

*Does Europe exist? Good question, let us debate...*  
The Approach of Problem-Based Learning in European Union Studies

by

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#### Abstract

The approach of Problem-based learning (PBL), which was used for the first time in medical education at Mc Master University, is the main teaching method within the field of European Studies at Maastricht University, both at Master and Bachelor level.

PBL is a student-centred approach in which students collaboratively solve problems - normally structured by way of assignments - in small groups with the help of a tutor. Advocates of PBL claim it can be used to enhance content knowledge and foster the development of communication, problem-solving, and self-directed learning.

This contribution aims to reflect on how to apply this method to the field of European Studies (ES) and how to set up assignments within this domain.

In a nutshell this paper thus aims not only to contribute to the general debate about teaching with PBL and its relevance for EU studies but examines specifically the value and applicability of different assignments in different settings

## 1. Introduction

Problem-based learning (PBL) is a teaching approach that was originally established to come to terms with complex problems in the domain of medical studies and is now firmly established in the teaching curriculum of European Studies at Maastricht University since almost a decade. While the approach of PBL has been successfully used in a range of other disciplines such as medicine, nursing and law, it is used less widely in the field of politics, and its application in the field of European Studies has been very limited (Craig & Hale 2008: 165).

Maastricht University is a pioneer when it comes to applying the method in the field of European Studies. The Bachelor programme of European Studies (BA-ES) welcomed its first cohort of students in 2002, and its curriculum is fully taught by way of PBL, in contrast to other programmes that might use PBL just for single modules or courses. The curriculum focuses on European integration from a plethora of angles that bring together the disciplines of law, politics, history, philosophy and economics. It is a three year programme, where around 800 students are enrolled in the BA-ES at a given time. European integration is considered as a broader process than the European Union (EU) as such and is conceived for students with a broad interest in the political, historical, social and cultural aspects of the European endeavour<sup>1</sup>.

The scope of European studies is almost as large as Europe itself. It stretches from the feudal system of the Middle Ages to the present-day challenges of economic and fiscal integration of the European Union (and beyond). In fact, the possibilities for study can be overwhelming. It goes beyond the scope of this paper to probe into a comparative analysis of different European Studies programmes in Europe and beyond to probe into the "ideal" design of European Studies programmes at Bachelor level.

A different approach is thus taken in so far as we reflect on how to apply this teaching method in the field of European Studies (ES) and how to set up assignments within this domain. In its ideal form PBL is supposed to enable the study of real-life problems in their complexity by way of an inter-disciplinary approach. We reflect on this method by giving examples of different assignments developed throughout the BA-ES and reflect on the opportunities and challenges this meets during implementation in the classroom. This is closely linked to the question of the pre-requisites staff and students have to bring to deal with these varieties of challenges.

In this quest the chapter is set up as follows: First, the rationale of PBL and the seven-step approach are examined, to then be able to examine the role of tutors and students within such a setting. This more general account about PBL builds the starting point for a reflection on the drawing up of problems and assignments, specifically within ES. The last section reflects on challenges that tutors (might) face when teaching ES by way of the PBL method. The methodological approach applied in this contribution builds on insights of tutors within the Basic Teaching Qualification project at Maastricht University, during which staff

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<sup>1</sup> For more background information on the structure of the BA-ES curriculum see: <http://www.maastrichtuniversity.nl/web/Faculties/FASoS/TargetGroups/ProspectiveStudents/BachelorsProgrammes/EuropeanStudies2.htm>

members are asked to reflect on their teaching experiences during the last years<sup>2</sup>. Additionally, reflections and insights are presented that have been identified within a current project entitled "Update PBL" at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences.

## 2. The Rationale underlying Problem-Based learning

PBL is an interactive process of learning that slowly developed during the late 1960s. It was first established in the field of medicine at McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario as well as in medical schools at Case Western Reserve University in the US already in the 1950s (Albanese & Mitchell 1993: 52; Kaunert 2009: 255). Students were to work on problems together with other peers and under the guidance of a tutor. The number of lectures was restricted to one or two per week, while the starting point for the process of learning were assignments that had been designed by academic staff members. This student-centred approach has been described as promoting collaborative learning on the one hand, while at the same time enhancing the student's responsibility for the results achieved (Schmidt, van der Molen, te Winkel & Wijnen 2009: 227).

This "pedagogical innovation" of PBL (Schmidt, van der Molen, te Winkel & Wijnen 2009: 227; Barrows 1996: 5-7) is seen to be based on the following characteristics:

1. The use of problems as a point of departure for the learning process that allows to discover a certain topic within a real-time background; Different kind of "PBL problems" are presented in assignments developed by academic staff.
2. Learning is student-centred, based on student agency and initiation. The seven-step approach supports students in structuring their ideas and their approach, and strongly mimics the academic research process.
3. Collaborative learning by cooperation of students in small groups: While in the original set-up the tutorial group was constituted of 5-6 students, the tutorial groups in Maastricht are limited to around 16 students. The underlying idea of the tutorial groups follows the idea of "collaborate learning" (Bruffee 1987), which assumes that students learn better in the collaborative setting of the PBL tutorials instead of the competitive and highly individualized traditional classroom. Through this collaborative learning exercise students are supposed to train and increase their ability to judge information provided by others, relate it to their own learning success, and critically assess compatibility or conflicting judgment.
4. Flexible facilitation by a tutor who is present at group meetings to help students with the learning process and to act as a facilitator rather than a teacher. The tutor, hence, is to support the learning process of students and not per se to transfer expert knowledge by way of lecturing to students.
5. Limitation of the number of frontal lectures in order to present and clarify information that will feed into the debates of tutor groups (van Berkel & Schmidt 2005).
6. Ample time for self-study and reflection of the material.

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<sup>2</sup> This project 'Basis-Kwalificatie Onderwijs' (BKO) is a larger project conducted in the Netherlands where teaching staff are evaluated when it comes to their teaching experiences but at the same time have to reflect on different methods and experiences in this quest.

These characteristics of PBL relate to research findings of cognitive psychology, suggesting that students learn better if the following *three conditions* are met during the learning process (Bridges 1992: 22-23; Gijsselaers 1996; Schmidt, van der Molen, te Winkel & Wijnen 2009; Albanese & Mitchell 1993: 53).

First, within a sustainable learning process, as it is assumed to prevail in a PBL framework, students are pushed to *activate previous knowledge* during the pre-discussion. Discussing the assignment in the tutorial group not only leads to a common understanding of the learning objectives for the respective assignment, but students are also prompted to rely on and discuss knowledge during the brainstorm that they have already gained and that they are familiar with. The underlying psychological logic is that students apply knowledge to understand new information, which makes it easier to memorise and to mentally store the new information (Bridges 1992: 22; see also Gijsselaers 1996: 15).

Secondly, PBL is based on psychological research that shows that for knowledge to be recalled and applied later, it is best if the PBL assignments and the context of learning mimic the future professional problems that students might encounter as closely as possible. This *importance of social and contextual factors* is also highlighted by Gijsselaers (1996: 14-16) who criticises that in traditional learning environments students are just left with the acquired knowledge without any explanations of how the learnt could now be applicable in the real work or in a future job. This shortcoming of a mental distance between the acquired knowledge and its translation into a real-work context is overcome by PBL (Gijsselaers 1996: 16, referring to Mandl, Gruber and Renkl 1993).

Last, PBL rests on the quite common observation that most people learn best by doing and by way of repeating and writing down issues rather than by just listening to lectures. Within the post-discussion meetings in a tutorial group students have to *elaborate on the information that they collected* (Bridges 1992), discuss with peers and exchange views and arguments. This way students not only memorise what they have read, but this exchange with fellow students also helps them to understand and question the learnt material much better than if they would just read it or hear it in a lecture. Gijsselaers takes this idea even further, when he emphasises that students learn to “question their acquired knowledge during self study in a meaningful way” (Gijsselaers 1996: 14-16), because they are confronted with the elaborations of their peers in the tutorials. Students are not only confronted with the need to formulate the acquired knowledge in own words when presenting it to their peers, but ideally this also leads to deeper understanding and questioning of inconsistent interpretations of the learnt material. Additionally, we also claim that in this regard the effect of students repeating the learnt knowledge yet another time also helps to them to memorise and retain information.

Next to these psychological insights into the best ways to gain and retrieve new information, PBL is also strongly based on the idea of integrated learning and the development of team skills. The rationale underlying some of the characteristics of PBL is deduced “*from the theory that learning is a process in which the learner actively constructs knowledge*” (Gijsselaers 1996: 13; for more background about learning theories underlying PBL see Glaser 1991). The student-centred characteristic of PBL directly derives from this assumption that “students learn best when they set their own goals”, i.e. when the learners define themselves what they find interesting about a certain assignment and what they want to discover in their self-study. This assumption also strongly shapes the role of the tutor, who is

not responsible anymore to transfer knowledge in the traditional sense, but facilitates students in developing and improving their “self-directed learning skills” (Gijsselaers 1996: 13).

This way of learning becomes an “active and constructive process” (Gijsselaers 1996: 15), especially when compared to the more receptive nature of the traditional learning when passively listening to lectures. As best shown by the seven step approach, students mimic the normal process of academic research by elaborating on a problem and by way of developing a research plan and formulating clear research questions for each assignment. The advantage of this approach is that students feel ownership for their own learning, and by being able to select themselves how exactly they want to approach certain problems, they show a higher interest and more engagement in their learning process.

Additionally, reflection and self-monitoring skills allow students to learn about their learning process, to identify shortcomings and to improve next time. This way of fostering awareness and reflection in the learning process, according to Gijsselaers (1996: 15) makes PBL also more effective in the long run, as it equips students with the necessary meta-cognitive skills to learn quicker and better also in the future, after finishing the respective course of even their studies.

PBL and its underlying logics, hence, can also be seen as a very strong response to the discontent with traditional learning approaches that were often criticised insofar as students are seen to retain very little information from what they have heard during lectures, or not being able to link what they have learnt with their future job profiles, inside and outside academia. At the same time, PBL strongly points at the process-dimension of learning, emphasising that the main focus should not be “what is learnt” but “how it is learnt”. Educating students towards independent, reflective and sustainable learners is the ultimate goal of PBL.

### *2.1. Seven “steps to wisdom”*

The seven-step approach, also called “seven jump” was developed at Maastricht University to facilitate and structure the students’ learning process. Each tutorial meeting is thereby divided into two parts: The post-discussion of the assignment that students prepared in their self-study before the tutorial, and after a short break, the pre-discussion follows for the next assignment that students are going to prepare until the next meeting, triggered by the assignment that they are confronted with. Ideally both parts should take around 60 minutes.

In the pre-discussion of an assignment students follow the first five steps (for overview see Table 1): (1) clarification of terms and concepts; (2) Formulation of a problem statement; (3) Brainstorm; (4) Classification and Structuring of brainstorm; and finally (5) Formulation of learning objectives (van Til & van der Heijden 2009: 9-11; See also Schmidt, van der Molen, te Winkel & Wijnen 2009: 228-229; Or Schmidt 1983).

Table 1: Seven-steps of PBL and their underlying logics

No.	What to do?	What to do in detail?	Why?
1	Clarification of terms and concepts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>ask for explanation of words or concepts that are not understood</li> <li>if illustration: discuss what picture shows</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>provide common starting point, i.e. every group member should understand the assignment as it stands</li> </ul>
2	Formulation of Problem Statement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provide "title" for the session or formulate wider research question, i.e. "what is it about"</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Students dive into topic and grasp the "underlying problem" of the assignment</li> <li>By discussing in the group, the group establishes a common ground of the problem – they not only name it but discuss it</li> </ul>
3	Brainstorm	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Everything is allowed: collection of ideas, potential explanations in regard of problem statement, etc</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To establish and contrast: what does the group already now – what does the group want to find out</li> <li>students spontaneously name aspects that THEY consider as interesting and relevant</li> <li>activation of prior knowledge and real-world experiences – students should link the problem statement to existing knowledge</li> </ul>
4	Categorising and Structuring of Brainstorm	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Keywords from Brainstorm are put into similar categories (e.g. according to question type: why, how, what consequences etc)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Structuring first creative collection of ideas to find patterns and facilitate the formulation of <i>few</i> learning objectives</li> </ul>
5	Formulation of Learning objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Use categories of structured brainstorm to formulate single questions, or research task (e.g. "look for x")</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provide clear focus in reading the literature by having a smaller research questions guiding the learning process</li> </ul>
6	Self-Study	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Students read literature, look for additional sources, prepare answers to the formulated learning objectives</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Student as self-directed and responsible learner</li> </ul>
7	Post-discussion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Students report back on how they answered the learning objectives; compare results but also exchange arguments</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>By Formulating acquired knowledge in own words and by exchanging arguments with peers, deeper understanding is facilitated in contrast to pure memorising;</li> <li>Students become aware of potential misinterpretations of (empirical) material in being confronted with reports from other peers</li> </ul>
	& Reflection on Learning Process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Self-assessment of students in learning process and peer assessment, especially in roles of chair and discussant</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>By becoming aware of what works well and what could be improved, first step to improve learning process</li> <li>Not all experiences students have to make themselves, but they can learn tremendously by observing and providing feedback to each other</li> </ul>

To get students started on a certain topic, they are confronted with an assignment that provides a picture, some quotes, or few text passages outlining the problem. These assignments are developed by scientific staff and are part of the course book that students receive at the beginning of each module. Students are supposed to have read and looked at this assignment already before their tutorial (or during the break), so that they can start off with clarifying terms and concepts. This first step guides students mentally into the topic, and by discussing unknown words or concepts one should ensure that all students understand the text as it stands and that the group shares ideas about illustrations that might be part of the assignment. In the next step, the whole group agrees on the formulation of the problem statement that frames the whole assignment, provides a title for the session, and makes the group agree on what the general impetus of the assignment is about. Problem statements can be traditional titles, but sometimes are also formulated as broader research questions. The problem statement should trigger the next step of the brainstorm. The rationale behind this step is that students collect potential interests that they might have, activate prior knowledge, and share certain expectations. Everything is allowed during this step, and ideas are collected unquestioned at the whiteboard (i.e. there are no wrong ideas; everyone should be allowed to follow her/his own ideas). Just in case a group member does not understand how a certain intervention of a peer is connected to the problem statement and if the relevant student did not explain why a certain keyword should be taken into account in regard of the problem statement, clarification questions can be asked by the group. The outcome of the brainstorm is noted on the whiteboard by the secretary that during the next (fourth) step should be categorized and structured by the students. This is mostly the most challenging step for inexperienced students, but by structuring the brainstorm students categorise keywords that fit together and this way they find common patterns that in the next step will allow for the formulation of specific questions. As last step of the pre-discussion, students agree on the formulation of common learning objectives, by referring to the brainstorm and the now structured collection of ideas that they have noted on the whiteboard. This way of formulating learning objectives in the ideal case reflects the different approaches to the wider topic that students have agreed to research upon, because they consider them to be the most relevant to the specific topic and because they are interested in exploring exactly these questions. Additionally, by agreeing on common learning objectives in a group, experience showed that students also get acquainted to formulate learning objectives clearly and to the point, as otherwise the post-discussion in the tutorial group would go into different directions.

After these five steps of the pre-discussion, students go home to engage in the self-study, which takes a central position in the PBL framework and emphasises the self-responsibility of the learner for knowledge acquisition. During this self-study students should work on own answers to the formulated learning objectives. Especially for students in their first year of study the key literature is provided after each assignment, while this should not discourage students to look for additional sources and other literature that they might find interesting. For more advanced students, sometimes also just a general reading list for the whole course is provided, and it is up to the students themselves to decide in their self-study, which of the literature provided is relevant for their respective learning objective. Students thereby also learn how to select relevant material and literature in a relatively short period of time. The following tutorial starts with the post-discussion where students report back, exchange their answers, discuss problems and try to come to common conclusions of how to answer the learning objectives. While students should be able to come to a common understanding of some relevant factual knowledge during this post-

discussion, it is especially the more normative and not-straightforward answers that then allow for a more profound discussion and exchange of arguments.

While the formal seven step approach ends here, students are in practice often also encouraged by their tutors to reflect in their post-discussion about their selected learning objectives and potential aspects of the topic that they did not cover originally but found interesting while engaging with the literature. It is, however, mostly more experienced students in their second year of study who are able to show that kind of reflexivity in the post-discussion and provide guidance for improving the next pre-discussion. This way of improving the process of learning is, at the same time, identified as one of the most important aspects of the PBL cycle (see for example Albanese & Mitchell 1993: 53), as otherwise students repeat their mistakes and imprecision every time they engage in an assignment. In addition, students are also encouraged, to provide peer-feedback on their performance as chair, participant and secretary. This way they ideally not only advance on the discussed topic, but are also able to improve their communicative skills.

## *2.2. Role of students and the tutor with the setting of PBL*

Next to the cognitive-psychological logics described above that PBL is based upon, PBL also strongly emphasises team development and working skills. PBL is not only student-centred in terms of its inquiry set-up, but in practice it is also students themselves who organise their tutorial meetings, by fulfilling the roles of chair, secretary, and of course, active participants (for a more elaborated discussion of the role of students and tutors in PBL see Savin-Baden & Major 2004: 81-104).

Each assignment session is chaired by a student-chair who is responsible for convening the meeting, keeping track of the discussion to cover all learning objectives, engaging all participants in the discussion and making sure of the keeping within a reasonable time-limit. By summarising the discussion from time to time, the student-chair should also facilitate the understanding of the participants and provide concise overviews, especially in case some students get lost in details during the discussion. It is important to note that the student-chair her/himself is not supposed to provide the answers to all questions and lecture his colleagues, but the role is mainly aimed at chairing the meeting in an orderly and inspiring manner. The student-chair is supported by the role of the secretary, who takes note on the whiteboard, especially during the pre-discussion. Depending on the prior details of agreement between group members, the secretary can also be asked to post the learning objectives electronically, or to send other collected material around. The roles of student-chair and secretary alternate with every assignment, so that as many students as possible get the possibility to try and succeed in these roles. By fulfilling this role, students also are meant to improve their leadership skills as chairs, as well as their note-taking skills, as a skilled secretary can make a huge impact on how the brainstorm takes shape on the whiteboard. The rest of the tutorial group members, are fulfilling the role of active participants, engaging in dialogue to determine the learning objectives, or to respectively exchange answers and arguments in regard of their prior formulated learning objectives.

Each tutorial group is supported by an academic staff member, called a "tutor" who is meant to facilitate the learning process of the group (Schmidt & Moust 1998: 5-11; Moust & Nuy 1987), by asking provocative questions, providing assistance with the seven-step approach, or providing feedback to the chair/secretary or the overall learning process of the group. At

no point in time the tutor should lecture the group, but in case of problems, s/he should support the group in identifying what went wrong and what could be improved to get to a more successful learning process in the next assignment. However, as many colleagues often highlight, it is also extremely important especially when tutoring PBL-inexperienced students that the tutor is able to react to potentially distracting group dynamics, and stops the group in case they are “going off the track”.

Research into the use of PBL in disciplines such as medicine, nursing and law has shown that students have taken away benefits from PBL as they have acquired transferable skills and have engaged with concepts and principles in such a way that processes are internalized rather than being conveyed by a top-down approach (Craig & Hale 2008: 165). Until now there is only limited research done about the application of PBL in Politics curricula, while there is even less in-depth research about PBL in European Studies. The aim of this paper is to see how the above ideal PBL-approach can be practically transferred and adapted to the specific needs of a European Studies curriculum.

### 3. Drawing up Problems and Materials for PBL in European Studies

In the scholarly literature on PBL, two elements are especially emphasised as essential features that have a great impact on students’ learning success with PBL: the role of the tutor as facilitator, and the format of problems as presented in assignments (see e.g. Gijssels 1996: 20, Sockalingem 2010). Next to various factors that influence the PBL process, like tutor performance, amount of prior knowledge, group functioning, time spent on individual study, or interest in subject matter, the quality of problems/assignments is considered as one of the crucial factors influencing the success of PBL (For a path-dependency model of PBL see Norman & Schmidt 2000: 726).

Problems as portrayed in assignments are the starting point for the student-centred inquiry within the PBL framework. Kaunert (2009), hence, highlights the importance to catch students’ interest and engagement with the respective assignment right from the start. Only when students really want to solve the puzzle that the assignment is providing for them, they will engage actively and learn effectively in the self-study and the subsequent post-discussion. After discussing briefly some general ideas about problems and PBL assignments, some practical examples of PBL assignments as used in the BA European Studies at Maastricht University will be examined.

#### *3.a. Objectives when drawing up assignments in PBL*

As PBL always departs from a problem its attributes and the way it is set up is of crucial importance (Sockalingem et.al. 2010). Prior studies in the field of Medicine have identified nine attributes of a “good” problem, as it should be set-up in order to:

- a. stimulate thinking, analysis and reasoning,
- b. ensure self-directed learning,
- c. activate prior knowledge,
- d. be set in a realistic context,
- e. lead to the appropriate formulation of learning goals
- f. arouse curiosity
- g. include topics relevant for the discipline

- h. assure contextual breadth
- i. build on an appropriate vocabulary (Des Marchais 1999, referred in Sockalingam et al 2010).

What is also stressed in the scholarly literature is the fact that a problem is usually a description of different phenomena or events taken from the real world (Schmidt et al 2009, p. 227).

These characteristics and observations are very useful to set out general criteria but do not give us any insights into the views of tutors and students of how a problem or assignment should be designed in order to meet the needs of the target group and the curriculum of a European Studies Programme at Bachelor level.

### *3.b. Reflections on drawing on up concrete assignments in European Studies*

The three different assignments presented<sup>3</sup>, are examples of tasks that have been designed and applied within the context of the European Studies programme at Maastricht University. They have been identified by tutors active within the programme as “good” problems insofar as they fulfil the nine criteria stipulated by Des Marchais and most importantly arouse curiosity and lead to the formulation of appropriate and concise learning goals.<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless there are differences between these assignments and they have also been designed for different contexts. By way of analysis of these different tasks we aim to shed more light on how one could design assignments within the field of European Studies. Moreover the need of adapting tasks to different target groups will be probed into.

The first assignment on the *institutional framework of the European Union* (EU) has been designed for first year BA students within the field of European Studies. It also has been applied to prospective students interested in studying the programme at so-called Introduction Days to ES. Hence it is especially targeted towards students without a profound knowledge about the EU institutional framework and EU policy making. The task is designed as a puzzle. All EU institutions are marked on separate sheets of paper, and students – in the pre-discussion – are asked to tape the institutions to the wall, in the logical order of how they might work together in the policy-making process. This leads to a very interactive way of pre-discussing and activation of prior knowledge. Students that only have very rudimentary insights into what the EU institutions are and how they work are immediately intrigued and try to figure out with others how this might be solved. This method also prevents that students feel isolated when not knowing the details of the processes at stake as the answers have to be found in a common effort. For the Introduction Days one compensated for the fact that students had no time for self-study and examined the institutions by way of a lecture, after the interactive pre-discussion. This immediately led to some results as students had a much clearer idea of how the EU institutions interact in real life. This idea of structuring the pre-discussion could of course be applied to other topics in the field of European Studies.

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<sup>3</sup> Please see the annex of this contribution.

<sup>4</sup> The assignments presented were identified by tutors within the BKO (Basis Kwalifikatie Onderwijs; Basic Teaching Qualification) project conducted at Maastricht University. Here around 15 tutors active within the BA-ES received a diploma for the academic year 2009-2010 and had to draw up a dossier where they reflected on experiences when teaching the BA-ES.

The second assignment has been drawn up for students of a second year BA course, entitled Policy Domains, which gives an introduction into policy-making in the EU. The course is a combination of a classical PBL course - in the sense that students have to discuss assignments for around two weeks – but then they have to work on a specific domain that they can sign up for in small groups. They meet with a policy expert once a week but otherwise have to work on a specific domain among themselves by answering specific questions and writing an in-depth dossier at the end. One has opted for this project-based approach as it seemed ideal to acquaint students to a particular area. <sup>5</sup>

The assignment presented here is used within the first two weeks of the course. It is very openly formulated, and it always manages to trigger a lot of discussion among students about definitions. When starting this module, students always think they know what 'policy' is, but when we ask them to define it, they realize it is not that easy. How formal is 'policy'? Can unwritten rules also be policy? The definitions help them to discover that there are differences between policy, politics and polity, and one helps them to define when policy actually becomes 'public' policy. The method of contrasting different definitions leads to a reflection of concepts and to critical thinking and can of course be applied in any course within the domain of ES.

The last assignment is designed for students taking the Minor European Studies<sup>6</sup>. These are students that have very different backgrounds and want to become acquainted to ES in a very short time-span. In this quest this assignment is different from the others presented as it formulates many questions. Normally a PBL assignment leaves more to the imagination of students, stimulating them to formulate questions themselves. Students coming from different backgrounds find it helpful when assignments a bit more 'pre-cooked'. This assignment also highlights the fact that images can be helpful when drawing up assignments as they can not only stimulate discussion but can be very effective tools to convey concepts.

What is key for all three assignments and when drawing up assignments in general, is that one has respective objectives in mind, i.e. what wants students do learn and to process when doing this specific assignment. It thus can be very helpful to make this explicit and to put these goals or questions one wants students to answer into instructions for tutors teaching the course. This way one can ensure cohesion when interpreting the same material across different tutor groups.

#### 4. From lecturer to facilitator: challenges for tutors when teaching ES by way of PBL

Besides general reflection on the role of tutor above, PBL also brings specific challenges for those teaching within the field of ES. Whereas tutors used to the PBL system - either as teachers or students - find that this method comes rather naturally, new teaching staff recruited from abroad – more often than not - need to undergo a process of adaptation. It is in the nature of a specialised but also inter-disciplinary programme such as European Studies that teaching staff from different countries with different backgrounds have to be recruited. According to the experience at Maastricht University interdisciplinarity works if tutors with

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<sup>5</sup> This approach has also been applied to Area Studies, where students study one country in detail by using the project based approach.

<sup>6</sup> The Minor European Studies is set-up for exchange students for other universities (e.g. Erasmus students) or students from other faculties who want to acquire specific knowledge about the European integration process and EU politics within the course of six months.

specific backgrounds teach within their own domain. Courses of European law are thus taught by lawyers and courses on European economics by economists. A specific expertise within the field is thus seen as crucial. There are issues within European Studies such as the EU decision-making process or the history of EU integration however that need cross-cutting expertise. This demands a certain flexibility and openness from teaching staff. It has proven to be helpful for newcomers to sit in PBL tutorials with more experienced tutors, to gain a practical insight of how tutorials work.

Moreover the fact that European Studies is taught by way of the method of PBL demands that new teaching staff need to receive training on how to work with PBL. Not only have they to be acquainted to the seven-step approach but they also have to be able to reflect on how this method can be applied within the field of European Studies. For those that have been used to teaching by way of giving frontal lectures this implies that they have to learn how to “take themselves back” and not always give answers to questions but ask students to reflect themselves. The secret is to become a facilitator by way of asking open-ended questions and steering students towards possible answers. As Craig and Hale put it this process requires the “tutor to let go of the learning process” to a larger degree than some of the delivery approaches such as lectures and seminars (Craig and Hale 2008, p. 173)

One has to point out that there is a lot of debate if PBL needs a tutor with expertise knowledge in subject matter, or if it is sufficient if the tutor knows ins and outs of facilitation. Eagle, Harsym & Mandin (1992) demonstrated that students guided by content-expert tutors produced more than twice as many learning issues for self-directed learning and spent almost twice the amount of time on self-study. Schmidt, Van der Arend & Moust (1993) found similar effects of subject-matter expertise on achievement.

One hypothesis explaining this discrepancy is that the subject-matter expertise of the tutor seems to play a role predominantly when the “scaffold provided by the learning environment itself: the problems, the resources, do not contain sufficient cues as to what is important to study” (Schmidt, van der Molen, te Winkel & Wijnen 2009: 238). Within the ES programme a special focus is thus put on training of tutors and guiding students towards the formulation of focused problem statements and learning goals where it is clear (to the tutor) that the answers can be found in the literature provided.

## 5. Concluding remarks

Problem-based learning is a method initially developed in the field of medicine several decades ago. It is based on the notion that students should come to terms with- and process the material at stake themselves, rather than being transmitted the information by teaching staff by way of frontal lectures. The student-activating approach is seen to improve student's retention and comprehension of the respective matter.

The question at stake within this contribution was how this method can be applied within the field of European Studies. Although one is aware that European Studies is a vast field that is not interpreted the same way across all teaching programmes, it is normally an interdisciplinary programme with a focus on “Europe”. In this context the scope of interpretation is very large; from the birth of European nation states to the ins- and outs of the ordinary legislative procedure of the EU, to just give two examples.

Nevertheless, starting from the assumption that European Studies normally demands a certain degree of interdisciplinarity and flexibility in the approach, we have examined a selected number of assignments that have been applied within the European Studies programme at Maastricht University.

This sheds light on the fact that one can work with very simple tools such as contrasting different definitions of concepts or marking key-words that then have to be assembled to get the (pre-)discussion going and to lead to the formulation of respective learning objectives. Supplemented with images this incites student's curiosity. What became apparent however is the fact that PBL does not operate according to the principle "one size fits all". For a very heterogeneous group of students, assignments might have to provide more information, i.e. be more "pre-cooked". Some aspects of ES are also difficult to answer in the post-discussion by way of PBL, for example the co-decision procedure. This can then be done by way of a lecture. Some aspects within the field of European Studies such as the in-depth study of a policy or an area can be grasped better by way of using a project-based approach, where students cooperate in small groups under the guidance of an expert.

Teaching staff that have newly been recruited to a programme using PBL have to get acquainted to the new method one the one hand. Moreover, the experience at Maastricht University has shown that PBL assignments have to be updated regularly and PBL can not be taken as a given. Not only does one have to review assignments regularly but one also has to reflect on teaching methods at regular intervals. The question has to be asked as regards to which method is appropriate for which subject matter. PBL can thus be seen as reflecting the content of European Studies itself, a dynamic and ever-changing process.

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## ANNEX

### ASSIGNMENT 1 – BA ES (GREAT EXPECTATIONS)

#### INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK OF THE EU

Formally the European Union has seven institutions: the European Parliament, the European Commission, the Council of Ministers, the European Court of Justice, and the Court of Auditors and the European Council and the European Central Bank. The Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) defines the composition of these bodies as well as their functions. In addition there are a number of advisory bodies such as the Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions.

These are the most important European bodies involved in the various policy and decision-making processes within the European Union:

EUROPEAN COMMISSION	EUROPEAN COURT OF JUSTICE	COURT OF AUDITORS
EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT	COUNCIL OF MINISTERS	ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE
COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS	EUROPEAN COUNCIL	EUROPEAN CENTRAL BANK

## ASSIGNMENT 2 – BA ES (POLICY DOMAINS)

### WHAT IS POLICY?

“The basis of government is jugglery. If it works and lasts, it becomes policy”  
(a 9th-century Baghdad wazir quoted in Hill, 1997: 381)

“Policy is rather like the elephant – you recognize it when you see it but cannot easily define it”

(Cunningham, a former top British civil servant, quoted in Hill, 2005: 7)

Consider the following definitions:

*Policy* = “political sagacity; statecraft; prudent conduct; craftiness; course of action adopted by government, party, etc.” (Oxford English Dictionary)

*Policy* = “action (or inaction) by public authorities facing choices between alternative courses of public action” (Peterson & Bomberg, 1999: 4)

*Policy* = “a more or less well-considered strive to reach certain goals with certain means in a certain time order” (Hoogerwerf, 1985: 25)

*Public policy* = “what governments do, why they do it, and what difference it makes” (Dye, 1976: 1)

*Public policy* = “the greatest happiness of the greatest number” (Mill and Bentham, quoted in Parsons, 1995: 5)

*Policy-making* = “conscious awareness of choice between two main alternatives for steering societies” (Dror, 1989: xiii)

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## ASSIGNMENT 3 – MINOR ES (EUROPE: A CRITICAL REFLECTION)

### “HOMO EUROPAEUS”?

As Chryssochoou remarked in the previous discussion, *‘at the heart of the EU’s democratic deficit lies the absence of ‘civic we-ness’ – that is, a sense of common identity amongst Europeans’*.<sup>7</sup> Thus according to the socio-psychological perspective on the democratic deficit, the European Union does not have, and is in need of, a common identity.

Is it indeed the case that such a common European identity is absent? According to the preamble of the failed European Constitution, the EU is ‘united in diversity’. Is this sufficient basis for a common identity? Do ‘shared historical events’ such as the Roman Empire, the Renaissance and the Enlightenment constitute such a basis? Or can we only have a ‘European demos’ when we have clear ‘identity markers’ such as a common religion, language or memory? Do we indeed feel more ‘European’ since we use the ‘Euro’ as Thomas Risse argues?



Source: <http://www.mammeas.de/European-k.jpg>

Is a common European identity a necessity for further integration? Is its absence a ‘threat’ to the Union’s survival as Shore claims, or can we have a European ‘identity light’ as Risse argues? Could it be argued that the lack of a European identity lays at the foundation of the French ‘non’ and the Dutch ‘nee’ to the European Constitution? And if we consider it a necessity, what should such a common identity consist of and how can it be ‘constructed’? To what extent does the introduction of the principle of EU citizenship in the Maastricht Treaty stimulate a common European identity?

<sup>7</sup> D.N. Chryssochoou (2003). EU democracy and the democratic deficit. In M. Cini (Ed.), *European Union Politics* (p. 373). Oxford: Oxford University Press.