uk. Please include the URL of the record in KAR. If you believe that your, or a third party's rights have been compromised through this document please see our Take Down policy (available from https://www.kent.ac.uk/guides/kar-the-kent-academic-repository#policies).

Journal of Contemporary European Research

Volume 16, Issue 1 (2020)

Research Article

Teaching the EU in Brexit Britain: Responsive Teaching at a Time of Uncertainty and Change

Jane O'Mahony

Citation

O'Mahony, J. (2020). 'Teaching the EU in Brexit Britain: Responsive Teaching at a Time of Uncertainty and Change', *Journal of Contemporary European Research* 16(1): 37-50.
https://doi.org/10.30950/jcer.v16i1.1082

First published at: www.jcer.net

Abstract

The decision by the electorate of the United Kingdom (UK) in June 2016 marked the first time in its history that a member state of the European Union (EU) voted to leave. For the EU, its story is no longer primarily one of cooperation and integration but also of disintegration. For the UK, implementing Brexit has thrown its economic, geopolitical and territorial models into question in an unprecedented way. From the moment of the referendum result it was clear it was no longer going to be business as usual for scholars and teachers of the EU in the UK. Drawing on an action research approach, this article explores how the referendum result affected what and how this educator teaches the EU at a time of uncertainty and change for the UK. This is best encapsulated in the idea of *responsiveness*. This included responding to students' desires to broaden and deepen what they study as they try to make sense of myriad complex and continuously changing political events in an age of the internet and social media, as well as navigating new social dynamics that have emerged in the classroom at a time when the politics of identity is increasingly salient.

Keywords

EU; Brexit; Responsive teaching; Action research; Identity; Politicisation; Social media

Even at the best of times, teaching the EU is challenging (Parker 2016: 37). From the Maastricht Treaty onwards, students of the EU have grappled with a complex entity whose membership, level and scope of integration has expanded and become more differentiated. Added to this, in the last ten years the EU has experienced a confluence of both fast-and slow-burning crises including a Eurozone crisis, a Ukraine crisis, a refugee crisis, a terrorist crisis, a Brexit crisis and a rule of law crisis (Börzel 2018: 475; Seabrooke and Tsingou 2019). Domestic and transnational politics intervene in EU-level politics as never before and the EU has become increasingly salient in domestic politics with vote gains for populist radical right political parties in a number of member states. Students of the EU are learning about a complex, constantly evolving and often bewildering subject in unsettled times. In this context, the phenomenon of Brexit is yet another challenge, amongst many, for students of the EU to contend with.

Yet Brexit is also a novel historical event in the trajectory of European integration. For the first time an EU member state has chosen exit over voice and loyalty (Laffan 2017: 9). While the origins of many of the crises experienced by the EU in the last ten years or so have been exogenous, Brexit is an endogenous shock to the system (Schimmelfennig 2018a: 969). For teachers of the EU, particularly those working within the UK, it was clear on 24 June 2016 that it would no longer be business as usual in the classroom. Ever since this event, Brexit continues to affect the teaching of the EU in the UK and also beyond. Yet teaching the EU in the UK post-referendum is a singular experience: the decision to leave the EU means that students of the EU studying in the UK are living within a political system that is in a process of significant change, mired with uncertainty, with the potential to significantly impact their lives and futures.

While Brexit is just one issue amongst many affecting EU politics, it dominates the UK political landscape as its political and governance systems are consumed with the process and implications of withdrawal. Brexit entails a fundamental reset of Britain's economic and geopolitical orientation in the world, risks undermining the peace process in Northern Ireland and the settlements with the devolved administrations within the UK. Its consequences will be felt for many years to come. Implementing Brexit has disturbed and disrupted the UK's political system, hitherto known for its stability. Students of the EU in the UK are living through what Evans and Menon have termed 'one of those rare moments when an advanced liberal democracy might be witnessing a profound and far-reaching political recalibration' (Evans and Menon 2017: xvi). Through their lived experience, they find themselves in the midst of a 'real-time' social experiment of what the process of withdrawal from the EU really entails.

Within this new context, as a political science lecturer who teaches EU politics and policy-making at university level in the UK, the key question I seek to address in this article is: how have I changed my teaching since the Brexit vote? Following the referendum, in order to try to begin to make sense of this question, I conducted an examination into my own pedagogical practice using elements of action research, an analytical framework that can be used by educators to introduce problem-solving measures in their teaching and at the same time engage in a process of self-reflective enquiry of such measures so as to understand and improve their own practice (Wilson 2017, 99). In so doing, I reflected on the introduction of a new aspect to my teaching brought on by Brexit: responsiveness.

Influenced by ongoing developments in domestic, EU and global politics in an environment of continuously evolving politics I have become more responsive to students' needs in terms of what I teach, taking more of a lead from them on what they want to learn, often triggered by events, thus branching out from our more traditional curriculum. I also recognised that I needed to address more systematically the impact of advances in digital technology on my teaching of the EU. In recent years there has been a massive expansion in the availability of information and analysis for students on the EU, often representing polarised views of the EU. This direct access to wide range of information and analyses on the EU can have many positive benefits for students in terms of increasing and democratising access to information and knowledge (Beetham and Sharpe 2013). However, in a world where expertise is questioned, teachers still have an important role to play in terms of helping students to hone their critical thinking skills in evaluating the abundance of commentary, evidence and data now easily available online, assisting them to overcome information overload and interrogating issues of bias (Cardwell 2017; Thornton 2012).

The other political shock of 2016 was the election of Donald J. Trump as President of the United States (US). Brexit and the Trump Presidency have become closely associated with each other (Van Middelaar 2019, 140; Norris and Inglehart 2019) and there are also parallels to be drawn from a teaching perspective. Academics teaching political science in the US have reflected on how Trump's election affected their teaching in ways similar to my own experience. Daniel Drezner (2018), Professor of International Politics at Tufts University, described how he took to Twitter to compare with other academics how, since Trump's election, they have had to adjust their course materials in their teaching. Responses focused on efforts to reconcile ongoing events with their understanding of how the world works, including creating completely new courses, redesigning existing ones to include new elements reflecting issues arising from the Trump presidency and the challenge of contextualising latest events in their teaching. They also spoke of undertaking more work with students on how to teach them to be 'critical consumers of news', as well as making references to anxiety and confusion in the classroom.

This article proceeds as follows. First, I outline how I responded to developments following the referendum result in my teaching and investigated my own teaching practice using elements of action research. Second, I explore a number of insights gained from this process, including how Brexit and

other challenges facing the EU have prompted me to broaden and deepen what and how I teach, how the politics of identity can enter and be used in the University classroom and how the role of teachers can evolve as students respond to learning about the EU at a time of uncertainty and change and with a profusion of information available to them online.

METHODOLOGY: ACTION RESEARCH AS AN APPROACH TO EXAMINE EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE

Used first to describe research that helps a practitioner, action research is often associated with healthcare policy contexts, but it has also been used in education, agriculture and international development research (Arnold and Norton 2018). Action research is method that can be used by higher education practitioners interested in improving their students' learning experiences through the process of researching, interrogating and evaluating their own practice (Arnold and Norton 2018: 4; McNiff 2013: 23). Action research can involve introducing and evaluating new changes to practice and is collaborative as it can incorporate dialogue with those who are participating in those changes, e.g. students. Rather than just evaluating the effectiveness of practices or as an approach to improve techniques of teaching and/or assessment, action research can seek to understand teaching as it takes place within a broader social, cultural and historical context and endeavours to challenge the assumptions that underpin practice (McNiff 2013: 24; Arnold and Norton 2018: 5). According to Noffke: 'action research is part of the process of constructing what it means to be a teacher and involves interconnections between the identities of the researcher and the researched' (quoted in Arnold and Norton 2018: 5).

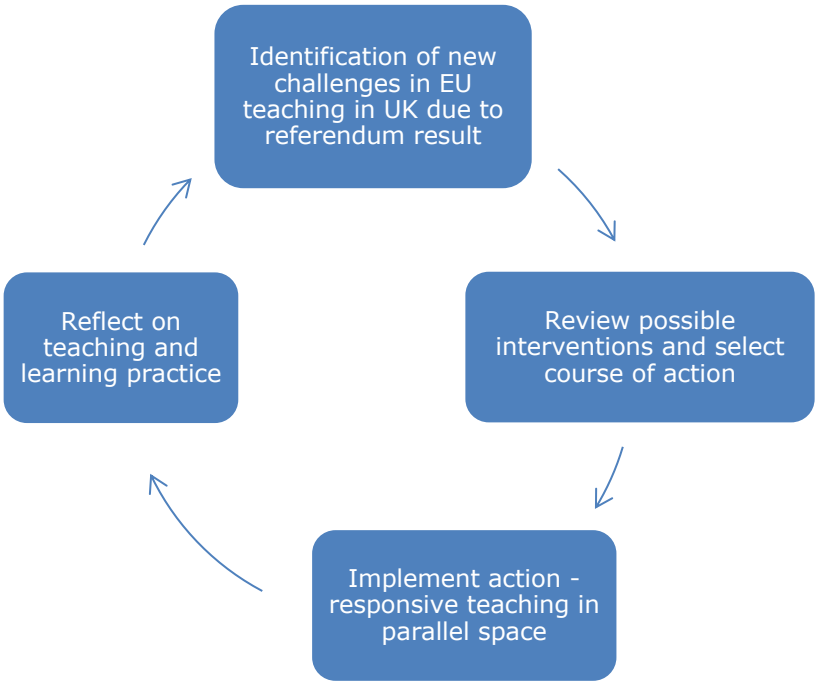
Action research combines formal inquiry into an aspect of practice (research) that is carried out alongside changes in practice (action). As a type of inquiry, it is reflexive as it requires practitioner researchers to keep their own knowledge, values and professional activities under review. It is collaborative as it encourages engagement with others in the process and it is contextual as it acknowledges institutional, national, historical and societal influences (Arnold and Waterman 2018: 9). Action research typically involves a number of steps or stages in a cycle beginning with an examination of practice, exploration of the context in which practice takes place and the identification of possible actions to enhance practice; the implementation of action; the observation of action; the reflection and articulation of learning from the process and finally a reassessment of practice and a consideration of opportunities for a further cycle of research. McNiff represents this cycle as follows: Planning -> Acting -> Observing -> Reflecting -> Planning (McNiff 2013: 54-71).

In reality, action research is not always a linear process. Unexpected findings, problems and new questions can emerge out of the process of enquiry and not just in the period of reflection following the research. In this way as a research process it can be fluid, open and responsive (Koshy, Koshy and Waterman 2011: 6). In addition, many aspects of the lessons learned are likely to be linked to developing an individual teacher's practice in their own particular setting rather than creating generalisable rules for other practitioners. That said, some findings may resonate with and be relatable to others in their own contexts (Arnold and Norton 2018: 24).

Action research was used in this study to help gain greater knowledge and understanding of how changing political events such as Brexit affected my teaching of the EU in the UK. In the cycle of action research conducted, following the referendum result the initially identified action consisted of the setting up of a new parallel teaching space with my students alongside lectures and seminars where in one extra teaching event each week we branched off from the existing curriculum. In this new space I took my students' lead in terms of widening the curriculum, giving them agency over the subjects we would cover in class as together we responded to ongoing events and the questions and issues they inspired.[1]

The action research approach taken in this study can be illustrated as follows:

Figure 1: An Action Research Cycle on teaching the EU in the context of Brexit



Adapted from: Arnold and Norton 2018

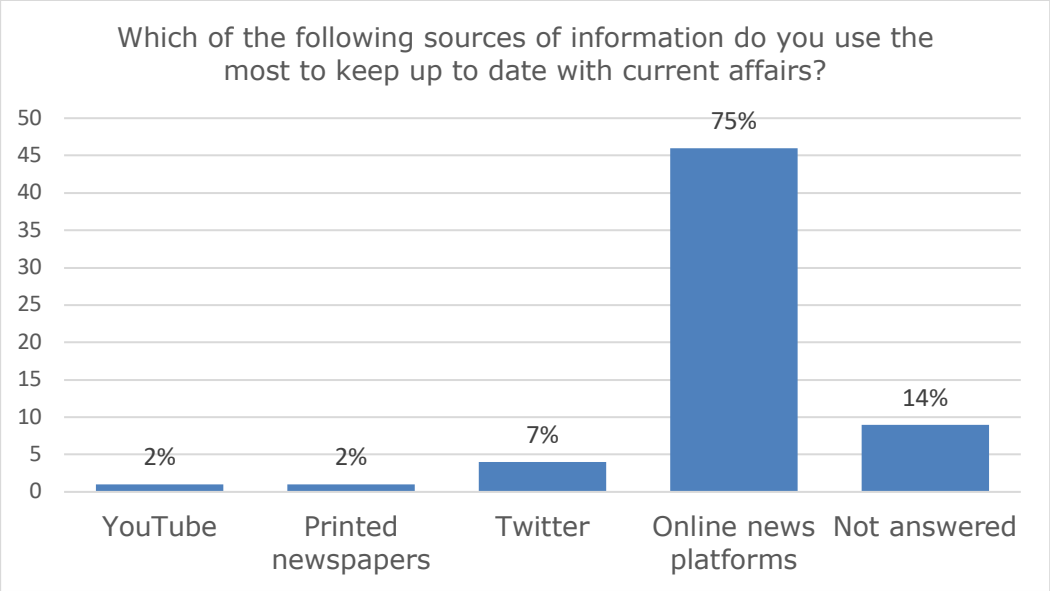
Alongside the introduction of this action I conducted two small surveys of undergraduate students in the 2016/7 academic year in order to gauge their own needs with regard to their learning. At the beginning of the academic year an initial short survey was conducted online using the audience response system application Socrative to a second-year undergraduate cohort of an introductory EU politics course on the sources of information and media they used to gather information on current affairs (61 responses, 66 per cent response rate). A second qualitative survey was conducted later in the academic year with final year undergraduate students on a higher-level EU policy-making module once the initial action had been put in place (28 responses, 88 per cent response rate). This survey asked more in-depth qualitative questions of students regarding sources of information they use to study the EU as well as the challenges of studying the EU at a time of change, including Brexit.[2] I also kept an informal log of my teaching, using it to note down important observations and reflections on my practice as teaching progressed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Since the arrival of digital technologies there has been an exponential increase in information readily available on the EU and accessible to anyone with a computer/mobile device and an internet connection. The development and deployment of information technology developments can very much enhance learning as students of politics learn about and engage with issues that change often on a daily basis (Pleschova 2015: 291). Both surveys conducted as part of this research into my teaching practice post-referendum showed how much students use online sources and social media to access information on current affairs and the EU. As figures 2 and 3 show, the vast majority of students surveyed in the first online survey used information technology, particularly online news platforms, to access information on current affairs. When it comes to social media, figure 3 shows that for just over

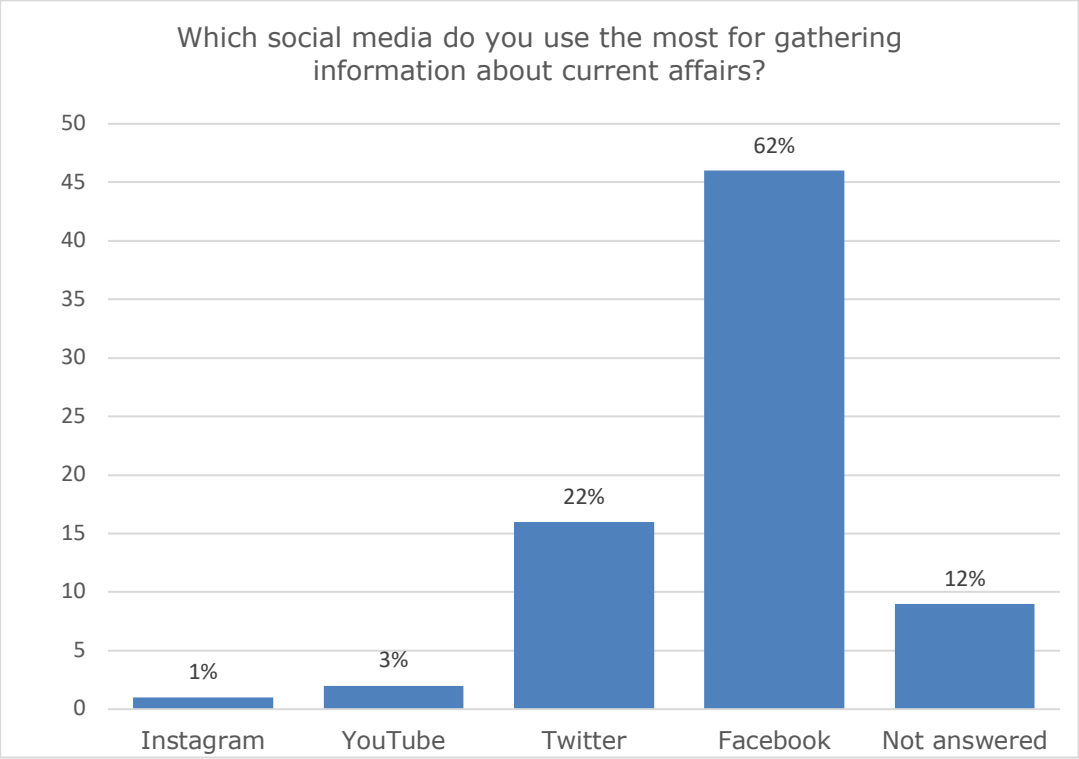
half of those students surveyed, Facebook was their most used type of social media network to gather information.

Figure 2



Total responses: 61 (66%)

Figure 3



Total responses: 61 (66%)

In the second qualitative survey[3] students were asked whether and how they used social media in helping them to learn about the EU. In their answers they spoke of how social media and online news platforms can be useful to help them keep up with rapidly changing political events:

> 'For the EU, especially current affairs, social media (Twitter) is a fantastic way to keep up with developments. Especially for Brexit, EU summits, international affairs and polling data' (Student 12).

> 'I follow the EU institutions on Twitter and have found this really helpful for keeping track of what is going on. For example, my dissertation is on EU enlargement in the Western Balkans and Federica Mogherini visited the region last week, so finding her reports via Twitter has been very helpful' (Student 23).

> 'Social media can be a useful way of sharing information…. It's particularly useful for issues like Brexit that are constantly developing' (Student 14).

However, this wealth of information also brings with it a number of challenges. Access to a superabundance of information may create a scenario of information overload, which can hamper learning unless students are trained in how to deal with such a vast information supply and become critical and reflective consumers of information themselves (Thornton 2015; 2012: 97). The potential information overload from access to online information and social media means teachers play an important role as guides to students in teaching them the skills of how to interpret data, select and evaluate information that is both accurate and useful to them and understand and analyse how arguments on issues are built.

The second survey showed clear signs of students developing as critical consumers of news and information, triangulating information, data and commentary from multiple sources, in line with the responsive approach adopted in my teaching. One student surveyed commented:

> 'I usually get my information from Twitter and Facebook, by following BBC World, Bloomberg Brexit, the EU Commission and Al-Jazeera. As the EU is a broad topic and knowledge comes from different perspectives, it helps on getting current topics of the week and provides current issues for us to think about' (Student 18).

Others signalled their caution, if not scepticism, of online information:

> 'I use Twitter sometimes because I follow some politicians, academics, experts etc. and obviously news accounts so I sometimes find information, articles etc. but in general I'm also cautious because I know you can find literally anything and everything on there. More 'classical sources' remain my main source of information' (Student 6).

> 'I use some forms of social media, mainly to gain information on the news. However, I try not to take it so seriously' (Student 10).

Interestingly, some students did not wish to use the internet or social media to help with their learning:

> 'Personally, social media distracts me so I try to stay away from it when working' (Student 25).

Students were also aware of the impact of the timeliness of events on academic research and printed publication lead-in times and the added issue this presents for their learning and research. According to one student surveyed, the most challenging aspect of studying the EU at this time of change is 'gathering academic sources that are up to date with recent events of Brexit and populism – even articles from a year ago could be considered to be out of date in some aspects' (Student 1). Digital and

social media technology including YouTube, Twitter and online instantaneous recordings of key speeches, academic talks and online academic blogs can be important sources of up to date information, knowledge and research for students but require careful navigation on the part of both the teacher and student. Teachers can also integrate these digital innovations into online visual learning environments widely used in university teaching.

A key challenge for students and scholars of the EU currently is uncertainty regarding the future development of the EU and particularly surrounding the UK-EU relationship and the future of the UK post-Brexit. The pervasive uncertainty and fast-paced coverage regarding the UK's future relationship with the EU can be challenging for students to deal with in their learning. Many students referred directly to this uncertainty in the qualitative survey when asked what, for them, is the most challenging aspect of studying the EU at the present time, commenting that this has both positive and negative aspects:

> 'There's a lot of uncertainty about the EU's future, which leads to key assumptions being questioned. However, that also makes studying the EU at this time interesting' (Student 14).
>
> 'The levels of uncertainty arising from Brexit are the most challenging, nevertheless this is the most interesting part as well' (Student 13).
>
> 'I think the most challenging aspect has been studying an organisation that is either a car without a driver or with too many drivers wanting to go in different directions. There is no telling how the EU will change in the next few years which is both difficult and interesting' (Student 17).

A number referred to the speculative nature of analysing the future of the EU and also the Brexit process, e.g.:

> 'With things changing so often many things we say in class are very speculative and so can't necessarily be said with much certainty. But in some ways, this is good, it lets us give our view of how we think things might or should go' (Student 2).
>
> 'Trying to deal with questions of the future post-Brexit is the biggest challenge, when it feels even our government has no idea….' (Student 23).

In addition, the assumption or presumption that teachers know more than their students is somewhat undermined in circumstances such as Brexit where due to digital technology students often can be aware of events before teachers, when events can sometimes occur 'live' in the classroom and where students can be aware of useful research that the teacher has yet to come across. In this context and in my own experience, it was important to recognise my role as a facilitator of knowledge for students in my teaching but also to acknowledge that students and teachers are also collaborators in sharing and making sense of new information and research.

As well as reflecting on the survey results, using an action research approach enabled me to glean a number of insights into my teaching the EU in the UK post-referendum relating to what and how I teach and what students want to explore further. The initial action of creating a parallel teaching space alongside the requirements of the set curriculum as mandated by UK university specifications had the effect of creating of what can be termed an *exilic* teaching space outside of lectures and seminars where students and I worked in partnership as co-learners to discuss and answer questions of their own choosing as they responded to ongoing political events and developments (see further Brogan 2017).[4] In this way, Brexit inspired and challenged me to break out of a teacher-controlled, heavily

curriculum-based mode of pedagogy and to be more flexible in my teaching of the EU, involving student agency to a greater degree.

Making connections in an expanding EU curriculum

The steer I received from students led to a widening and deepening of the EU as an object of study, greater connections made within and without the discipline of political science as well as with other disciplines including law, history, economics and international political economy. In our parallel space, students wished to understand in greater depth the linkages between domestic and EU level politics and comparative public policy as well as a wish to make links between domestic and international legal frameworks including trade. They also wished to address the big questions and challenges facing the EU today, particularly in the broader global context of the liberal internationalist order under stress.

Until the eurozone crisis there was a widespread assumption prevalent in academic work on the EU that the EU was a settled system. Scholarship in the decade before the euro crisis focused on institutional and governance aspects of European integration, enhancing our knowledge and understanding of the dynamics of governance processes within the EU but as Laffan acknowledges, 'at a cost of neglecting politics other than technocratic politics and the cost of paying insufficient attention to power' (Laffan 2017: 18). The core curriculum of many courses on the EU, including my own and as also seen in many undergraduate textbooks on the EU, reflected this emphasis which tended to treat European issues and domestic politics as separate. The challenge of keeping track of developments in all member states and the difficulty of cross-country comparison as the EU deepened its integration and widened its membership also fed into this European-level technocratic focus in both scholarship and teaching (Wallace 2017: 11).

The sequence of challenges affecting the EU since 2008 and the increased fragmentation of domestic politics in many EU member states with rising nationalist and populist discourse has prompted both students and scholars of the EU alike to wrestle with the big existential questions facing the EU. Significant moments in the evolution of the EU have tended to inspire new departures in theorising on the EU and European integration and the last ten years are no exception to this. From the eurozone crisis to the refugee crisis and now with Brexit, scholars have renewed their focus on understanding the institutional and constitutional transformation of the EU in both positive and negative directions as well as its resilience. This was also reflected in the new questions my students wanted to answer and explore in our *exilic* space as they responded to ongoing events.

Through their post-functionalist theory published on the cusp of the Eurozone crisis, Hooghe and Marks showed how conceptions of identity are having an independent effect on the trajectory and outcomes of European integration and affect voters' and elite decisions about national and international politics (Hooghe and Marks 2009). Other scholars have examined the limitations of integration theories such as neofunctionalism and liberal intergovernmentalism, recasting and applying them to the Euro and refugee crises (e.g. Schimmelfennig 2017, 2018a; Niemann and Ioannou 2015). Students have similarly become alive again to these key questions and frameworks regarding European integration, mirroring this emphasis of many scholars. Combined with the impact of a succession of crises affecting the EU, the Brexit vote also led both students and scholars to question whether we have reached the limits of European integration. While Vollard (2014) and Webber (2014) focused on the forces behind disintegration in the EU well before the Brexit vote, since 2016 scholars such as Schimmelfennig (2018b), Jones (2018) and Leruth et.al. (2019) have also begun to systematically theorise the dynamics of disintegration and differentiated disintegration. Hodson and Puetter have even gone so far as to conduct a thought experiment on what EU scholars would study if the EU were to fall (Hodson and Puetter 2018).

Trying to understand the EU's multiple challenges including Brexit has also reminded us that the EU cannot solely be examined and understood through exclusive disciplinary lenses alone (Manners and Whitman 2016). By its very nature understanding the beast that is the EU, as with many issues of political concern, involves the interlocking nature of a variety of economic, social and legal factors and dynamics and opens out new opportunities to adopt multidisciplinary approaches to studying the EU (Kauffman 2015: 111). Prompted by my students' questions responding to events since the referendum, it became clear that helping to introduce them to the process of looking at the EU through multiple theoretical and disciplinary lenses enabled them to make stronger connections and more in-depth critical analyses of the EU and its integrative processes.

Identity in teaching the EU

Teaching EU politics in the UK since the Brexit vote has shown that identity issues and the social context within which teaching takes place are also present in the classroom experience. Although the determinants of the Brexit vote are multiple, in their research some scholars have found that attitudes to intra-EU migration may have been an important driver of the Brexit referendum result (e.g. Clarke et.al. 2016). It is certainly the case since the referendum result that the politics of identity has become much more salient the UK and also in discussions in the classroom (and this can also be influenced by where within the UK teaching takes place).

Increasingly in our discussions where British students were joined with other European and international students, they realised that they have different experiences of EU membership based on where they are from. This echoes the insights of scholars such as Diez Medrano (2003) and De Vries (2018) who, at different times in their research, have investigated how our views about the European project can be affected by our national perspectives. For Diez Medrano:

> 'People approach the topic of European integration equipped with a cultural repertoire that tends to vary along sociographic, political and national lines. This cultural repertoire includes, among other things, knowledge, habitus, stories, memories and world views, upon which people draw more or less consciously when framing objects and problems' (2003; 6).

Underpinning De Vries' more recent research is the key insight: 'people's evaluations of and experiences with the European project are fundamentally framed by the national circumstances in which they find themselves' (2018: vii). For De Vries, the challenge now is to understand more about the exact way in which national conditions matter for public opinion about European integration and how they relate to behaviour in elections and referendums.

When it comes to teaching the EU, rather than ignoring or minimising the issues of how we identify with, and our national experiences of, the EU in the classroom (as had been my own practice in the past out of a desire to be as objective as possible), it can be useful as part of the learning process to acknowledge them explicitly and integrate them into our teaching in order to enhance understanding. How can this be done? For Wallace (2017: 9-10), we need to pay more attention to the stories or narratives that we tell each other about Europe and the EU and what membership means. As a way of exploring this further, having students deploy the concept of narratives or stories in the classroom can help engage their cognitive frames and personal experiences in a new way, increasing their ability to make connections (Bode and Heo 2017). By asking students in class to actively interrogate their diverse national experiences of the European project through the identification of possible narratives on EU membership as presented in their own countries (a sort of narrative heuristic as it were), my students went on to gain a greater understanding of the stories we tell ourselves about what it means to be part of the EU from different national and subnational perspectives, what the EU represents to those

from outside the EU and the constraints these narratives can also have on elite behaviour. In making use of narratives and frames in this manner we were able to access the politics of identity and how it relates to the EU in a more nuanced and perhaps even more authentic way.

Brexit and the politicisation of teaching the EU in the UK

In an environment of contestation and contention it is impossible to teach the EU completely dispassionately and it is important to be open about one's potential biases and consider questions of subjectivity (O'Rourke 2019, xxi). In a political context where one's subject is hotly contested also means that politicisation in the form of controversy and emotion can come into the classroom. For the first time, British students are experiencing 'live' what it means for their country to move from being an EU member state to a third country and this is also present in their learning experience in the classroom setting. As an example, by definition the UK's withdrawal from the EU entails the loss of EU citizenship rights for British citizens. Depending on their political views some students may be sanguine about this, but for others it has given rise to a number of feelings including anger, upset, fear and anxiety often occurring in class discussions, as students contemplate the loss of their rights to live, work and study in the EU.

Drawing on political controversy in the classroom can, at times, be a useful teaching method in order to enhance student engagement (Malet 2015: 245). But what about when the subject being taught becomes contentious in a divided society? The Brexit result and the reactions of certain political elites and tabloid newspapers to it also politicised the teaching of the EU in the UK. In October 2017, Conservative politician and then party whip Chris Heaton Harris MP sent a letter to all UK university vice chancellors (heads) requesting the names of lecturers teaching European affairs with particular reference to Brexit, copies of their syllabi and online content (including presumably online lecture recordings as this practice is now ubiquitous in UK universities) thus bringing contention directly into the classroom. Reactions by newspapers such as the Daily Mail and Daily Telegraph alleging 'remainer' lecturer bias and infiltration of the EU in universities further unsettled the teaching process. This prompted academics to challenge such charges of bias and influence asserting their educative role in imparting knowledge, encouraging debate and developing skills of critical thinking amongst students (Cardwell 2017; The Guardian 2017).

CONCLUSION

> 'Europe is an idea and a place. It must be defined by each new generation as the challenges confronting it and the solutions to them change' (Peter A. Hall, 2018).

Teaching and learning about the EU in Brexit Britain has brought with it both challenges and opportunities. In my own experience, since the referendum my students have never been more interested and critically engaged in the EU as an object of study as they personally experience the Brexit process. They are asking wider and more far reaching questions about the nature of the EU project and its impacts than before, as well as making more interconnections between politics, economics and social phenomena in Europe and between Europe and the rest of the world**.** Teaching more 'responsively' and flexibly in reaction to political events as I have done since the referendum has meant that my students contribute to the direction of their learning in a more active way. Political controversy and social context are also more present in the classroom and the teacher does play a role in acknowledging and responding to this. Finally, keeping up to date with and making sense of ongoing events, especially in the digital age with its enhanced opportunities for knowledge acquisition, adds to the challenge of teaching and learning about the EU at this uncertain time. Indeed, this abundance of

information and proliferation of rapidly changing events can be overwhelming for both students and teachers and our workloads increase as a result.

As a method of educational research, the action research method adopted in this study is best conducted as a continuous process of problem-posing, data gathering, analysis and action in multiple cycles (Wilson 2017, 99). Although this research involved one cycle of action research, it still allowed scope for careful reflection on practice. Taking the action research process further could involve more active engagement with students as participants in the research process, gaining their evaluations of responsiveness and instigating a new action of their suggestion, including them as active agents in the research cycle.

While every teacher's experience is context dependent, particularly in terms of the rigidities of national curriculum requirements, since the referendum the introduction of flexibility, student collaboration and student agency into my teaching has certainly enhanced, if not transformed, the learning experience in my classroom. In times of flux and uncertainty, as students and teachers we can respond to and navigate the choppy waters of events in partnership together.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to the editors of this special issue, anonymous reviewer, Karen Heard-Lauréote, Christopher Huggins and Richard Whitman for comments on various iterations of this article.

AUTHOR DETAILS

Dr Jane O'Mahony, School of Politics and International Relations, University of Kent, Canterbury, CT2 7NX [J.A.O'Mahony@kent.ac.uk].

ENDNOTES

[1] The class appeared in students' timetables as a 'drop-in' to highlight its flexible and non-compulsory nature. Each week, prior to class students were asked to indicate in advance of upcoming sessions the questions and topics they wished to address.

[2] This teaching comprises a second year undergraduate introductory EU course and a final year course on EU policy making in the School of Politics and International Relations at the University of Kent, UK. With approximately 20,000 students and situated in the south east of England, in 2017 its student profile was as follows: 73% UK; 10.9% EU and 16.1% Overseas with students from 158 nationalities studying at the university. 41% of Kent's academic staff are from outside of the UK (University of Kent 2017). In my own EU undergraduate modules, in 2016/7 approximately 60% students came from the UK, 30% from the EU (including Erasmus) and 10% overseas and were in the range of ages 19-21, evenly split across gender.

[3] Students were asked two questions in the survey: 1) 'do you use social media in helping you learn about the EU and how?' and 2) 'what do you find the most challenging aspect of studying the EU at the present time?'.

[4] Drawing on post-anarchist thinking, Brogan defines an exilic space in teaching as a temporally and spatially bracketed space where, in their educational interactions, teachers and students are able to step out of their predetermined roles to create new possibilities of relationships (Brogan 2017, 510).

REFERENCES

Arnold, L. and L. Norton (2018). *Higher Education Academy Action Research: Practice Guide*. https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/action-research-practice-guide. [Date accessed: 2 May 2018].

Beetham, H. and Rhona Sharpe. Eds. (2013). *Rethinking Pedagogy for a Digital Age. Designing for 21st century learning.* Second edition. Abingdon: Routledge.

Bode, I. and S.E. Heo (2017). 'World War II Narratives in Contemporary Germany and Japan: How University Students Understand Their Past', *International Studies Perspectives* 18(2): 131-154. https://doi.org/10.1093/isp/ekw011.

Börzel, T. (2018). 'Researching the EU (Studies) into demise?' *Journal of European Public Policy* 25(3): 475-485. https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2017.1411385.

Brogan, A. J. (2017). 'The Exilic Classroom: Spaces of Subversion', *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 51(2): 510-523. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9752.12243.

Cardwell, P. J. (2017). 'Career advice: how to teach Brexit', *Times Higher Education*, 6 November, https://mybisapgn.wordpress.com/bisa-pgn-teaching-blog/10-teaching-european-studies-in-times-of-brexit/ [Date accessed 20 November 2017].

Clarke, H., M. Goodwin and P. Whiteley (2017). *Brexit! Why Britain Voted to Leave the EU*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

De Vries, C. (2018). *Euroscepticism and the future of European integration.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Diez Medrano, Juan (2003). *Framing Europe. Attitudes to European Integration in Germany, Spain, and the United Kingdom.* Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.

Drezner, D. (2018). 'Teaching political science in the age of Trump', *The Washington Post* 5 April. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/posteverything/wp/2018/04/05/teaching-political-science-in-the-age-of-trump/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.b610595784e5 [Date accessed: 6 April 2018].

Evans, G. and A. Menon (2017). *Brexit and British Politics.* Cambridge: Polity Press.

Hall, Peter A. (2018). *Personal Website, Centre for European Studies Harvard.* https://ces.fas.harvard.edu/people/000059-peter-a-hall [Date accessed: 20 February 2018].

Hodson, D. and U. Puetter. (2018). 'Studying Europe after the fall: four thoughts on post-EU studies', *Journal of European Public Policy* 25(3): 465-474. https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2017.1411382.

Hooghe, L. and G. Marks. (2019). 'Grand theories of European integration in the twenty-first century', *Journal of European Public Policy* 26(8): 1113-1133. https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2019.1569711.

Hooghe, L. and G. Marks (2009). 'A Postfunctionalist Theory of European Integration: From Permissive Consensus to Constraining Dissensus', *British Journal of Political Science*, 39(1): 1–23. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123408000409.

Jones, E. (2018). 'Towards a theory of disintegration', *Journal of European Public Policy* 25(3): 440-451. https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2017.1411381.

Kauffman, B. (2015). 'Multidisciplinary approaches to teaching political science'. In J. Ishiyama, W.J. Miller and E. Simon Eds. *Handbook on Teaching and Learning in Political Science and International Relations*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar: 111-120.

Koshy, E., V. Koshy and H. Waterman (2011). *Action Research in Healthcare*. London: Sage.

Laffan, B. (2016). 'Europe's union in crisis: tested and contested', *West European Politics* 39(5): 915-932. https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2016.1186387.

Laffan, B. (2017). 'Europe's Union: fractured polity and fractious politics – the 2016 Peter Mair Memorial Lecture', *Irish Political Studies* 33(1): 2-20. https://doi.org/10.1080/07907184.2017.1365710.

Leruth, B., S. Gänzle and J. Trondal. (2019). 'Exploring Differentiated Disintegration in a Post-Brexit European Union', *Journal of Common Market Studies* 57(5): 1013-1030. https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.12869.

Malet, D. (2015). 'Teaching controversial topics'. In J. Ishiyama, W.J. Miller and E. Simon Eds. *Handbook on Teaching and Learning in Political Science and International Relations*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar: 244-248.

Manners, I. and R. Whitman (2016). 'Another Theory Is Possible: Dissident Voices in Theorising Europe', *Journal of Common Market Studies* 54(1): 3-18. https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.12332.

McNiff, J. (2013). *Action Research. Principles and practice. Third Edition.* Oxford: Routledge.

Niemann, A. and D. Ioannou. (2015). 'European economic integration in times of crisis: a case of neofunctionalism?', *Journal of European Public Policy* 22(2): 196-218. https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2014.994021.

Norris, P. and R. Inglehart. (2019). *Cultural Backlash. Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

O'Rourke, K. (2019). *A Short History of Brexit. From Brentry to Backstop.* London: Pelican.

Parker, O. (2016). 'Teaching (Dissident) Theory in Crisis EU', *Journal of Common Market Studies* 54(1): 37-52. https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.12333.

Pleschova, G. (2015). 'Integrating technology into the classroom'. In J. Ishiyama, W.J. Miller and E. Simon Eds. *Handbook on Teaching and Learning in Political Science and International Relations*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar: 291- 303.

Seabrooke, L. and E. Tsingou (2019). 'Europe's fast- and slow-burning crises', *Journal of European Public Policy* 26(3): 468-481. https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2018.1446456.

Schimmelfennig, F. (2018a). 'European Integration (Theory) in Times of Crisis: Why the euro crisis led to more integration, but the migrant crisis did not', *Journal of European Public Policy* 25(7): 969-989. https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2017.1421252.

Schimmelfennig, F. (2018b). 'Brexit: differentiated disintegration in the EU', *Journal of European Public Policy* 25(8): 1154-1173. https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2018.1467954.

The Guardian (2017). 'Universities deplore 'McCarthyism' as MP demands list of tutors lecturing on Brexit', 24 October: https://www.theguardian.com/education/2017/oct/24/universities-mccarthyism-mp-demands-list-brexit-chris-heaton-harris [Date accessed 5 May 2018].

Thornton, S. (2012). 'Trying to learn (politics) in a data-drenched society: can information literacy save us?', *European Political Science* 11(2): 213-32. https://doi.org/10.1057/eps.2011.20.

Thornton, S. (2015). 'Promoting information literacy and information research'. In J. Ishiyama, W.J. Miller and E. Simon Eds. *Handbook on Teaching and Learning in Political Science and International Relations*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar: 121-131.

University of Kent. 2017. Key Facts: https://www.kent.ac.uk/about/keyfacts2017.html [Date accessed 1 April 2018].

Wallace, H. (2017). 'The JCMS Annual Review Lecture: In the Name of Europe', *Journal of Common Market Studies* 55(S1): 8-18. https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.12616.

Webber, D. (2014). 'How Likely Is It That The European Union Will Disintegrate? A Critical Analysis of Competing Theoretical Perspectives', *European Journal of International Relations* 20(2): 341-365. https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066112461286.

Wilson, E. (2017). 'How to do Action Research' in *School-based Research. A guide for education students.* (Third Edition), London: Sage: 107-123.

Van Middelaar, L. (2019). *Alarums and Excursions. Improvising Politics on the European Stage.* Newcastle: Agenda Publishing.

Vollard, H. (2014). 'Explaining European disintegration', *Journal of Common Market Studies* 52(2): 1142-59. https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.12132.