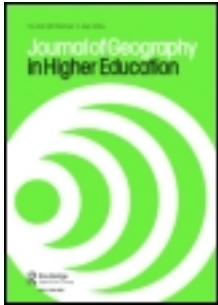


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### Connecting lectures to current affairs: the 'letters to newspapers' assignment

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## Connecting lectures to current affairs: the ‘letters to newspapers’ assignment

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This paper presents the experiences of teaching political geography, in a level 2 BA course, with the use of an innovative assignment – the letters to newspapers assignment. We provide here the aims, rationale and a detailed outline of the assignment. We also discuss student feedback from 67 questionnaires and 2 focus groups. Our findings suggest that the assignment was instrumental in (a) enabling the students to see concepts in action, that is to link abstract ideas with real-world issues and (b) initiating a move away from passive learning towards supporting students to actively and critically reflect upon their relationship with the world.

**Keywords:** political geography; newspapers; letters; active learning; critical pedagogy

### Introduction

The teacher’s qualification consists in knowing the world and being able to instruct others about it, but his (sic) authority rests on his assumption of responsibility for that world. Vis-a-vis the child it is as though he were a representative of all adult inhabitants, pointing out the details and saying to the child: This is our world. (Hannah Arendt, 1954)

Hannah Arendt’s view that the authority of teachers rests on assuming responsibility for the world reminds us about the ethics involved in pedagogy. As political geographers engaged in teaching about “the world,” we try to equip our students with a critical lens with which they can begin to see the world as it “is actively spatialized, divided up, labelled, sorted out into a hierarchy of places of greater or lesser ‘importance’ by political geographers, other academics and political leaders” (Agnew, 1998, p. 3). However, to make these arguments “come alive” in the students’ imagination so that they can see the relevance of the concepts and theories in real life can sometimes be a more difficult task.

In recent years, we have seen active learning techniques such as discussions (Dengler, 2008), problem solving, brainstorming (Bradbeer, 1996), role plays (Maddrell, 1994) and debate (Healey, 2012) being more commonly used to encourage students to interact and engage with lecture materials (Revell & Wainright, 2009, p. 209). There have also been calls to engage with the media and current affairs in geography teaching at large (Maddrell, 2010; Schuermans, Meeus, & De Maesschalck, 2010). Assessments have also moved away from being purely examination based towards course work and group projects, in order to encourage students to analyse and synthesize information as opposed

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to merely reproducing it in an exam setting. The undergraduate review essay though still remains the most popular assessment method (Heywood, 1988; Hounsell, 1997; Prosser & Webb, 1994). It typically asks the students to discuss, evaluate or identify features of a substantial disciplinary topic by following a chosen line of argument (Bonnett, 2001).

Although essays are a valuable established method of assessment, we have found that their adoption by students often involves a formulaic essay plan which typically situates the chosen topic within the literature and in a good attempt might also give a critically balanced argument. However, an essay is not always the best format in which to get students to engage with current affairs. Especially in political geography, examples from current affairs are valuable when trying to analyse concepts such as sovereignty, nationalism, the state, borders and boundaries. However, when students do cite such examples they are rarely explored in relation to the relevant scholarly literature. This undermines the capacity of the essay-type assessment to provide an accurate reflection of the students' ability to apply and ultimately retain concepts introduced in lectures.

In an age of 24-h TV news channels and where news feeds punctuate our daily routines via news website browsing or through social networking sites, students are certainly not suffering from a lack of information. What perhaps is more elusive is to see them make sense of the bewildering amount of available information and to develop an ability to situate and contextualize facts and figures in order to form an assessed and informed opinion. This may be especially important with the current move towards online sources of news, the values of which may be harder to judge (see e.g. Luckhurst, 2011 and responses). With this in mind, we have developed a new assignment that takes its inspiration from the "Letters to the editor" columns of newspapers. It is aimed at encouraging students to practice the skills of stepping back from acquisition of information and to evaluate it in relation to its source, focus and narrative. For us, it is a complementary addition to an undergraduate essay assignment. The letters to newspapers (LTN) assignment focuses on one of the strengths of the essay-type assignments, namely its focus on encouraging students to relate academic information to real-world examples by formalizing the process of thinking, reflecting and making evidence-based opinions in a concise, written format.

In this paper, we make a case for a more "active learning pedagogical model" (Fletcher, 2005) in political geography teaching. The text is also intended to serve as a guide document for interested colleagues to reproduce the assignment part or whole in their own teaching. To this end, we present here the aims and rationale of the assignment together with an outline of the mechanics of successfully running it among stage 2 students. We also report back on student feedback obtained via post-assignment questionnaires and two focus groups.

### **Aims and rationale**

The assignment requires students to submit a letter for publication to the editor of a UK national, regional or local newspaper, responding to an item in that newspaper that in some way relates to the taught material on the module. The students are then required to submit their letters for assessment together with a properly referenced 1600-word commentary on it. The assignment has three aims. The first is to demonstrate disciplinary knowledge of the taught material. The second is to enable students to take responsibility for relating this knowledge to the world around them. The third is to not only relate knowledge to contemporary debates, but actively engage in them. As we point out to our students, the letters' sections of newspapers are important for a number of reasons. They are a prominent public forum that can often set agendas in political debate. The Red Cross and Amnesty International are examples of organizations that have their origins in letters

published in UK newspapers. They are also often the only parts of newspapers in which genuinely dissenting views to the editorial line are to be found.

The second and third aims can be summed up as moving from passive learning to critical participation in the world, and are inspired by the writings of Brazilian educator Freire (1972, 1998a, 1998b). Freire argued that critical pedagogy should be one that “not only supports the practice of students and workers reflecting critically upon their location *in* the world, but also on their relationship *with* the world” (cited in McLaren & Farahmandpur, 2002, p. 48). For Freire, education involves both a struggle for meaning and a struggle over power relations. As Mohanty (2006, p. 195) puts it “education becomes the terrain where power and politics operate . . . this way of understanding the academy entails a critique of education as the mere accumulation of disciplinary knowledges that can be exchanged on the world market for upward mobility”. The aim instead is to engender among our students a critical consciousness, one which focuses not only on the relation between existing socio-political configurations and their subjectivities as students now but also as future opinion and decision makers of our world. Much of the standard material on assessment and teaching is silent on this issue (e.g. Bedford & Burgess, 2001; Bryan, 2006), prioritizing instead the cultivation of subjectivities that “aspire to become more efficient, professional individuals” (Bryan, 2006, p. 225) – which might be interpreted to mean consumers and producers, ideally suited to neoliberalism. Hence, the LTN assignment was intended to help students “develop as geographers and citizens” (Yarwood, 2005, p. 367)

In addition to a desire for stimulating forms of participatory citizenship, the design of the LTN exercise was influenced by recent scholarship that has sought to situate pedagogy within wider political and cultural contexts. To this end, we have been influenced by the manifesto for a cyborg pedagogy from Angus *et al.* (2001). This body of work seeks to integrate Haraway’s (1997) concept of ‘situated knowledge’ within practices of teaching and learning. As Cook (2010, p. 198) explains, Haraway has advanced our understanding of the politics of knowledge production and circulation:

responsible knowledge of the world is one which is grounded, embodied and locatable in a “knowing self” [and] is partial in all its guises.

Through the LTN assignment, we have attempted to help students make critically informed connections between real-world political events as they are reported in the news with the geopolitical concepts, categories and the “regimes of truths” (Foucault, 1980) they represent. The notion of “border pedagogy” (Giroux, 1991; Hooks, 1994) is also of significance here, where geography teaching comes to equate learning with the creation of critical rather than merely good citizens. As Giroux has noted “we need to combine the modernist emphasis on the capacity of individuals to use critical reason . . . with a postmodern concern with how we might experience agency in a world constituted in differences” (Giroux, 1991, p. 72). One of the first steps towards feeling a sense of agency is through the ability to articulate informed opinions, or to put it informally, to be able to make your mind up – not in the sense of having an inflexible view of the world, but as in opinions forming the springboard to decision and action. To understand the news, beyond just the text of what is being reported, one needs to appreciate what Scholes (1985) has referred to as “textual power”, the ability of text to inform, fashion and invite opinion. According to him (cited in Giroux, 1991, p. 73), as teachers we need to encourage students to *read within, upon and against the text*, in order to reveal the contested nature of knowledge making. In other words, such a form of study should involve dimensions of reading, interpretation and criticism. Our LTN assignment is an attempt at encouraging

undergraduate students to hone this form of close reading in relation to newspaper texts. By asking them to write letters to the editor expressing an informed opinion, we have envisaged that they have not only been encouraged to make links between world events and the concepts taught in the classroom but also have been persuaded to practice the skill of critical interpretation.

### **Outline of the assignment**

The LTN assessment is part of Newcastle University's second year optional module, "Political Geography," taught by Nick and Alex. In 2008–2009, Raksha worked as a teaching assistant on the module, and conducted and analysed the data from the focus groups. Richard, who helped train Nick and Alex in his role with the university's Staff Development Unit, brings his expertise in pedagogical theory and practice to this article. The assignment was designed "to create possibilities for the construction and production of knowledge rather than to be engaged simply in a game of transferring knowledge" (Freire, 1998a, p. 49, 1998b). Differentiated from the "transmission model" of teaching, it is a form of "active learning" that "encourages learners to make sense of topics by engaging in the learning process through participation in a structured learning activity to obtain desired learning outcomes" (Fletcher, 2005, p. 313). In the LTN assignment, we have aimed to use an activity that students are already familiar with, reading newspapers and prolonged its practice and effect by association with lectures and taught material in the classroom.

As this is a new form of assessment for the students which requires skills not usually taught at school or university, care is taken to equip the students to undertake it. An introductory lecture explains the rationale of the exercise, how to identify relevant newspaper material to respond to, how to write letters and the actual process of submission of letters to editors. A separate handbook is produced for the exercise, explaining rationale and process very carefully. It contained a number of examples of letters which the instructor (Nick) and students in previous years have published. During the lecture, the style and characteristics of these letters are explained in more detail. Not included in the handbook, but shown in lecture slides, are a collection of letters the instructor received from readers in reply, both published in the newspapers and sent privately. As many of these question the judgement, mental stability and even grammatical ability of the instructor, it added a humorous element that helped to unsettle the performance of authority that a lecture hall environment tends to produce. The handbook also contained links to websites providing guidance on writing LTN.

This initial lecture is followed up by a 2-h workshop, run by Nick, Alex and Raksha. Students are encouraged to bring draft letters or recent newspaper articles to discuss in small groups and with the instructors and teaching assistants. The instructor talks through how examples of reports and stories from that morning newspapers relate to the module and could be the theme of letters. The students are shown that relevant material is not confined to major articles on obviously political geographical topics such as territorial disputes, but can be found in the letters and opinion pages, political cartoons and even the sport or lifestyle supplements. The detailed handbook provided contains clear advice on writing and submitting letters, along with many examples of published letters written by both staff and students. Additional support for the exercise is provided by lecturers referring to relevant topics in the news during lectures, and a "political geography in the news" notice board in the Geography Department on which Nick and Alex regularly posted relevant newspaper cuttings.

The provision of a lecture, a workshop and a handbook is time consuming compared to the traditional method of distributing an essay question. However, it is necessary to support the students by equipping them with what are to almost all of them new skills and enabling them to grasp the purpose of the exercise. In order to ensure that the assignment is fully integrated into the module syllabus, students are required to submit to the university the original newspaper item they responded to, the letter they wrote to the newspaper with proof of submission (usually an automated email response) and a 1600-word commentary on the aspect of the political geography module that their chosen newspaper item and letter engage with. The letter itself is not marked, although a book prize is given for the best published letter. The commentary is worth 40 per cent of the overall module mark, the remainder being an unseen examination. Although this was not part of the original rationale, this assessment has the advantage of mitigating the dangers of plagiarism, by following Bryan and Clegg's advice to set questions related to current affairs so that there is less chance that students can find material suitable for plagiarizing (Bryan, 2006, p. 219).

### **Analysing student engagement**

The research for this article was conducted among second and third year undergraduates who were enrolled for the "Political Geography" module at Newcastle University's Geography Department in the years 2008–2009 and 2009–2010, respectively. We used post-assessment questionnaires and focus groups as the research methods to collect data for analysing student engagement with the assignment. The questionnaires were distributed at the end of the academic year to second year undergraduates. In addition to the questionnaire, we also invited second and third year undergraduates to reflect on their learning experience in two separate focus groups. Focus groups are a well-established research method among human geographers (Hopkins, 2007) and are particularly valuable in collecting data on topics that involve and benefit from shared collective experiences. Nick and Alex recruited the focus group participants by distributing a written call for participation in their second and third year lectures. Students were asked to sign up by indicating their availability and contact email addresses. Raksha then emailed all the students who had expressed an interest in participation suggesting a time and venue for the discussion. Two focus groups were conducted, each lasted for an average of 45–50 min. The focus group with second year students involved seven participants (five female and two male), and there were five participants (four male and one female) in the group with third year undergraduates. The sample although self-selective (due to the nature of voluntary participation in focus groups) was representative of the white, 18–21-aged student body in geography at our institution. Students were explained the purpose of the focus group and permission to tape record the conversations was also sought. Informed consent and confidentiality was also recorded on tape. We present here the results from the evaluation of feedback questionnaires followed by the findings from the focus group discussions. As our interest for this paper is on student engagement with newspapers and how that changed, we confine our reporting of results to that question.

There were 136 second year undergraduate students enrolled in the course for the year 2009–2010 among whom we distributed the post-assessment questionnaires. All students had submitted the letters to their chosen newspapers and some of them had theirs published. The topics students engaged varied in focus from the "war on terror" to Somali pirates, from EU relations to the Spanish claim on the island of Gibraltar. The newspapers they chose ranged from the broadsheets to the local dailies. A total of 67 completed questionnaires were returned which makes an overall response rate of 49.2 per cent. The results (Table 1) from

Table 1. Results from post-assessment questionnaires.

Serial number	Questionnaire topic	Number	Percentage
1	Students who wrote the compulsory one letter	44	66
2	Students who wrote more than one letter (the highest being 4)	23	34
3	Students who said that they would consider writing a letter in the future	31	46
4	Students who have written a letter to a newspaper since the assignment	5	7
5	Students who have participated through other means (blogs/comment boards) after the assignment	14	22
6	Students who reported a change in the way they read the newspapers as a result of the assignment	47	70

the feedback questionnaires suggest an enthusiastic response to the new assignment. Over a quarter (34 per cent) reported submitting more than the required one letter. The highest number of letters written was four. Nearly half would consider continuing the practice of contributing to the letters to the editor section of their chosen newspapers. Seven per cent reported back as having already done so, and another 22 per cent had participated in news debate via other media such as blogs and comment sections on news websites. The highest positive response was to the question asking if the letters to newspaper exercise had changed the way they read newspapers. Some 70 per cent of the students replied yes and offered comments such as now I “engage more with political articles, think more about what is occurring around what is reported,” “read more critically, link issues in newspapers to topics I study to better understand issues” and that the assignment “makes you read the (newspaper) article and first of all makes you think what’s your point of view and then check if there are any other disagreements or arguments with different points of views.”

### *Student reception of the new assignment*

All focus group participants reported feeling “quite scared,” when they first saw the assignment requirements in the module handbook. They felt, they were being taken out of their “comfort zone” as is evident from the following responses from three students:

I thought it was quite scary . . . that it was going to be publicized like a proper publication

Yes felt the same, quite intimidated . . . that you weren’t just sort of in the same realm of the university but you were breaking out and interacting, so proper publicized work.

It was taking you out of your comfort zone, so it wasn’t just sitting in front of a book . . .

The fact that the LTN, if they were published, were going out in public domain made for a daunting experience. The students felt they needed to be more careful and thorough in how they write and what opinion they express, which needless to say should be a concern in all written academic work, but the idea of having a potentially publishable piece reinforced the point as one student said that you “can’t be careless or express unsubstantiated points as somebody might write a letter about it!” So even though the letter was not assessed as part of the assignment, the students felt that some measure of evaluation was nonetheless involved if the letters they wrote were published and read by

a public audience. The point about “breaking out (of the realm of university space) and interacting” is important to note as one of the aims of the assignment was to encourage students to appreciate the link between ideas discussed in the academy and their relevance in the public sphere.

Although most students reported approaching the assignment with some trepidation, they did, however, appreciate the novelty of the exercise. The fact that it was not “just another essay assignment” was very appealing to them. In addition, once the initial fear over the new assignment was overcome, the exercise was deemed to be quite enjoyable as “you get to express your views [in a] personalized piece of work.”

### ***Main strengths of the LTN assignment***

The focus group discussion brought an awareness to the forefront among the students of the value of geography as a discipline. As a result of the exercise, they reported learning to appreciate that “you can’t escape, geography is everywhere” and “it made you think that everything round you is relevant to what you study.”

In addition to the novelty of the assignment, students felt that it encouraged them to pick up a good habit, namely reading the daily papers and keeping up to date with current affairs issues. Moreover, they felt that the exercise made them evaluate and think more deeply about what is being said in the papers:

it made me realize that I read all that stuff in papers but just flip past it but actually [what is more important is] relating it to theory and having to think about the links between [the news topic and] what is being said in the lectures.

This aspect of relating news stories with what is being said in lectures was illustrated by an example that three students recalled. They had all written their letter about the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka in response to a news story about their role in “pioneering suicide bombing” as a method of expressing political dissent. In their letters, they had branded the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) as terrorists and expressed outrage at their actions but on reflection and after doing their research for the commentary they felt that it was too simplistic a view of a very complex geopolitical issue. As one student concluded,

The essay was good for this, so the Tamil Tiger problem is a post-colonial situation, we are to blame as well, you saw the background, [the role of the] British empire and I suppose in that way you think about citizenship, where you are located etc.

This highlights that the assignment was successful in helping student not just to take a critical stance but also to be more reflexive about their position in relation to the world. It also highlighted the point that the LTN assignment works best when it is combined with a compulsory reflective piece. Otherwise, there is a danger of the letter-writing exercise just becoming an avenue of voicing unsubstantiated opinions.

As a result of the assignment, students also reported becoming more attuned to the politics of news making. They discovered that news is not just a reporting back of facts but it is made and is from a political and ideological stance. They reflected on how the newspapers they are used to reading are the ones bought at home by their parents as one student put it “for me it was understanding newspapers, The Telegraph is the standard newspaper at home and I had never read The Guardian” but for the assessment they consulted more than one paper and this opened up a more diverse range of sources and an appreciation of the differences between them.

Students also demonstrated an awareness of the transferable nature of the skills developed in the LTN assignment. For example, students appreciated the value of



expressing your opinion in a concise and coherent style: “to write a letter, short and concise is such a good skill to have, we are never going to write lengthy essays when we leave University.” The value of brevity and being to the point in your opinion was expressed in the following terms: “If you have got a point to make, you have got to put it across effectively, to make a difference you have to be concise.”

Interestingly, the students were able to identify the usefulness of the LTN exercise in careers outside academia, as one student pointed out

You have also got to be aware, say you are a CEO of a big company, they might have interests all over the world and you have to be aware of them ... even if you just read the Financial Times, you have to be aware of other views to be successful.

### ***Main weaknesses of the LTN assignment***

The short turnaround time (24 h) in choosing a news story and writing a letter about it to the editor made some of the students feel under pressure. It is important to point out here that the requirement for a short turnaround time is because the probability of having a letter published increases if it is about a topic which is currently in the news. We were keen to point out that the whole exercise was intended to encourage the students to take part in a debate and to learn to fashion their arguments into concise and coherent opinions. The prospect of having your opinion published was an added attraction. Some students felt that a 1600-word limit for the commentary was awkward. Having been usually asked to write 2000-word essays, they found the word limit difficult to get right. They had greeted the new assignment with a degree of nervousness as some had never written formal letters before. The most challenging part of the task was finding a story to write the letter about. Some felt it sucked the joy out of reading papers as it became an assignment, others commented on how although challenging they could still see the relevance of “reading newspapers in a more active way.”

A couple of students also questioned the assignment requirement, which asked them to express their opinions in only a format fit to be published in the letters to the editor section of a paper copy of a newspaper. They suggested that they could have done the same thing online by commenting on a news article or a news blog. While acknowledging the value of online sources for news, we feel that by restricting the assignment to the letters to the editor style opinion pieces we are able to introduce a degree of formality to the exercise. We feared that the whole exercise would lose its academic import, if we allowed use of the online comments section of a news article, by becoming reduced to a *Facebook* or *Twitter* style status update on a given topic. Crucially, because the letters to editors section of newspapers are subject to editorial control, more care needs to be taken in crafting a letter and thus the exercise makes more demands on students. On a more personal level, we also wanted to share with our students the charm of simple old-fashioned letter writing and also the sense of satisfaction that accompanies seeing your views in the material form of a newspaper cutting.

### **Conclusions**

The letters to newspaper assignment is instrumental in introducing elements of “critical pedagogical” thinking in our assessment criteria by initiating a learning process whereby students are encouraged to become more reflexive, responsible and critical when reflecting upon their relationship with the world. It is effective in enabling the students to see *concepts in action*, that is to link abstract ideas with real-world issues

and to take their reading beyond the set academic texts. Students are able to see for themselves the impact of education and learning in changing an activity such as reading newspapers from being previously thought of as a passive exercise in collecting information to its scope as a more interactive, interesting and empowering enterprise. Lastly, we believe that this exercise is able to set into motion the wheels of a critical consciousness among undergraduates. As one of the students put it in the focus group discussion,

it kind of gives you an opinion and makes you angry about stuff, because otherwise you go through day to day thinking, "oh isn't life great" but it isn't, it makes you angry and which is a good thing, it is healthy . . . it makes you think you can make an effort to make a difference and you can make a change, campaign, it is really cool!

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