



## Student Engagement: Students as active partners in shaping their learning experience

<b>Case Study Title</b>	Rewriting the French Revolution
<b>Institution</b>	Leeds Trinity University College
<b>Department / Faculty</b>	Department of Humanities, Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences
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### Summary:

In the academic year 2009/10 student representatives of the Department of Humanities' Student Staff Academic Committee – part of Leeds Trinity University college's student representation system – raised concerns about the syllabus of a Level 4 core module for BA Single Honours History. Similar concerns had been reported informally through an exercise undertaken in class and had also been raised the year before. Staff subsequently engaged students on the module in the process of revising the syllabus, which is now being used to teach the new intake.

### Background

The module in question 'Study in Depth: the French Revolution' is a Level 4 core module for BA Single Honours History and has been taught successfully, i.e. with positive student feedback and good results, both by permanent and temporary staff, since 2000/01. It has often been cited in subject-centred exit questionnaires as a favourite module and students have often selected to cover this topic in their final year Dissertations. It is taught in such a way as to assume no prior knowledge of the French Revolution, and is designed to enable students to develop subject-specific and transferable skills, as well as subject knowledge. In the academic year 2009/10 Student Representatives on the Department of Humanities' Student Staff Academic Committee (SSAC) raised concerns about the syllabus. The SSACs form part of Leeds Trinity University College's student representation system, which also includes representation on the Academic Board and its committees, a Student Forum, and the Union President's meetings with the Principal and the senior team. Student Representatives representing each subject at each level sit on SSACs for each Department, and these meet three times a year – as the Department of Humanities consists of three distinct subject areas, it also holds two additional subject-focused meetings.

The Student Representatives for 09/10 believed that the concerns raised by students in the preceding year, concerns which they saw recorded as part of the process of annual

review, had not been addressed fully, given that similar concerns had been reported informally through a reflective exercise undertaken in class mid-way through their own year. These earlier concerns about the module (which focused on the running order of the syllabus) were evident both in the SSAC minutes and in the Module Evaluation Questionnaires (MEQ) at the conclusion of 08/09 – MEQs are distributed at the end of a module and are used to gather student feedback as part of the College's process of annual review. This data is quantified, but also contains qualitative feedback in the form of students' (anonymous) individual comments. The data from MEQs and staff responses to that data, in the form of Module Reviews, are circulated to the SSACs, as well as feeding into Departmental Annual Reports.

Given the consistency of the concerns being raised, this feedback was acted on immediately. Staff responded both by ensuring that the students' concerns about subject knowledge were addressed during the remaining sessions for the year, and by engaging students on the module in the process of revising the syllabus at the end of the 09/10 academic year.

### **Description of your activity:**

Student engagement in the changes made to the syllabus of 'Study in Depth: French Revolution' took place in three ways, each in dialogue with the other two: (1) at the level of the College's student representation system, via the Department of Humanities' Student Staff Academic Committee (SSAC); (2) through a reflective teaching exercise (nicknamed the 'yellow sticky exercise', a college initiative), plus an additional reflective discussion in class of the syllabus at the close of the module (employed by the module co-ordinator in order to engage students in revision of the course); and (3) through the formal process of annual review, via Module Evaluation Questionnaires (MEQs), used for data collection, and the normal process of review undertaken by staff at a modular level, (which in turn feed into the process of annual review for the overall programme).

During the academic year 2009/10, Student Representatives on the SSAC reviewed the MEQ data and module review for 08/09, and given this plus their own experience queried the "format" (as it was recorded in the minutes) of the core Level 4 module 'Study in Depth: French Revolution'. This was taken up by the Staff Representative for History who referred it to the History team. At that point, the module was being taught by a temporary visiting member of staff as the usual tutor was on leave. On her return in January 2010, the normal module co-ordinator took up the module again and in the first session undertook what is known in the College as a 'yellow sticky exercise', employed to catch a snapshot of students' responses to a module midway through its course. In such an exercise students write one "good" and one "bad" thing about their work/progress/the module to date on two yellow sticky notes. These are collated and the issues addressed in class. Students will often identify something that they feel weak on in terms of subject knowledge during this process, e.g. in this case, some said that they wanted to know more about the clergy in the French Revolution, others identified a need to complete more of the reading outlined in preparation for sessions, or wanted to know more about the final assessment.

At that point, the module co-ordinator undertook to cover what the students felt they were missing in terms of subject knowledge, during the remainder of the module, put additional materials supporting learning onto the VLE and to provide ongoing advice about study skills. However, in the minutes of the SSAC for March 2010 it was subsequently recorded that 'student reps were still anxious for a change in the structuring of Study in Depth, to allow for more grounding in the basic events of the French Revolution before study of the historiography.' And it became clear when this was discussed in class that a greater, structural, change was desired. As a result of this discussion, with the whole class, and in

light of the similar qualitative feedback received via the MEQs for 08/09, the module co-ordinator undertook to rework the syllabus and to bring proposals back to class at the end of the module – while continuing to reinforce knowledge and address areas of perceived weakness week by week.

Towards the end of the module, the module co-ordinator engaged the whole class in an hour-long workshop exercise to redesign the syllabus. The week before, she flagged up that this would be discussed and asked students to reflect on the module in preparation for the session. In the session itself, she firstly summarised the feedback that had been received, and then talked the students through the detail of the validated module descriptor, by explaining how the subject matter that they had studied, the different learning activities and the assessments linked through to the content, aims and objectives as set out in that document. The module descriptor is relatively broad e.g. the objectives include ‘explain the historical significance of a particular period’; ‘explore the inter-relationships of various different aspects of a society,’ etc., but this still requires the students to tackle quite complex issues, such as the historical debate about the “significance” of the Revolution, which means that it would not have been possible to drop some of the more testing elements of the syllabus. After talking them through the module specification – making it clear that whatever taught, it had to comply with the validated documentation – she then opened up debate about what was wanted. This discussion was initially undertaken in pairs, with the aid of a series ‘warm up’ questions, e.g. ‘what were your expectations of this module?’ and ‘what is the first thing that enters your mind when you hear the phrase ‘French Revolution’? After this, the pairs then had to get together into fours, compare notes and answer a second series of questions, designed to elicit further reflection e.g. ‘provide an example of a revolutionary site’, ‘what names spring to mind for you re the French Revolution?’ and ‘what would you expect to cover on a module called ‘In Depth Study: the French Revolution?’ etc. This was then followed up by group feedback based on the question: ‘as a **group** what would you like to cover on this module?’. This series of questions were designed to reassure the students that they had gained knowledge, as well as to get them to reflect on their experience of the module.

During the feedback session it became clear that there were some areas of disagreement among the students, e.g. should the module co-ordinator provide preparation work in the form of designated weekly reading, or a key questions plus a suggested reading list? In tackling these issues, the module co-ordinator discussed the pedagogical reasoning behind her choices and compared these to other modules which had different learning objectives, and the students discussed these choices. In other areas there was greater convergence of opinion within the class, in particular the students suggested changes to the running order of the sessions and requested some alternative/additional sessions, e.g. on life in pre-revolutionary France, and also women in the Revolution.

After further discussion it became clear that the first semester was the one which had generated greatest concern – it also became clear later, anecdotally, in talking to students from the previous year, that this had also been the case in 08/09. In the session following this, the students were shown a draft revised syllabus, which changed the running order of what was being taught and included new sessions of the sort requested, and undertakings were made about reading matter, preparation methodologies etc – this material was also circulated electronically via the VLE and by email to catch students who might have been absent. The students agreed that this material addressed their concerns and the syllabus is now being taught.

### **Impact**

The work had an immediate positive impact on all of the students who participated in the process of review. The Student Representatives who initially raised the concerns that were later addressed felt that they had brought about substantive change through their participation in the processes of the student representation system. This is a valuable part of the experience of being a Student Representative. The remainder of the students on the module, who participated actively in the session in which the syllabus for the coming year was finalised, felt that they too had brought about real change, and that they had left a legacy for the following year's intake. Its impact on staff was also positive. As well as being a useful reminder that students can have great insight into the learning and teaching process, the fact that the process was undertaken through constructive dialogue, in real partnership with the students, has led to a much greater sense of surety in the syllabus that has finally been designed.

### **Issues and challenges**

On a practical level, it was initially difficult to address students' concerns as raised by the SSAC through the first half of 09/10, due to the module co-ordinator being on leave in the first semester. It is unreasonable, indeed inappropriate, to expect temporary part-time staff to engage in the processes of rewriting a syllabus, but this probably led to an additional sense of frustration among the student representatives at first, even though this was explained to them by the Staff Representative on the SSAC. It was in this sense fortunate that the module co-ordinator returned at the beginning of January 2010 and was then able to tackle the students' concerns. If the feedback from the student representatives had been formalised or passed on in a more directive fashion, rather than being assessed by staff and students together, the pressures on staff would have been immense and the whole process of change could easily have become one of confrontation rather than one of engagement and dialogue. Indeed, given that students often express concern that when they raise issues for discussion within the student representation system these will get a staff member "into trouble", they may not have flagged them up at all in a more formalised system of reporting. As it was, the ways in which they expressed their concerns were couched extremely carefully, almost too carefully to see what exactly was needed at the outset of the process. In addition, some of the students on the module, when the issue was initially raised in class, expressed concern that revising the syllabus during 09/10 would place an unreasonable workload onto the module co-ordinator through the remainder of the year. The module co-ordinator had to provide reassurances that no one was "wrong", and that the work could be done sensibly to the benefit of the students and staff. Only then could the student body and member of staff together work out ways of addressing the students' most pressing concerns and plan for the future.

### **Advice to others**

Student Representation at the 'local' level, as a dynamic and flexible consultative process, enables you to employ a range of strategies to really engage students in the work of the subject area. In order to remain actively engaged it is important to be alert to issues as they arise. But, it is also important to draw on **all** of the forms of student representation and engagement that are available, including informal systems of reflection, and the data and information generated by students in concert, rather than to rely on a single source. This enables you to have confirmation that an issue is concrete and is something that really needs to be addressed, but more importantly, it enables you to get to the "heart" of

the matter, to uncover student's real concerns and to react quickly to them. Here, a module had been taught successfully for eight years before any substantive issue arose, yet the students then provided consistent feedback that the module needed to be changed. The only way to genuinely change it for the better, given that staff review during the year in which the issue first arose had failed to address the students' concerns, was to listen to and act on the students' constructive views about what could be improved.