

Mind the Gap

Connecting Teaching and Research in the English
Department

EMP Project 2018-2019

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July 2019

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Introduction

Research suggests that including students in research is a powerful teaching tool. Students who are involved in their teachers' research benefit in various ways. They find it intellectually stimulating and motivating. It enhances a variety of academic skills, including the ability to conduct a literature study, but it also shows that there is still work to be done, with research questions to be formulated and projects to be designed. Students can learn about the steps that are taken when publishing research, and improve their own writing and presenting skills in the process. Yet, in practice, students are often taught by teachers who conduct little research, and as a result students are offered limited opportunity at in-depth interaction with the larger field of researchers. They lack teachers who can set examples for doing research and who can be role models. No wonder so few of our students apply for PhD positions. They see very little serious research being conducted, and most of them have never even seen a PhD student in the flesh. Although in academia increasingly attention and appreciation are given to teaching, there still seems to be a gap between teaching and research. Experienced, senior research staff have most research time, while those who do much of the teaching spend their time . . . teaching.

Not just the students, but also teachers benefit from bringing research into the classroom. What better way to set yourself a deadline for a paper than putting it on your students' reading list, and receive their critical input? By using students' eyes and ears researchers can expand their field. Those who do a great deal of teaching might add to their research time if they integrate teaching and research.

The EMP project "Mind the Gap" aimed to build bridges. By bringing more of their research into their teaching, researchers can gain a critical audience and capitalise on students' insights, and students can be introduced to hands-on research. This win-win situation, however, is contingent upon teaching and research being interconnected. The central question, therefore is:

How can the relation between research and teaching be improved?

Method

To find answers to the above question, the following steps have been taken.

What	When	Who	By
Focus Group Interview	June 2017	5 students (BA&MA)	Supheert
Teacher Interviews	July-August 2017	4 teachers (Lit&Ling)	Van den Berg
Focus Group	1 October 2018	2 teachers, Albion	Supheert, De Jonge
Literature Study	October 2018- March 2019		Supheert, De Jonge
Student Survey	March 2019	All BA students of	Supheert, De Jonge

		English	
Workshop	26 March 2019	Albion, students, teachers	Supheert, De Jonge
Interviews	May-June 2019	Suzanne van Hoogstraten, Michiel Fleerkate, Imke de Jong	Supheert, De Jonge

Results

The focus group interview and student survey suggest that students have a general idea of their teachers' research, but they may see more of it in extracurricular activities than in the regular teaching: "it's mostly outlier activities." When writing term papers or theses, very few students see a connection with their teachers' research. Yet they are definitely interested and think it important that their teachers are active as researchers and share their research with them. They find this motivating as it is "good to know that there's still stuff out there," and "a stepping stone towards doing [our] own stuff." A teacher-researcher also generates respect: "they're not just standing there teaching but they're actually really experts in their field." Students would also appreciate contact with advanced students or PhD candidates: "I feel it's a lot less intimidating if you can talk to students who've just finished, instead of talking to teachers. Those students have been where you are, with the anxieties."

The teachers indicate that they include more of their research in their teaching at MA-level than at BA-level, discussing their work in class. They occasionally publish together, or attend conferences together with their students. They point to a tension between teaching the basics and conducting research, which often questions basics, and they may be hesitant to flaunt their hobbies in class.

In the literature, examples of good practice, combining teaching and research, can mainly be found at American universities, which have offices, staff and websites specifically dedicated to undergraduate research. At UU a promising example may be KonJoin <https://uu.konjoin.nl/>, an online environment where researchers post descriptions of their research, inviting student participation. It is available to all, but mainly used by the sciences.

Pointers

The interviews, focus groups and literature suggest the following pointers for strengthening the link between teaching and research:

YEAR 3

1. Capitalise on the BA theses you supervise.
 - 1.1. Specify topics for BA theses relevant to your research, and write brief, appealing advertisements about research to which your students can contribute. We strongly feel offering preconceived BA thesis projects to students can be mutually beneficial to both student and staff members (compared to doing it the other way around). You can post BA thesis projects in the Blackboard environment for BA theses (English BA thesis, EN3V14001). Students can then see teacher availability, sign up, and view earlier research projects in the English Department if you add links to igitur or your own work. Showcase good examples, incl. those that were shortlisted for thesis awards. Put calls online every semester. Allow for hybridity, though: bright students with good ideas should be given the opportunity to find a supervisor. Lastly, keep in mind that student learning should be the central goal of the thesis project, and not so much the originality of the work being done. In line with what others have argued (e.g., Schantz 2008), we should perhaps let go of the pervasive assumption that authentic research should be original in order for it to be meaningful. A (conceptual) replication (and modest extension) of previous research findings could very well be considered more meaningful in terms of student learning than exploring unventured territory. Keep this in mind when specifying topics for the BA theses.
 - 1.2. Have students present BA (or MA) theses in courses you teach.
 - 1.3. In your *thesis groups*: form teams of BA and MA students.
 - 1.4. Connect BA theses to internships to valorise student research. See also the USO project on [Community Based Research](#) and the course “Doing community-based research in the Humanities: knowledge for society” (TC3V19001, block 3, level 3).

YEAR 1

2. Refer to research when introducing yourself as a teacher.
3. Show the relevance of requirements for papers and revision. Have students look up calls for papers, submissions requirements of journals or publishers. This way, they become aware of the fact that guidelines matter, and that our stylesheets are not overly detailed. Tell the

students about the revision process, feedback from publishers (peer review), and adjustments you have to make when publishing your work.

YEARS 2-3

4. Check suggested readings for your students.
 - 4.1. Have you read any articles recently that you found interesting and that are relevant to your research? Put them on the syllabus. If possible, use your own work for this.
 - 4.2. Add an article on methodology.
5. Apply additional resources to student research. Think of interdisciplinary projects, or help from research groups.
6. Teach small-group tutorials focusing on research.
7. Teach workshops on presenting and writing for publication, highlighting the different stages of conducting and publicising research. This could be done in the tutor programme.
8. Point to student journals (*Frame, LingUU*) in which students can publish their work: include info and links on our departmental website.
9. Train quantitative skills in a course.
10. Train qualitative skills in course (Literary Toolbox)
11. Organise conferences for students, teachers and PhD candidates. We can link this to the new Capstone course (in blocks 1 & 3, week 6). You can use poster presentations to make it less static and more interactive.

Works Consulted

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