Developing students as researchers: policy analysis case study

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Research-Based: *Researching, writing and disseminating a policy report whilst developing students' transferable skills that are considered desirable by many employers.*

The intention behind the establishment of the Policy Analysis module was to create a second year core module which equipped students with a combination of academic and employability skills. Drawing on my previous experience as a researcher in a policy rather than an academic setting, I designed the assessment of the module to reflect the sort of activities students might need to complete whilst in employment. This consisted of a policy report based on the research they conducted during the module, a press release to promote their key findings to media outlets but also a short "Today style" radio interview (developing ideas from Kemp et al, 2012).[16] Essentially, the assessment was designed to provide a level of authenticity to non-academic research roles many of our students transition to for a range of organisations after graduation.

Early in the module students are placed into groups and work together to complete several learning activities each week. This helps to generate team-working and a level of familiarity with teammates. This, not only seeks to draw on the benefits of team-based learning, but also provide students with the opportunity to get to know and work with colleagues (Sweet and Michaelsen, 2012).[17] This is essential as students start to engage with methods of conducting policy analysis and start to engage in preparatory work as teams for their research project. The teams:

- Identify a research topic and develop a research question;
- Conduct a STEEPLE[18] analysis of the policy issue selected;
- Divide up tasks within the group, typically by dividing the research topic up into different issues for each team member to be assigned to conduct an appropriate literature review and report back to the team;
- Collectively develop policy solutions based on their review and determine the criteria against which solutions will be assessed;
- Develop the final proposals and present a convincing argument through the report, press release and radio interview.

Students are supported by a team supervisor and are directed towards the use of a specific approach, that of Bardach (2012).[19] This ensures groups have a clear structure for the design of their research project and can focus on developing their practice as researchers to survey the policy debates. Through a range of class activities, students engage and complete a number of these steps during class time to limit the number of self-directed meetings they need to organise around their timetables and other commitments. Through their work, students develop several potential solutions and assess these to draw recommendations. They then develop the communications strategy to promote their findings.

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16   Kemp, J., Mellor, A., Kotter, R. and Oosthoek, J.W. (2012) Student-Produced Podcasts as an Assessment Tool: An Example from Geo morphology, *Journal of Geography in Higher Educatio*n, 36:1, 117-130, DOI: 10.1080/03098265.2011.576754
17   Sweet M and Michaelsen LK. (2012) *Team-based Learning in the Social Sciences and Humanities*. Virgina Stylus Publishing.
18   STEEPLE analysis is one variant of the very popular and simple management methods for analysing the external environment. It explores socio-cultural, technology, economic, environmental, political, ethical and legal factors.
19   Bardach, E. (2012) *A Practical Guide for Policy Analysis: the eightfold path to more effective problem solving*. (4th Edition) London: Sage Publications.