

What, why democracy? Research and Film Projects about Democracy: Students, Academics and Filmmakers United

The addition of a student film making activity to Core Issues in Comparative Politics, with Renske Doorenspleet of Politics and International Studies at the University of Warwick

Summary:

In 2011-2012 We have added a film making Student as Producer activity to the module, ensuring a directly experiential engagement with the subject matter. The activity works towards a *capstone experience* (the *What Why Democracy Festival*, a student conference with feedback from an internationally acclaimed film maker). All of the students on this core module are required to undertake the activity (20-30 students each year). The film making takes place over a four week period. It is made possible with additional technology provision and support provided by the Media Suite (Academic Technology Service), using Apple iMovie and the Media Suite cameras and iMacs. The project was a great success, despite some misgivings by students early on (having not worked in these ways in a university setting). In 2012-2013 it will be repeated, with the addition of student film making mentors to provide more involved creative and technical advice at a level of proximal development closer to the students. In this second run the students will also be given more responsibility for choosing and defining a topics.

The problem:

We describe this module by posing a series of questions that are representative of the concerns of Comparative Politics: why do political regimes and institutions develop how they do, where they do? what does democracy mean? how do people view democracy, and are there different opinions around the world? why are some countries democratic and others not? These questions demonstrate how the comparative approach problematizes our assumptions about democracy and political process, and compels us to understand the impacts of quantitative and qualitative differences in local and global conditions. To do so requires a genuine sensitivity to the process through which power is formed and engaged on the ground.

The module should lead the students to become comparative politics researchers, finding their own examples to investigate and forming their own research questions. However, the danger is that overly “instrumental” student attitudes and strategies will result in them focussing upon high level global questions, answered by reiterating academic content several levels of abstraction removed from the realities of local power and agency. To counter this tendency, we have added a group-based Student as

Producer activity that *cannot* be successfully completed by merely summarizing academic content, and which *demand*s a direct engagement with power and agency at a local level.

The solution:

The short film format demands a level of efficient storytelling, clarity of message and engaging editing that can only be achieved by combining:

- creative thinking;
- getting a strong well defined purpose and message;
- finding and exploiting opportunities;
- choosing appropriate aesthetic properties for the film;
- defining and understanding an audience;
- understanding the affordances and constraints of the technologies and medium;
- storyboarding, scripting, testing, revising;
- being reflexive and critical, especially being aware of stereotypes and inaccuracies;
- designing and managing a production process;

Undertaking these challenges in a small team of novice film makers adds an additional dimension. The students must negotiate their own production, agency and relationships, as well as that of the realities they are trying to represent.

In term 2 (Spring) the challenge was introduced to the students: to create a short film (3 minutes) on the topic “what, why democracy”. The students were assigned to small groups, with a mix of nationalities. An introductory lecture by Robert O’Toole gave some advice on effective film making organisation and process, as well as basic good practice and an explanation of the necessary constraints (no sound equipment, copyright compliance). This was followed by a series of introductory workshops in the Media Suite (maximum ten students at a time), demonstrating the equipment, editing in iMovie, and giving a more detailed understanding of what is possible. The students were given access to the Media Suite, with iMacs and cameras being reserved for them. They could use the Suite at any time, including evenings and weekends. Support was on-hand, but as is often the case with iMovie, was only needed on a few occasions. In most cases, the students needed only a brief demonstration of how to achieve the desired process or effect in iMovie. Once the films were completed, they were uploaded to a Sitebuilder page. They were then shown in a viewing as part of the festival, with feedback given by the successful film maker Zoe d’Amaro.

Student response:

The films can be viewed at:

<http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/pais/research/csd/whatwhydemocracyproject/filmprojects/>

A debriefing seminar was held shortly after the film making projects had ended (2 seminars, each with half of the students present). The discussion was unstructured and student led. The relationship between creativity, politics and academia was discussed at some length and with fresh insights provided by the film making experience. One of the students described how she had become less certain about her future direction, with more possibilities seeming to have opened. Another student was leaning more to the creative side, although the necessity of the distinction between creative and academic was questioned. There were few explicit certainties identified, with the discussion in both seminars being more subtle and reflective. This could be interpreted as a good sign. In each case, forty minutes of engaged and lively consideration was given to the film making process, its relationship to politics and academia, and the question of how this fits with individual student lives. The film making activity had succeeded in problematising and complicating the student relationship with the academic project.

In the following term (summer 2012) the *What Why Democracy Festival* acted to resurface these issues and to draw them into the focus provided by the presence of the campaigning film maker Zoe D'Amaro. This gave the students a chance to reflect on their own films with a degree of distance from the film making process and contentions, and to re-situate their work within the wider world of political documentaries. The screening event added extra value to the efforts of the students, and celebrated their work. It provided a springboard for a more conclusive reformulation of the experience and its meaning within the module, within the academic study of politics, and the lives of the students.