

“Active Learning and the European Union:  
Variations in a Business School Environment”

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Abstract

This paper examines how teaching about the European Union (EU) can be adapted to a business school environment. As a scholar who has taught the EU for over 20 years in departments or colleges of political science, international affairs, and business, I have had to modify my approach to the subject matter to accommodate the needs of a variety of students. For business students, that means de-emphasizing theory and focusing more on the practical implications of the EU's effects on business operations and strategy.

One technique I have employed to achieve this goal is to include students in active learning situations. Two formats have proved to be particularly effective. One is to allow every student to choose non-syllabus readings for discussion. By giving students ownership for part of the course, they have a stake in its content and direction. We spend between 20-33% of the time in every class discussing this material, with students leading the discussion. The second active learning technique is a team-based group project in which students analyze the dynamics (e.g., market structure, intensity of competition, opportunities, challenges, etc.) and policy issues (EU and/or national level) facing an industry in Europe of their choosing.

While this paper focuses primarily on the reasons for a different course structure for business students, and the implementation of active learning techniques, it will use empirical evidence from course evaluations in recent years to assess the impact of such techniques on student learning.

## **INTRODUCTION**

This paper is essentially a reflection on how I teach about Europe to undergraduate students. It begins with a description of the course I teach, and the reasons why I have had to adapt the content of the course, and assignments, to a different population of students. The next section describes two specific ways in which I have incorporated active learning into the course, as well as my perceptions of how they have assisted student learning, and comments from student course evaluations. The conclusion proposes ways that active learning can be improved in this course, and adapted to others I teach.

## **OVERVIEW OF IB450 BUSINESS ENVIRONMENT OF EUROPE**

IB450 is a course that I developed when I arrived at Penn State in 2004. The course did not previously exist, so I had the freedom to design a new course that covered the subject I thought appropriate. The course is offered every fall semester and, occasionally, in the spring. It meets twice per week for 75 minutes per session, and I am the only instructor. While the course has gone through some minor changes over the past 15 years, the objective has remained fairly constant. IB450 provides an overview of the business, economic, and policy environment in Europe at the European Union (EU) and national levels. The emphasis on EU **and** national levels is important because I want students to realize that Europe's business environment is shaped by both levels. The course discusses at various points how sub-national entities (e.g., regional governments; länder, cities, etc.), non-European countries, international organizations, and non-government

organizations impact Europe's business environment, but there generally is less emphasis on them.

One of the first classes includes a simulation game *European Jeopardy!*, which is based off the US television game show *Jeopardy!* As emcee, I pose questions to students, playing as individuals or teams, which introduce them to European geography, names of government leaders, and a few historical facts. The goal is to ease the students into the course without overwhelming them with too much information early on, and to do so in a fun way that encourages interaction and participation. For the next couple of weeks, we review the history of the EU from the end of World War II to the present. This is followed by an overview of the European Commission, Council, Parliament, and Court of Justice, focusing on how they are constructed, where power lies, and why they matter to business. We then spend about two more weeks on key EU policies, specifically the single market, competition, and economic and monetary union. Thus, the first five weeks of the class gives students a workable, but definitely not comprehensive, understanding of the EU's strengths and weaknesses, which will be referred to for the remainder of the semester.

The next two weeks or so focus on "social capitalist Europe." The purpose here is to contrast social and economic policies within Europe, but also between Europe generally and the United State (US). I have found that many students have pre-conceived notions of European health care, labor and worker training policies, parental leave, holidays, parliamentary political systems, and other socioeconomic differences. This portion of the course is data heavy, including many graphs and tables from Eurostat, the

Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), *The Economist* magazine, and various think tanks and research organizations.

The third section of the course examines Europe's business environment through the varieties of capitalism lens. This takes almost three weeks and is aimed at helping students see critical the national context is to shaping the business environment within countries. Starting with market capitalism (UK), then managed capitalism (Germany and Scandinavia), and finally state capitalism (France, Italy, and Spain), we sketch some of the historical, cultural, and values-based differences that make national business environments so different across Europe. We conclude this section by studying Central and Eastern Europe, and considering how post-Communist countries can best adapt to a 21st century global economy.

The fourth and final portion of the course begins with about three classes that look at regulatory issues, usually focusing on privacy, food safety, and environmental issues. The next week then turns to the international level, specifically how globalization, the rise of new powers, relations with the US, and the impact of NGOs affect Europe's business environment. Lastly, the course looks at internal and external challenges, such as immigration, rise of populism, innovation and entrepreneurship, and demographic trends.

The expectation, through 14 of the 15 weeks-long course, is that students have developed a broad-based understanding of the various actors that shape Europe's business environment. The approach taken in this course is a multidisciplinary one, with the assumption that business executives must understand the political, cultural,

institutional, historical, and geographic aspects of Europe if they are to be successful in the business environment of Europe.

With this overview, it is important to describe several constraints that shape the structure of this course. For eight years prior to my arrival at Penn State's Smeal College of Business, I taught in political science departments and international relations programs at Syracuse University (SU) and American University (AU). Among the courses I taught were: Politics of the European Union and US-Europe Relations at SU; and Overview of the European Union, Politics of the European Union, Economic Policies of the European Union, and European Foreign Policy at AU. The vast majority of these students were majoring in social science disciplines which, traditionally, included fairly high levels of reading and writing assignments. I learned within my first couple of years at Penn State that students, in general, were unwilling or unable to complete the quantity of readings that I had assigned at my two previous universities. Many also had difficulty comprehending readings that were more conceptual in nature, or textbooks with more of a historical or political orientation.

There are several possible explanations. One is that SU and AU are private universities, while Penn State is a public university. While SU and AU are not considered elite universities, they do cost almost twice as much to attend as an in-state student would pay to enroll at Penn State. [Citation for socioeconomic background of students who attend private versus public institutions of higher education] Thus, it is possible that Penn State students arrive at university somewhat less prepared academically, and with fewer enriching experiences like travel abroad prior to, or even

during, college, which families with higher socioeconomic means are likely to be able to support and afford.

A second explanation is structural differences amongst these three universities. For example, Penn State's Smeal College of Business typically enrolls over 5,000 undergraduate students. The faculty-student ratio is one of the highest for top-ranked business schools, which means class sizes are large, especially for introductory and in-demand courses like finance. Consequently, faculty members often use multiple choice exams, which can be easily scanned and graded. Exams that are essay-based or write-at-home papers are rare, and students have little experience proposing an argument and supporting it with evidence and information provided in a range of course readings.

A third explanation is that students pursuing business degrees have different interests than those in the social sciences and liberal arts. Business students tend to be more focused on learning skills (e.g., financial analysis, data analytics, logistics, etc.) rather than contemplative thinking and curiosity about unfamiliar subject areas.

[Citation] Courses in business disciplines like accounting, finance, and supply chain generally have light reading loads, with students expected to spend more time on problem sets and homework assignments. Courses like IB450, which have a significantly higher reading requirement, are unusual for business students who are not generally expected to read as much in other courses, and so require an adjustment to student time management. Likewise, a course on the EU or European political economy offered in a Department of Political Science or International Relations Program would be viewed as part of a major with political concepts or theories of global cooperation and conflict anchoring the course to the major and broader curriculum. IB450 and international business courses at most

business schools would be viewed as almost stand-alone courses or, at best, one of a handful of courses that students might take to get a sense of different business practices in regions of the world. The themes, concepts, and topics covered might rarely be seen in other business courses on accounting, finance, management, marketing, and supply chain.

A fourth explanation is that I am now 15 years removed from interacting with political science and international relations students, and they have perhaps changed, too, due to the rise of electronics and social media use (Bauerlein, 2009). The ability to focus on longer readings and reflect on an author's arguments may be a skill that is less used by the current generation of students.

As a result of some, or perhaps all, of these differences, my courses at Penn State have required some adjustments. One significant change is to de-emphasize theory. My students have little interest in understanding the nuances of neofunctionalism, liberal intergovernmentalism, constructivism, or other theoretical approaches to explaining European integration. As noted above, they would have little or no prior coursework on the various "isms", including realism, liberalism, or even Marxism. So these concepts are new and unlikely to be discussed in subsequent courses. As a result, I have reduced theoretical explanations of European integration to about one-half of one class, or at most 30 minutes.

The vast majority of IB450 is allocated toward the impact of EU and national policies on business. As a result, we discuss extensively competition policy, and the various companies that have been subject to EU anti-trust, merger, cartel, and anti-competitive practices. A similar approach is taken with respect to trade, monetary, and environmental policies, focusing less on why these policies came about and how policies

are made. The political relations between the European Commission, Parliament, and Council are of less interest to my students than is the question of how these policies affect companies and the attractiveness of Europe's business environment. Thus, the emphasis is on practice rather than theory.

### **ACTIVE LEARNING METHODS, OUTCOMES, AND STUDENT REVIEWS**

As a result of the issues discussed above, I have implemented active learning methods in IB450 in two key ways. There is a long history of research that emphasizes the benefits of active learning. Dale (1969), for example, introduces the "cone of experience," which suggests that the most effective means of learning information involves direct, purposeful experiences such as hands-on, simulations, and role-playing. Teaching methods that are interactive, experiential, and individualized generally promote greater student involvement in learning than more traditional approaches like lecturing (Centra, 1993), and are more effective in achieving higher-order learning outcomes;(Dunkin and Barnes, 1986). Active learning is particularly important for business students, as evidence suggests that managers prefer employees that can work collaboratively in teams to solve problems (Garfield, 1993).

The first way that IB450 aims to encourage active learning is to spend a significant amount of time discussing current events. Students are more interested in what is happening in Europe now and in the near future, and less interested in studying why Jean Monnet, Charles, De Gaulle, Margaret Thatcher, and Jacques Delors mattered in the historical development of the EU. Students typically are assigned two dates over the semester to select and recommend that everyone in the class read the articles prior to



class. With 30-40 students, this averages about three articles per class meeting (twice per week). Students are told they may select any article as long as it relates to Europe in some way. I recommend that the articles be chosen from popular and highly-regarded English-language news sources such as BBC, France 24, Reuters, or *The Economist*, but students are free to choose news items elsewhere if they wish. Students post the URL or full text of the article on Canvas, our on-line course management system, at least 48 hours prior to class time, so that all students have a reasonable amount of time to read the three articles for class.

This requirement produces a wide range of articles. Those students who simply seek to fulfill the requirement as easily as possible are likely to select a headline from BBC's website. But students who are more interested in the course are likely to dig deeper, perhaps selecting an article from a Central European country where ancestors lived, or one that relates to the industry they plan to enter upon graduation, or that reflects specific personal interests like green energy or LGBTQ issues. Each class begins with each of the three students explaining why they selected their article, and how it relates to class. Depending on the originality and timeliness of the topic, how much we have previously discussed similar topics, or the ensuing interest in class discussion, we may spend anywhere from 10-30 minutes on the three current events.

The second example of active learning is a team paper and presentation. I divide the class into teams of 3-5 students, depending on class enrollment. Each team is responsible for a class presentation and written report (approximately 10 double-spaced pages) analyzing the dynamics (e.g., market structure, intensity of competition, opportunities, challenges, etc.) and policy issues (EU and/or national level) facing an

industry in Europe. The purpose is to allow students to do in-depth research on an industry that is interesting to them, perhaps because one or more group members plan to pursue careers in it, by applying what we have learned over the semester in terms of EU and national level policy-making and their impact on companies in that industry. Each presentation is about ten minutes in length, followed by 5-10 minutes of questions from other students.

After trying both of these strategies in recent years, the current events articles work better. Students generally come well-prepared to discuss the articles, and often ask follow-up questions that suggests they are curious about the topic. It helps that the reading is incentivized with a quiz each week on the current events and other course readings.

The team project produces mixed results. Some of the presentations are quite good, but others are not. Part of the problem may be scheduling them the last week of the semester, and many students feel rushed completing the project. Some teams wait until the very end of the semester to even begin the work of researching an industry, learning its structure and dynamics, and figuring out which EU and national policies best relate to it.

Student course evaluations tend to confirm these impressions. A selection of student comments over the past five semesters that IB450 was offered follows. With respect to current events:

“The current events articles are really effective in helping students learn about Europe.”  
(Fall 2018)

“I liked the inclusion of the current events to keep us up to date with current affairs.”

(Fall 2018)

“I liked that we spoke about current events—I thought that was very interesting and also useful for everyday life.” (Fall 2018)

“Current events were great too to be able to share something with class we found interesting.” (Fall 2018)

“I used to not enjoy history, but I really got into it in this class and will follow current events and what we’ve covered into the future.” (Fall 2018)

“The class really promoted discussion on relevant topics which helped me to gain better analytical and critical thinking skills.” (Spring 2018)

“I liked that the instructor had us submit current events because sometimes it is hard to keep up with international news.” (Spring 2018)

“Current events and connecting class material to actual events happening in Europe and encouraging discussion around those current events to gain different perspectives.” (Fall 2017)

“Loved the daily articles. Great way to keep up with European news.” (Fall 2017)

“...I enjoyed discussing current events and highlighting not only areas of Europe’s history but also its modern-day politics.” (Fall 2017)

“Going over current events before every class was a great ice-breaker.” (Fall 2016)

“I loved the current events. I felt like I never knew what was going on in the world before this class...” (Fall 2016)

Only two negative comments appeared on the evaluations over the five semester period with respect to student selection of current events articles:

“I did not find the current events helpful. For many students, it may be their only interaction with the news and keeping up with the world’s (and specifically Europe’s) state of affairs, but I personally did not learn very much from these daily discussions.”

(Spring 2018)

“The current events sometimes got a little repetitive, but I understand the importance of being aware of what is going on in Europe and see why the current events are relevant.”

(Fall 2017)

These comments seem to be from students who already stayed abreast of current news. But, given that students chose articles with no instructor input, there were times when students simply selected an article on a topic that was constantly in the news (e.g., Brexit or Greece’s financial situation) because it was easy to find.

However, it was clear that the team project was not well-received. There were no student comments saying the team activity provided any learning value.

“...the group project is extremely broad and vague and I think there should be more instruction.” (Fall 2017)

“I was not such a fan of the group paper. I never quite understand the purpose of group papers.” (Fall 2017)

“...end of semester group projects are difficult in general, I think it'd be more beneficial to be in the middle of the semester.” (Fall 2017)

“I disliked the few times that we would break up into groups and do case studies or answer questions as a team.” (Fall 2016)

“I really did not enjoy the group project of the course. I feel like my group was not motivated...” (Fall 2015)

Many of the comments about the team project reflected concerns that not all group members “pull their weight”, and that much of the workload falls on one or two students. As a result, students feel they have less control over their grade. Team projects are a component of many, if not most, business school courses, and are assigned to help students develop the communication skills necessary to work as part of a team once they graduate university and gain professional employment. After completing team projects, I ask students to submit peer evaluation forms that inform me of any patterns of students who went above and beyond or, conversely, slacked off, which I then use when assigning individual grades for team activities. Relatively few (under 20 percent) of the teams appear to have internal problems that created conflict and, presumably, dissatisfaction with the assignment. While I suspect that few students would claim to enjoy team projects in an end-of-term course evaluation, the comments that do appear come from students who had very bad experiences.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The evidence shows that one of the active learning exercises, student selection and discussion of current events, is well-received and strongly contributes to student learning

about Europe, the EU, and business-related issues. The second active learning component, a team-based paper and presentation on an industry in Europe and how EU and government policies impact it, receives lukewarm support at best. I will need to find ways going forward to improve this assignment, perhaps by offering more guidance and/or making it a semester-long activity with components completed every few weeks, rather than a big project due at the end of the semester.

One possible next step might be to include simulations. Giacomello (2011) describes how a semester-long, role-playing simulation can enhance understanding of how the European Commission operates, while Galatas (2006) concludes that students found a simulation of the Council of the European Union substantially increased their knowledge of EU political procedures. Given the course constraints described above, a simulation of the Commission or Council would require a level of detail about these institutions that would be far more nuanced than most business students want or need. But there might be an opportunity to hold, say, a one class simulation on how a specific industry might lobby the EU on proposed legislation.

Lessons from IB450 can be applied to other international business courses I teach, particularly study abroad courses I have taught in Copenhagen titled “Europe and the Global Economy (with a focus on Nordic countries),” as well as “Business in the Mediterranean Region” taught in Florence. Student selection of current events in Italy or Scandinavia would be helpful for students to gain a deeper understanding of the location where they are studying abroad. I will begin teaching an on-line international business course in January 2020 as part of Penn State’s On-Line MBA program, so will need to

research how other on-line instructors use active learning to enhance the educational experience of students.

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