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Laurie Boussaguet

The File of Documents: A New Kind of Work for Students

Teaching political science at the "Institut d'Etudes Politiques de Paris" (IEP) for two years I teach two courses: one of my classes is on political behaviour and attitudes while the other deals with "political power, from local to European level". These classes are methodology seminars which depend on a lecture class and which aim at putting into practice what is said in the latter thanks to a series of assignments: oral presentations, essays, reading commentaries and "fiches techniques" (i.e. sort of short essays on specific topics). All these assignments are typical of the IEP, and students there get so used to them that these assignments become too repetitive in the end. That's why I decided to introduce a new kind of activity into my classes to change a little.

How to bring originality…

Since last year, I have been asking my students, in addition to the other usual works, a "dossier de documents" (more or less a "**file of documents**") or document review, which is original for two reasons. On the one hand, it is a collective work allowing students to get to know each other, as well as, to exchange their various experiences and knowledge in order to develop the subject. Students at the IEP come from varying backgrounds: previous years at IEP, international exchanges, universities, preparatory classes…

On the other hand, the exercise also aims at elaborating a synthetic work on a specific subject using only primary sources. I try and give them a feel

for and a first experience in empirical research. For instance, I explain to them that to do research on a trade union, one has to go to its headquarters in order to gather leaflets, official documents, posters, etc. and to meet militants. I want them to understand that it is not enough to read what other people have already written on the subject and that it is necessary to get out of libraries to face reality.

Concretely, at the beginning of the semester, they have to constitute groups and choose a subject related to the general theme of the lecture (an election, a particular institution, a lobby, a political party, an association, a specific group of actors, a media, a public event, etc.). Then, during the semester, they have to collect documents about this subject. Finally, they have to write a presentation of the different documents including commentaries about them, their connection to the theories and facts developed in the seminars, as well as a description of the difficulties encountered during the empirical research. They then have to present it in front of the other students in the last seminar.

... and to interest students

My students usually enjoy this work and can even be over enthusiastic about it. For example, last year one group of students decided to research a trade union, the CGT (*Confédération Générale du Travail*). They followed a group of militants for several weeks. They even took part in a demonstration on first of May against the reform of pension laws, taking pictures and picking up banners. This year, in order to research their subject, "the euro-sceptics inside the French political parties", other students interviewed political actors and analysed electoral programmes.

IEP students evaluate their teachers at the end of each semester. Their comments up to now, lead to me conclude that this assignment was the one they enjoyed the most, partly because it is different from what they usually do, but also because, far from being completely out of context, it is rather an innovative way of tackling the theme of the class. In short, this document review is an unusual activity which contributes to making the course more interesting and brings added knowledge and experience to the students. As a PhD. researcher, I know that I would have appreciated doing this type of work during my schooling, in order to acquire a first hands-on experience in this field. Without saying that my classes have driven students towards vocations in research, it is interesting to note that in the last year, two of my students decided to apply for a master's in political science.