

Leave, Remain, Teach

Tony Travers and Swati Dhingra in conversation with Claire Gordon

The Common Room Podcast series, LSE Higher Education Blog

Recorded on 13 November 2019

Claire Gordon: Welcome to *The Common Room*, a series of podcasts by the [LSE Higher Education Blog](#). I'm Claire Gordon, your host, and today we're discussing Brexit and teaching and learning. How do academics at LSE teach about Brexit? As head of the Eden Centre for Education Enhancement and a scholar of EU politics in Eastern Europe, this podcast brings together two key research interests and passions - the EU and learning and teaching. How do lecturers incorporate Brexit into their curricula and teaching? How do they teach such a polarizing topic and what has the response from students been?

With the general election around the corner, Brexit as a key issue, if not the issue and the record numbers of under-25s registering to vote, the student vote is acquiring increasing significance. With us today are two LSE academics, Tony Travers and Swati Dhingra. Tony teaches a course on the *Politics and the Policies of Brexit, the UK's changing relationship with the European Union*, a course which attracts both undergraduates and postgraduates. Tony is the Director of LSE London and a professor in the School of Public Policy. Swati is in the Department of Economics and teaches courses in International Economics to undergraduates, Master's and doctoral students. Tony and Swati have both published widely, regularly advise government and can be heard and seen providing expert analysis about the economics and politics of Brexit across a range of media. Today we discuss what that conversation looks like in the classroom or lecture hall.

If I could start with you first, Tony. I want to ask you both about the background and origins of your teaching in relation to Brexit. Tony, could you tell us a little bit about how, the course, *The Politics and Policies of Brexit* came into being?

Tony Travers: Yes. What's interesting about it is that working in the LSE with lots of colleagues, social scientists ... our world is always changing and there are new things going on all the time, government politics, economics right across the disciplines represented in this school. The thing about Brexit is that it's one of those things - its importance to UK and indeed European and indeed potentially global politics and economics is profound. I had talked to a number of colleagues, but particularly with my colleague Kevin Featherstone from the European Institute about how not only teaching but all aspects of what we do, events and so on in the school ought to address the question of Brexit.

I can't actually remember exactly who suggested it to whom, but anyway somebody would have said, "We could run a course on this. That's a good idea," as people do in the LSE all the time. "We should set up a research centre," or whatever it is. We have these conversations, but on this occasion, it led through to the creation of the course. And, in a sense, both the creating ... as is often the case ... creating the course and

then inviting colleagues and indeed outsiders to take part in it, has been simultaneously intellectually stimulating and fun.

As I was going to say a little bit later in all of this, one of the great things about an issue of this kind that appears from hardly nowhere is that it does challenge you to think not only about putting together another course, but exactly how one is going fairly to represent all the aspects of it. And indeed (we're going to come onto this) given it's a highly contested issue, exactly how to do that is a great test for academics, it seems to me. How they present research and other expertise, but in this particular case, around an issue which is in effect the subject in a full-throttle culture war with the United Kingdom.

Claire: Thank you, and as you say, "We're going to come back to that issue again in a little while." Swati, if I could turn to you now. I understand you cover Brexit in all your courses. What made you introduce Brexit at all those different levels?

Swati Dhingra: I did International Economics at all levels and one of the big changes that has happened in the field of International Economics, both in terms of the research as well as the public debate and policymaking, is that we've suddenly seen that going from an era of increasing globalisation, we're now in an era where we're seeing de-globalisation policies being enacted. I think it's really important to let students look at that real-world application or tools that they've learned in the course, analysis that they've become capable of doing, to be able to apply that to a real-world situation. What's fantastic about these events is that from students' point of view, they're actually the seeing application of material that they've studied. They are able to think through how they would put together their own data or their own theories to be able to explain the facts that they're seeing unfold in front of them. What we're doing is enabling them to be able to think through these situations.

Claire: So, it's a sort of, almost, but not quite a laboratory situation, but an application in practice.

Swati: Exactly. The last time some really big event like this happened would be probably the Uruguay round in 1995, when the WTO came into being in a very formal way. Since then, we haven't had these big events, and this is really a great opportunity for them to see it.

Claire: Right. Okay, thank you. I remember talking to colleagues who were teaching in 1989, at the time where we had the domino effect of regimes in Eastern Europe collapsing one after the other in the autumn of 1989. Now we're not quite at that stage, but we are facing a constantly changing, evolving political and economic situation. How do you approach that in terms of planning and design and teaching on a course on *The Politics and Policies of Brexit*? Also, what do you see as perhaps the differences of discussing with LSE students versus say policymakers or TV pundits?

Tony: As is most obvious, there are some elements of the Brexit story which are embedded. The issue of the UK's complicated relationship with the EU and indeed the EU's predecessor organisations, that will stay is constant. What's intriguing about Brexit, of course, is that it is like a laboratory experiment. It's going on there in real-time. By the way, we're only at the foothills. Swati has taught me a lot of things, not least about what I didn't know about trade and its impact on the economy. We're nowhere

near all that feeding through into the economy. So in terms of the elements of the course, [these] can be left in broadly historical, but some of it's moving in real time.

Indeed, I was teaching on the course yesterday and going through the slides I used last year, I had to rewrite almost all of them. This was about the impact of Brexit on British government and British political institutions. So, it is a live subject and with that in mind, I think we have to be aware that the students want to have the most up-to-date information based on research, where there is research. Remember research, academic research moves a bit more slowly than the subjects and not only this one. With that in mind, we need to be aware of everything that's going on out there, bring out what we're saying up to date in the lecture. I think in terms of what the students want and expect, obviously for some, they'll have more background than others. It's not unique to this issue. Some of them have a deep understanding of UK political institutions and politics over many years. Others don't. In a sense, in talking to them, in teaching, it is necessary to remember that some of the history needs to be in-filled as you're going along all the time. And that for many of them, it's part of their lived experience, certainly, Brexit day by day, and that many of them will have, as we all do, emotional responses to the subject. It is not simply teaching classical history, important, though that is, this is something where they will have a personal political view about it. I think it's important to be aware of that. Also not to assume that there is homogeneity of view out there and that students like the rest of us have different views on many issues.

Claire: Thank you, and that's absolutely a key issue we ought to interrogate a little bit more in a minute in terms of emotional responses to Brexit, by the diversity of viewpoints in the classroom and also the fact that students may have very widely varying levels of knowledge about what you're actually talking about. But, just let me put that on pause for a moment and bring Swati in and ask: how do you see the difference between speaking to a group of students about Brexit and the international economics and trade versus when you're sitting on *Newsnight*, and you're being asked to comment on issues of the day?

Swati: I think you might be surprised by what I want to say actually there isn't really a difference. The point of academics stepping into the public debate on some sort of extremely big policy issue like this is that we're to provide an independent, sanitised view of what we think is going to happen, as best informed as we can be. And that's precisely what we want to do with our students as well. We don't want to guide them in one direction or the other, we wanted to lay out the facts and explain to them how we got to those facts or the analysis and that's precisely what I would do if I were say on *Newsnight* or if I were in a classroom. The point is for students to make up their own mind, just like it's for the audience of the BBC to make up their own mind about what they think of our view on it.

Claire: Okay, so maybe we'll move ahead, and talk about what are some of those challenges in terms of teaching Brexit. How have you handled any emotional responses that might emerge? Also, do you think that there are students who might feel that because their views are less ... let's call them mainstream for an institution of higher education, which is populated by members of the so-called liberal elite. How do you create space for those students to feel comfortable on expressing what might not be a popular view?

Tony: I think that these are really important as they're not unique to this subject. That this subject does, I think, act as a very clear way of thinking about the question of how anybody in talking about any subject distances themselves from their own political views. Academics are expected rightly to distance themselves from their political views in precisely the way journalists had to do as well. With that in mind, therefore to speak about the subject in a way that is simultaneously enthusiastic, but dispassionate. I think as you're trying to tread the line between sounding terribly factual and giving the information, research, whatever it is, in a way that is distant from your own views, but without it sounding boring. You need to make it sound interesting as well and be enthusiastic about it. I do think it's possible to do and not only when I'm talking here, at the LSE but elsewhere as well. I always imagine the audience includes people who have quite widely different views. How is what I'm saying going to hit them? Whether they're a raging Remainer or massively in favor of leaving the EU because most of what we're saying, and Swati alluded to this earlier on, is factual.

I mean, here is some research or here is an opinion actually, about what's going on and it is possible to describe that, I think, in a way that is factual without necessarily saying I am on either way. I agree with this or I disagree with this. Academics produce research on both sides of lots of arguments, we presented that both ways. By the way, with Brexit, none of us knows how it will really turn out in terms of economics or political science to name, but two disciplines.

I think that imagining the student body, which it will, and the audience more generally beyond the classroom will contain people with radically different views, and you need to speak to them in a way that neither of them finds ... you challenge them but doesn't find ... they think you're arguing against them in some way. You're just presenting the information, presenting the facts and research. That is deliverable, it's achievable.

Claire: Swati, what about you?

Swati: Yes, I will add something to what Tony just said, which is, thanks to people like Tony, we do get a lot of exposure even within an institutional setting. We don't have to necessarily go out to news programs alone to be able to get a diversity of opinion. I think what is nice about the same person having to face a class of students, as well as other audiences more broadly is that you might think that students would feel a bit of fear if they go against what they might perceive the teacher's opinion to be. With a more general audience, they don't necessarily have that fear. We have heard those diversity of opinions, both in student settings as well as in other settings. I think most of us are cognisant of the fact that there will be a diversity of opinions and some of these students might share those opinions, and therefore, it's better to be upfront, take on the task of saying, "You might have these other notions as well and here's why we think evidence suggests that this may or may not be true."

I think we always present cases like those to the students as well and let them have an argument with each other or with us about it. I mean, I understand there's of course, always going to be that concern that students might not be able to speak up very much, but I think there are enough channels built into the way we teach that we encourage them to do so rather than shut the conversation down.

Claire: Thank you. What I wanted to ask was, in a teaching situation, what are the things you might do to create space for those diverse viewpoints to be aired?

Tony: Well, Swati's answer did that rather elegantly. I failed to address that part of your question. I think that it's all a matter of how you present the information. If you're going to approach a group of people, be they students or others, frankly, and you make it absolutely clear what your views are, your personal views are, it is going to put parts of the audience off if they hold different views. We're trying not to do that. We're trying to say, this is the evidence. That actually leaves space for students of whatever view to ask questions and to have them addressed in as dispassionate a way as possible. Thinking and the whole process of Brexit made has me think more generally about academics and other audiences we don't normally speak to. You mentioned the liberal elite issue which universities absolutely needs to think about.

The question is we're talking about issues which actually are of interest, clearly of interests to people who are way beyond the normal reach of university lectures or public events or whatever. Again, I think that the question of how academics express their views and indeed what they say about the research base that they're building upon or they're using to explore issues ... It ought to be possible to say this to any group of people and for them to feel comfortable and to come back and ask you a question of fact, or indeed, even a question of opinion because our opinion is buried in all these.

Brexit is a really interesting issue and making all of us think harder about how we get across to people, not only complex ideas, but ideas that are controversial, and then how we make sure everybody in the audience, be they students or others, feel free to express their own views. That's the essence of what universities exist for.

Swati: I can give you a concrete example. Next week, I'm giving them problems which are related to trade policy, and one of the topics we cover in that is Brexit, of course. It is an article that I have written, and of course, it's very clear which way I stand on the issue, economically speaking even. I think instead of hiding and saying that I'm neutral in terms of what I believe or what I think about the issue, I think that would be probably a bit deceptive for the students, it's better to just tell them, here's what I think my opinion is. Now, write an essay, which gives you so many words where you actually critique everything I'm saying.

I think that encourages them then. It breaks that sort of barrier that they can't disagree with me or they can't sort of say something that I've written, something against that. I think encouraging them to have problems which explicitly says that you're supposed to find fault with the argument so that it encourages them then to think more critically about it.

Claire: That sounds like a really nice way of taking out the personal in terms of the students' views because they've been asked to occupy a particular position and then explore how that particular position might work in opposition or in critique to your position.

Tony: I just want to chip in. This is an elegant exposition of scientific method, really. I mean, all science proceeds by examination of previous research, attempts to falsify it or to replicate the results. I think Swati's way of making the point is actually very, very clear and a good one because everybody feels open to critique the research, and why not? You can do that many you like. Whatever view one or any of us hold, there are going to be people on both sides that have views very differently even from the views we may personally hold.

Claire: Thank you. I've got a couple more questions I wanted to ask you. I want to return to this issue which is again a more generic teaching issue or teaching and learning challenge which takes a particular form in relation to Brexit, which is, how do we approach the fact that students do come into the classroom with very differing levels of knowledge as well as in issues around identity in relation to Europe and the Brexit question?

Tony: It's, again, it's not unique to the Brexit question, but it is clearly going to be an issue in the LSE, which is an international institution. It's got students from all over the world, colleagues from all over the world. We all have different embedded backgrounds, which are, to some extent, based on what we've learned in the past and the cultural surround that we've had over our lives. Against that background, I just think we need to be careful again and again and again when we're introducing an idea, particularly something based on the history or a particular policy as it's evolved, that you put in a brief explainer to it because some people will know of it because they'll have learned it, they'll have lived through it, others will not. I think that actually the advantage of being in an institution with students and colleagues from all over the world is that it doesn't make you think about the fact that we all have embedded knowledge and that need to ensure that others who don't have the same embedded knowledge at least get enough of the background to be able to understand what they're hearing in real time.

I think that it's not unique to this issue but this Brexit does beg the challenge again and again and again just explaining how the EU institutions came into existence. The fact that it started off as a response to the Second World War and all the economic and political issues that fed into the creation of the institution, you can do that very, very quickly and then get onto the EU today.

Claire: Of course, in relation to that particular point, we shouldn't overestimate how much people have grown up in Europe know about how the EU and institutions came into existence I think that might-

Tony: Or indeed into British attitudes to the EU which are as visible-from-space different from those in many other EU countries. We need to be aware of that as well. As I say, it is one of the advantages of being in an institution with students and colleagues from all over the world that things will need to be explained which perhaps wouldn't if you're teaching a group of any one country's own students about their own history that I'll say. It will be a much more embedded and understood knowledge base.

As I said earlier, I knew nothing about trade until Brexit came along and I've been to many of Swati's lectures and I now feel I know a little bit about trade. So there we are.

Swati: Those kind words from Tony ... One of the ways that I think has worked for me which have been useful in classes is that I get a lot of international students because it is a course in international economics which means that many different students from different countries find it interesting. One of the things I've noticed that has happened over the years is that now I see many of my Singapore students telling me about industrial policy as it was implemented in Singapore and how those can have lessons for the Brexit or post-Brexit policy if the UK were to think of industrial strategy seriously and so on and so forth.

You have enough examples from these many other countries which people can bring to bear the knowledge that they have of it which people like me may not be aware of even those policies that were implemented, that they are able to educate not just me, but other students, and to bring many of these interesting case studies to light. I think that's really enriched the debate that happens within the lecture rooms as well.

Claire: That sounds fantastic that students can feel that their knowledge and background and prior experience is relevant even in the context of discussing something which seems rather at least initially Euro-centric or British-centric even. Perhaps, it would be good to hear from you both about what the student feedback has been on students who have opted to take this particular course. What feedback have they given you?

Tony: It seems to be pretty positive. The great thing about the Brexit course is that it's in real time, it's a living subject. We had good feedback from students. I think they enjoy it, they seem to enjoy it. What we've not had I think is any suggestions that we need radically to alter the way we structured the course so far, but we will review it. Kevin Featherstone and I met in the summer to review the whole course to think about what feedback we'd had and actually what changing events might require us to change by way of the content of the course and the reading list.

The reading list is much more mobile than perhaps traditional courses were because there's so much research coming along at any point. I think the responses have been good in the sense we will need to think after we've run it for two or three years whether we have a review of the course and decide whether this course in its current form will continue because Brexit itself will move on and then assuming Brexit happens, quite a big assumption, then it will turn into a course which will be far more about international relations and trade policy and all the less about the machinations of how it all happened and what's going on in UK and European politics hour-by-hour. We'll have to review the course quite soon, I suspect.

Claire: Thank you. Then, Swati, what about you? How have your students responded to studying Brexit in the context of international economics?

Swati: The first thing, it's just as Tony put it, which is that we haven't had any kinds of complaints saying that the slide was one way or the other. I think that's been really positive that people haven't come out thinking that we're trying to politically manipulate them rather that we're just trying to make them aware of a big political change that's happening. In terms of what the student feedback has been, I think it's really enabled students to go beyond just doing very simple problem-solving, which will let them get high marks in the test to going beyond that and thinking very critically about, not just about the methods taught in the courses, but what the relevance of learning those methods is.

I think that's reflected also in the fact that we recently proposed, in my course, at all levels that we would change the way students are assessed from an exam to an essay. Typically when you do big changes like these, when there's been no precedent and you don't have the sample essay to show it to them, there's a lot of resistance to that. We had almost an 80% vote in favor of changing the assessment largely because people wanted to actually be able to write and they wanted to write about topics that are going on around them. I think the whole Brexit, the Trump trade war has really helped

international economics students. I can't say anything about what it's done to the economy, but in terms of moving the economics profession forward and getting more students interested, it's had a very positive impact.

Claire: Right. Okay. Well, thank you. I've got a final question for you both, which is if someone within the LSE or at another institution of higher education were to come and ask you for a bit of advice about designing a course and teaching a course where Brexit was a key topic of the course or a key theme within it, what advice would you give to those colleagues?

Tony: I think we've just bumped up against that. That it's a living subject. It is a subject where it's moving on all the time. It is profoundly ... the need to change the content will be there during lectures. Actually, at one point I sometimes thought, and literally early on this term, it was a day when something very important was going on. I remember saying at one point, if any of you get anything off the internet about this while we're speaking, do let me know. It was literally moving in real time. I think it's a subject where the research base, but the topic itself is moving all the time. You're going to need to review what you're teaching and the shape of the course really very much more than other courses, which to some degree can be left in place but obviously reviewed, but left in place for longer periods, so it's a living subject.

Claire: Thank you.

Swati: I think when people used to tell me, senior colleagues, that you should do research policy and teaching - all that goes in the same direction. I don't think it was ever true to this point. I do research on this, I actually teach it in my courses and I'm involved in policy discussions about it, and I think that really comes through and most students really appreciate having all three of those dimensions put together.

Claire: I'd like to thank Tony and Swati for joining me today despite their hectic schedules and sharing how and why they teach their students about Brexit. It's wonderful to see the burning political-economic issues of the day being debated in our classrooms. It's also fascinating to hear how the intrinsic links between research, education and public engagement come together around the issue of Brexit and really represent the university higher education at its best.

We've also had some really interesting discussions about the challenges of teaching dispassionately and creating spaces for students to explore Brexit, challenging issues from multiple viewpoints and searching for an evidence space in which to make sense of what's going on around them. I think we also heard how interesting it is to be faced with a complex issue and then put our theories and methods to the test in terms of trying to make sense of what's going on around us.

Thank you all for listening and thank you again to Swati and Tony.