Enhancing learning and teaching through curriculum evaluation: reviewing a postgraduate module on Public Policy

Diana Stirbu
London Metropolitan University

Introduction

Within the broader aims of Higher Education as promoting freedom of thought and expression, advancing scholarship, and ensuring learning that last for students, the UK *Higher Education and Research Bill*, currently under consideration in the House of Lords, states that higher education institutions need to make a 'contribution to society through the pursuit, dissemination, and application of knowledge and expertise locally, nationally and internationally; and through partnerships with business, charitable foundations, and other organisations, including other colleges and universities' (Higher education and Research Bill 2016-17, Part 1, S(14)).

This suggests that higher education programmes cannot ignore the developments in the practical and social realm of their disciplines. Curriculum evaluation and redesign are therefore essential tools to ensure that higher education provision aligns with the requirements of the sector and reflects the developments in the field. This alignment and realignment constitutes (or should constitute) a constant dynamic within the curriculum. Through regular evaluation and adjustment of content, delivery, and assessment, higher education programmes can ensure they stay relevant within fast moving industries or sectors.

Public policy and public administration are prime examples of disciplines subject to significant and ever more fast-paced paradigmatic shifts. Hood (1989) talked about 'mega-trends' within these fields when anticipating the priorities in the study of public policy for 1990s - at that time: the rolling back of the state, the New Public Management etc. Almost every decade has its own 'megatrends' imprint and ours reads: demographic change, rapid urbanisation, changing economic model and technological breakthrough among others (PwC, 2016). All these arguably have an impact on how we study and evaluate public policy and administration.

In the areas of health and social care policy, the shifting patterns in demographic change (aging population, increase in chronic illness etc), the persisting uncertainty within the decision making environment, austerity pressures as well as disruptive models brought about by technological advancements, represent significant developments in the field that have made little breakthrough in the London Met curriculum for the *MSc in Health and Social Care Management and Policy* (SH7061).

This project sought to address this problem by undertaking an evaluation and proposing a redesign of the curriculum to better reflect broader developments and trends in public policy and to better align with the other postgraduate programmes (Masters of Public Administration [MPA]) in the School of Social Professions (SoSP).

Focus and Methodology

The project focused on one of the core modules of London Metropolitan's postgraduate taught provision in Health and Social Care Management and Policy, namely - SH7061 *Understanding the Policy Process*, using an ex-ante, mid-term and post-ante evaluation approach, which is the standard model for design and evaluation of European Union projects (European Commission, 2001). This approach was deployed within a learner-centred teaching philosophy, which fosters both deep learning and empowers students to become actively engaged in the learning process rather than mere recipients or subjects of teaching and learning (Weimar, 2002; Wright, 2011). Attention was paid to the following areas:

- *Module content*: ensure coherence and a strong Public Policy focus;
- *Module delivery*: strengthen the 'blended learning' and VLE (Weblearn) provision;
- *Module assessment*: ensure better diversity of assessment modes and more efficient and effective assessment of the module.

Curriculum evaluation was approached as a complex and iterative process conducted with the view to improve design (Light et al 2009 in Warren 2016). The author adopted a **staged approach** that aimed to incorporate both elements of intrinsic and extrinsic evaluation (Warren 2016) with the view of creating the conditions for developing a strong assessment and student centred learning environment that is conducive to high order learning. At each of these stages different insights can be drawn out and different aspects of the curriculum evaluated. This is an interdisciplinary model that allows for pre-evaluation (such as context and needs analysis) to take place as a means of informing project or programme design, mid-term evaluation (monitoring performance and allowing for adjustment), and ex-post evaluation for lesson drawing and further adjustments.
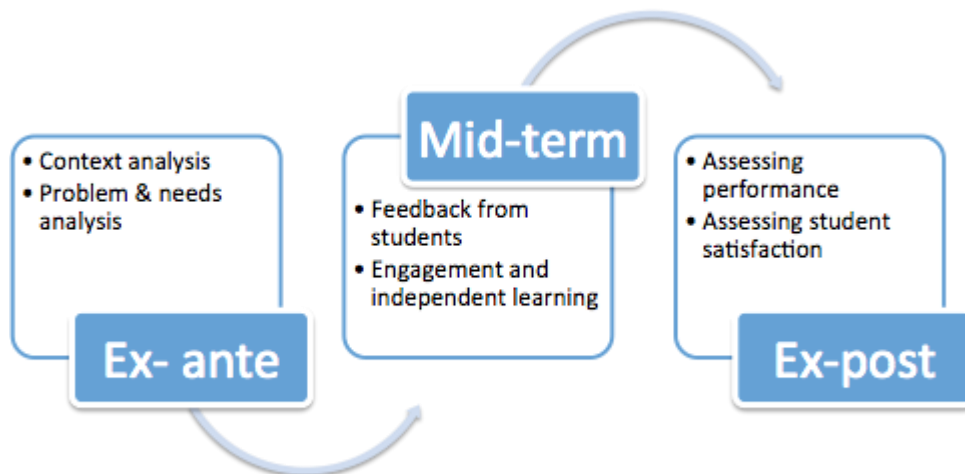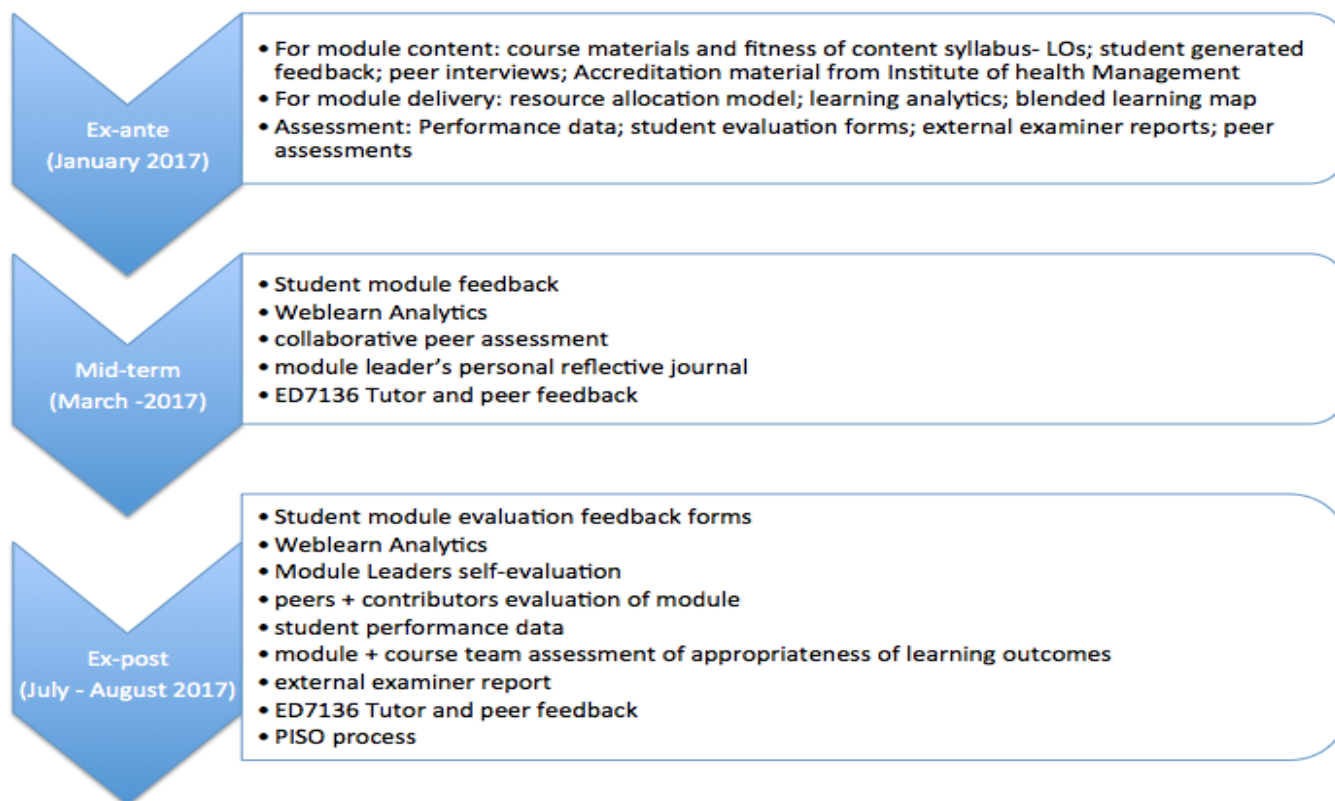
Jacob's (2000) model was useful in mapping out the very first stages in the process, namely in:

–   locating innovation (desired innovation) within the policy context: embedding contemporary debates, practices and methodologies within public policy in the curriculum;

–   Identifying the goals of the evaluation: establishing curriculum coherence and alignment

–   Identifying the stakeholders: students, the 'industry', academic staff in the School of Social professions, placement providers, module leader and module lecturers etc.;

–   Identifying sources and methods of the evaluation (see Figure 1).

The re-design of the module has been naturally intertwined with this evaluation. In terms of principles for effective curriculum design, this approach adheres to ideas of curriculum coherence and design for deep learning. A critical part of ensuring curriculum coherence is the principle of constructive alignment (Biggs, 1999 in Warren, 2016; Trigwell & Prosser, 2014), which entails congruence and coherence between various elements of the curriculum: the aims and learning outcomes, the delivery and assessment as well as the act of learning corroborated with 'performances of understanding'.

Another useful guide in shaping the design was Knight's process approach (2001), which suggests that the learning experience is enhanced by good teaching and learning 'encounters'. Creating and designing these good encounters (in and outside the classroom) was a particular focus of the re-design process.

Figure 1 - Sources and Methods of evaluation

Ex-ante (January 2017)
- For module content: course materials and fitness of content syllabus- LOs; student generated feedback; peer interviews; Accreditation material from Institute of health Management
- For module delivery: resource allocation model; learning analytics; blended learning map
- Assessment: Performance data; student evaluation forms; external examiner reports; peer assessments

Mid-term (March -2017)
- Student module feedback
- Weblearn Analytics
- collaborative peer assessment
- module leader's personal reflective journal
- ED7136 Tutor and peer feedback

Ex-post (July - August 2017)
- Student module evaluation feedback forms
- Weblearn Analytics
- Module Leaders self-evaluation
- peers + contributors evaluation of module
- student performance data
- module + course team assessment of appropriateness of learning outcomes
- external examiner report
- ED7136 Tutor and peer feedback
- PISO process

(Re)design considerations

Student profile

The student demographics are a key consideration, and designing for diversity is essential in shaping the teaching and learning experience of students (Allen, 1988). London Met's student demographic profile highlights the predominance of older students (48.3%), and of students from Black and Ethnic Minority Background (57.1%), whilst 12.6% have declared a known disability (London Met Statistics, 2017). The postgraduate cohort of SH7061 mirrors the overall university student profile. This brings challenges in the designing effective learning activities as well as in designing appropriate modes of assessment, as consideration would need to be paid to the individual learning needs and preferences. For instance the majority of students are mature, some with a considerable break since their last educational degree. Therefore, ensuring curriculum coherence, whilst responsive to students' different needs and abilities (Hounsell & McCune (2002) in Warren, 2016) is paramount.

Another important local factor is student numbers. Traditionally, this module fitted well in the small-group teaching paradigm that supports the goals of communication, team building and enhance the employability dimension (Knight & Yorke, 2006), which is in line with the module's aims and learning objectives (SH7061 Module Specification, 2015/16). In the context of doubling numbers since 2014/15, it is important to assess how this affects the teaching and learning philosophy and the resourcing model for this module. Given how resource demanding this module is and the breadth of its syllabus (with contributors on housing policy, internationalisation, corporate interests etc) it was important to carefully evaluate the effectiveness of the delivery methods and the alignment between the module's learning objectives and its content and assessment.

Match between aims, methods, and assessment

The stated aim of the MSc in Health and Social Care Management and Policy is to examine 'the social, political and economic context within which health and social services operate, locating this within the advanced study of social policy' (SoSP, 2017). A particular feature of the curriculum is its focus on policy, management and collaborative working structures in the context of regulation, evaluation and accountability frameworks for service delivery. The course is designed to meet the needs of those working in health and welfare services as practitioners, managers or administrators.

The match between aims, methods and assessment was the first hurdle in the re-design of this module. The author sought to simplify and clarify the learning outcomes, the syllabus through which the module was delivered and realign the assessment with the syllabus and learning outcomes. The presentation assessment was significantly re-designed at mid stage along the following lines:

- From group presentation to individual presentation: this is in line with the belief that group presentations, in the absence of a 360 peer review will hide those who do not contribute enough to the task.
- Given the high numbers of students and the limited time and resources, students were asked to record and submit a Podcast presentation via Weblearn (VLE). Assessing individual presentations for 33 students within the 12 weeks of teaching would have been counter-productive and taken too much out of the teaching time. Additionally, organising a separate day (as previously done) for assessment would be resource intensive and too demanding in the current climate.
- The number of tasks were reduced from 7 to 5 and the assessment criteria was simplified and rationalised differently.

How learning is promoted and teaching evaluated

Learning will be promoted by enhancing the role of the student in the process of teaching and learning. Whilst the formal lectures are considered a necessary part of the module delivery, the time allocated to unidirectional lecturing will be reduced and the time dedicated to workshops, group and individual research will be increased. To support this it is envisaged that the production of weekly or bi-weekly podcasts that introduce the major themes of the module, and that will be posted prior to the class, will carve out more time for interactive workshops, bespoke case studies and student directed activities in class. Blended learning will also sit at the core of this new approach. Lecture recordings, podcasts, online material and formative assessments will be part of this.

Key changes proposed in light of the first two stages of the evaluation:

- Delivery of the module to be undertaken in a small team but allow for practitioner input via guest speaker sessions.
- Reconsider the merit of presentation as assessment method and the weighting of the assessments.
- Use the forum of the PG curriculum review to align and integrate the module better within the course. There is a lot of overlap with Researching Public Services (second part of the module) and the Comparative Public Policy. These are MPA modules. It would benefit to consider the multi-valency of the module and shape it so that it takes advantage of the existing provision within the school
- Blended learning to be seriously considered as in need of evaluation across the programme.
- Use interactive workshops such as the simulation of the 'Westminster Select Committee' type inquiry to engage students practically in issues around policy influence and evidence based policy making.

Future challenges

The author is a strong advocate of approaching the curriculum as a developmental journey (Ross, 2001) with the view to creating the conditions for autonomous and lifelong learning (Jarvis, 2004). Operating within the public policy and public administration disciplines, the author believes in facilitating professional discourse, student-student interaction, and student-professional interaction (Faulks & Ternus, 2004) in order to enhance analytical and critical skills relevant to the real world professions. Aside from Fallows's (1999) general skills set for the world of work, the public policy and administration area poses specific challenges given the need for data literacy both at educator and student level, as it is fastly becoming imperative for offering reliable policy insights to decision makers (Mandinach & Gummer, 2016) in today's data-driven society and evidence-based policy context (Cairney, 2016).

More broadly, other important factors, such as changes in commissioning patterns, multi-agency working, and the move towards integration of health and social care and towards STPs, are likely to place different demands on the professions and require an up-skilled and multi-valent workforce that effectively manage complex partnerships and foster innovation within the sector. Similarly, the impact of living the European Union, whilst yet not known, does mean that the sector is going to be confronted with uncertainty. Managing uncertainty and shaping public services under economic constraints and political uncertainty is likely to become a well sought after skill and frame of mind (The King's Fund, 2016).

References

Allen, W. R. (1985). Black student, White campus: Structural, interpersonal, and psychological correlates of success. *The Journal of Negro Education*, *54*(2), 134-147.

Cairney, P., 2016. *The Politics of Evidence-Based Policy Making*. Springer.

European Commission (2001). *Ex Ante Evaluation A Practical Guide For Preparing Proposals For Expenditure Programmes, URL:* http://ec.europa.eu/smart-regulation/evaluation/docs/ex_ante_guide_2001_en.pdf

Fallows, S (1999) Teaching and Learning for Student skills development, in Fry et al (eds) (1999) *A Handbook for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, p. 121, Kogan Page: London.

Faulk, D.R. and Ternus, M.P., 2004. Strategies for teaching public policy in nursing: a creative approach. *Nurse educator*, *29*(3), pp.99-102.

Hood, C. (1989), Public Administration and Public Policy: Intellectual Challenges for the 1990s. *Australian Journal of Public Administration*, 48: 346–358.

Jacobs, C. (2000). The Evaluation of Educational Innovation, *Evaluation,* 6 (3): 261-280

Jarvis, P (2004) *Adult Education and Lifelong Learning: Theory and Practice*. London: RoutledgeFalmer

Knight, P. (2001) Curriculum and complexity: a process approach to curriculum-making, Teaching in Higher Education, 6 (3): 369-381.

Knight, P. and Yorke, M., 2006. *Embedding employability into the curriculum*. Higher Education Academy, York.

Mandinach, E.B. and Gummer, E.S., 2016. *Data Literacy for Educators: Making It Count in Teacher Preparation and Practice*. Teachers College Press.

PricewaterhouseCoopers [PwC] company (2016) *Five Megatrends and their Implications for Global Defence & Security*. Available at: https://www.pwc.com/ee/et/publications/pub/five-megatrends-implications.pdf

Ross, E. W. (2001). The struggle for the social studies curriculum. *The social studies curriculum: Purposes, problems, and possibilities*, 19-41.

The King's Fund (2016) Evidence submission: Health Committee's inquiry into Brexit and health and social care. Available at: https://www.kingsfund.org.uk/publications/briefings-and-responses/evidence-submission-health-committee-inquiry-brexit

Trigwell, K. and Prosser, M., (2014). Qualitative variation in constructive alignment in curriculum design. *Higher Education*, *67*(2), pp.141-154.

Warren, D., (2016) Course and Learning Design and Evaluation, in H. Pokorny and D.Warren (eds), *Enhancing Teaching Practice in Higher Education*. London: Sage

Weimer, M. (2002). *Learner-centered teaching: Five key changes to practice*. John Wiley & Sons.

Wright, G. B. (2011). Student-centred learning in higher education. *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, *23*(1), 92-97.

Biographical note

Dr Diana Stirbu, a Senior Lecturer in Public Policy and Administration at London Metropolitan University, is a leading academic in the field of governance and devolution who has been appointed to the Trustees Board of the Centre for Public Scrutiny (CfPS), a charity with a unique focus on good governance and the principles of accountability, transparency and involvement.