

Mind the Gap: Using UK Parliamentary Sources to Enhance Teaching

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Online primary parliamentary sources can be of great value in teaching Parliament-related courses and a valuable means of promoting the development of students' research and analytical skills; particularly taking into account the research habits of the modern student population. Through a series of focus groups with politics students and a national survey of politics lecturers, the perceptions and current use of the UK Parliament website in teaching are analysed. It was found that a considerable number of lecturers are making use of the website for teaching purposes, though this is usually at a very basic and often superficial level. Barriers to the use of parliamentary resources include a lack of awareness of the types and variety of parliamentary material, difficulties in finding appropriate material on the Parliament website and a lack of understanding on the part of lecturers as to how to use this material effectively in lectures and seminars.

Keywords: primary parliamentary sources; digital natives; learning and teaching; teaching about parliament.

Introduction

Until recently, the study of parliament could only be the private realm of a handful of experts. Besides the institution's complexity, opportunities to access parliamentary information were considerably restricted. Parliamentary information would have been disseminated through complex, difficult-to-reach publications and little more. Likewise, access to the actual institution would have implied living in or travelling to the capital, and even then limited to a narrow range of parliamentary activities. The rise of the Internet, however, has had a considerable impact in opening up parliaments (Leston-Bandeira, 2007), with a particularly visible impact on the expansion of information now available on the institution. At the click of a button, anyone, anywhere, can access a very wide, timely and detailed range of information about parliament, displayed in increasingly diverse types of format. Besides issues of parliamentary transparency, this has a clear impact on our ability to research parliament, but also, importantly, on the opportunities it opens up for teaching Parliament. Yet it is not always clear

that UK higher education teaching is making the most of these opportunities. In this article we explore the teaching opportunities offered by the UK Parliament's online sources and outline current practices by both students and lecturers in their limited use of these sources, on the basis of research by focus groups with students and a survey of lecturers.

As the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) Politics and International Studies benchmark establishes, political science is continually 'in contention and in flux' (QAA, 2007, p. 4). The requirement for up-to-date information in this rapidly changing environment means that it is highly conducive to the use of a wide range of online resources (Pencek, 2000). There is a 'superabundance of information' (Thornton, 2012, p. 213), which includes, but is by no means limited to, the use of institutional, news, party political and interest group websites. Within this environment sits a generation of students who feel completely at home with the wide availability of online material (Brabazon, 2007; Thornton, 2009) and who make greater use of the Internet to prepare for seminars and written assessments than ever before. As Prensky coined back in 2001, these are the 'digital natives', born and raised in a digital world. Unfortunately, those of us teaching Parliament are often among the most representative specimens of 'digital immigrants'. That is, we have had to adapt to digital means of communication rather than utilising them naturally (Prensky, 2001, p. 2). As we shall see below, while Parliament's online sources offer many opportunities to engage with students, developing key research skills and a better understanding of the institution, most of the time we are not using these resources effectively and students are instead making the most of other, easily available, non-parliamentary sources. Despite the 'explosion of innovations' in learning and teaching across political science over the last decade (Hale, 2008, p. 7), the use of parliamentary material in teaching is less innovative. Yet when used effectively, this material can develop students' research skills, promoting critical thinking.

The article starts by considering how utilising primary parliamentary sources can enhance teaching. We then turn to our focus group data to show the extent to which students' research habits rely on web-based, quick-to-access material. We then outline the ways in which parliamentary resources are already being used in teaching and suggest how these can be made more effective. Finally, we consider the barriers to greater use of these resources; in particular, the lack of awareness of the nature and extent of parliamentary sources and the difficulties faced by both students and lecturers in locating suitable material through the UK Parliament website.

Why Utilise Primary Parliamentary Sources to Support Teaching?

The teaching of Parliament can be problematic, particularly at undergraduate level. Students tend to have a low awareness of Parliament, often viewing it as a complex and boring institution. Furthermore, the distance from London and

high travel costs mean that most students are unable to visit Parliament, contributing to a sense of detachment from the institution they are studying. The material available through the UK Parliament website provides a partial solution to these problems, giving access to contemporary information in a variety of formats. Although there is no published research on the use of parliamentary material in student learning, Lee (2003, p. 69) shows that other institutional websites such as those of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) have been promoted as a means of enhancing tutorial discussions, enabling students to have greater contact with an otherwise seemingly remote institution. The potential to enhance the teaching of the UK Parliament is therefore considerable, as well as specifically to develop key transferable skills.

Reliance on secondary sources to support the teaching of Parliament has become a particularly impoverished approach in the face of today's availability of primary sources. Demonstrating proficiency in independent research is identified as a crucial transferable skill for students across all disciplines. Politics is no exception, as established by the QAA (2007, p. 11) subject benchmark, and departments spend increasing amounts of time promoting students' information literacy and independent research skills. Developing these skills has become particularly important in today's world of 24/7 cycles of news and access to information and where students arriving at university come already armed with embedded online search habits, with little reception to academics' perceived archaic methods of research. The ability to select relevant primary information, to analyse and evaluate it and to use it to justify or disprove political theories is, however, a 'vital element in the learning process' (Thornton, 2012, p. 213) and a key university skill; however, we do not always utilise the same language as our students to engage them effectively in this process. In the face of the explosion of information available and students' own ease in navigating digital information, it has become all the more important to show students that they have the capacity to become independent researchers; to provide the answers to questions themselves rather than being passive consumers of knowledge (Exley & Dennick, 2004, p. 32). But to do this, we need to engage with our students' research habits.

As we have shown before, utilising the stuff of politics is a key mechanism to engage students in the learning process (Leston-Bandeira, 2012, p. 64). What is more, integrating the development of primary research skills within the discipline itself is also the most effective way to teach research skills (Healey, 2005; Leston-Bandeira, 2013), rather than separating this teaching into isolated modules. The use of official transcripts of parliamentary proceedings and committee reports outside formal research methods sessions, for instance, can help increase students' confidence and competence in using primary research material. With research methods being taught formally in just over half of universities (Adeney & Carey, 2009, p. 195), integrating the techniques of research within modules is crucial for student learning, progression and employability. When

used in conjunction with traditional secondary sources, students can be encouraged to enhance their critical thinking skills, testing the theories they have read in a core text against primary parliamentary data that they have collected, read or watched through the website. It thus corresponds to the QAA (2007) benchmark that requires students to have a 'capacity to think critically and independently about events, ideas and institutions' (2007, p. 6) and to 'synthesise relevant information and exercise critical judgement' (2007, p. 7).

The benefits of utilising online material for student learning have long been recognised by scholars as a means of counteracting the traditional 'surface approach' to student learning (Stammers, Dittmar, & Henney, 1999, p. 115). The ease of access to online material allows learner-centred approaches to teaching, whereby students take ownership of their learning, developing deep understanding. In this respect, teaching Parliament with the aid of parliamentary resources means that lectures and seminars can be less tutor-led. Students are encouraged to become active participants in classes and therefore at the centre of their own learning (Clark, 2011, p. 135). Teaching can become more effective, with students engaging more deeply with parliamentary material. In doing so we are also effectively guiding students in their understanding of Parliament as an institution. This is particularly important in the context of the proliferation of Parliamentary Monitoring Organisations' (PMOs) websites.¹ PMOs have become popular outlets to locate easy-to-find data on parliaments and parliamentarians. However, as useful as these sites may be, many do not contextualise the data presented and can lead to a simplistic understanding of parliament. Engaging students with official primary parliamentary sources is crucial to promote their ability to evaluate critically this institution and engage with the literature.

Utilising online primary parliamentary material to engage students in the learning process should therefore be part of routine teaching on Parliament. It helps to develop students' independent research skills and promote a better understanding of this institution. This is particularly important in a context where students are 'digital natives' and engage with online sources more comfortably than with traditional ones. Our study set out to understand students' research habits, in particular on matters relating to Parliament, as well as lecturers' practices in the teaching of Parliament.

Methodology

Our study exploring student and staff use of parliamentary resources in learning and teaching was undertaken between May and December 2012. The first phase of the research involved gathering the views of students. Seven focus groups were held with 46 undergraduate politics students between May and July 2012 at the universities of Hull, Leeds and Nottingham; about half of these had a strong Parliament element in their degree. The sessions covered the students' research habits, perceptions of parliamentary resources and use of the UK Parliament website.

The second phase of the project sought the views of Politics and International Relations teaching staff regarding their perceptions of parliamentary resources, the incorporation of this material in their teaching and the specific needs of their students in utilising this material. Data were collected through a national online survey between 15 November and 11 December 2012. The survey was open to all politics staff, regardless of their teaching area or research expertise, and was disseminated through distribution lists held by the Political Studies Association (PSA), the British International Studies Association Learning and Teaching Group and the UK Parliament's Outreach Service. It considered use of the UK Parliament website by lecturers to support teaching and learning and what could be done to encourage greater use of these resources. All respondents who provided their contact details were later asked to provide an illustration of the use of parliamentary resources in their current teaching practices.

In total the survey included 108 responses. Although this is a small sample for generalisations, it compares well with the sample size of other pedagogic studies in politics.² Respondents included staff working in every region of the UK and at every career level (from PhD tutors to Professors). Respondents' average age was between 30 and 45 years and they were predominantly male. Our sample was broadly representative of the political science profession across the UK,³ according to the latest survey of the profession. Although the vast majority (86 per cent) did not teach any specific modules on the UK Parliament, 48 per cent taught students who complete a parliamentary placement as part of their degree. The research and teaching profiles of the respondents were very varied, from British Politics to International Relations.

Research Habits: Students as 'Digital Natives'

Our study shows that students' research and information search habits have changed somewhat from earlier studies within the social sciences, being increasingly different from those of their tutors. Previous studies have highlighted the rising infrequency of visits to university libraries and the rise of remote library users (Song, 2005, p. 30). As 'digital natives' their research is dominated by material that can be accessed online. As one student noted, 'I've just had 9000 words due in and I've not opened a book for any of them, not at all, I've just literally done it all off the internet'.⁴ Contrary to the findings of previous studies (Thornton, 2009, p. 5), university libraries are no longer the first port of call, with searches for core textbooks being replaced by Google, Google Scholar and Wikipedia.

The majority of students begin their research by locating resources through a Google search. Some of these searches are specialised, utilising specific keywords, but some students simply type their essay question into the Google search bar. Recognising the rapidly changing nature of the discipline that they study, they also make considerable use of news websites, particularly the BBC Democracy site, RSS Feeds and Twitter, to keep track of current events. Students

reported using articles and news stories promoted through Twitter in their research and enjoyed accessing informal, bite-sized pieces of information available in the form of short videos or podcasts.

It would be wrong to conclude that the traditional sources of research are now unpopular. Module reading lists continue to play a key role in student search habits, but journal articles and books are accessed online rather than on hard copy. By contrast, students' tutors are more accustomed to the use of more traditional research methods. They remain 'digital immigrants', using online material for research and teaching purposes, but not as extensively or as naturally. For instance, only 58 per cent of the lecturers had used Facebook while less than half had used Twitter. They are also much more likely to use very detailed online material in a more traditional format, rather than the types of material preferred by their students. Although they have begun to embrace online resources as part of their research and teaching habits, they continue to have a 'foot in the past' (Prensky, 2001, p. 2) and there is thus a sizeable gap between the research habits of students and of their lecturers.

Although students' research habits are a product of growing up in an increasingly digital world, they are also a response to the growing need for efficiency; for fast access to material and quick ways to search that material. Material that can be read at home or on portable devices is used more readily than that available only on hard copy. This allows students to use the Ctrl + F function or search bar to locate keywords rather than manually scanning books in the library. As one student commented, 'if you're stuck for a fact or a figure . . . you don't want to be flicking through 20 pages of a book chapter just to find it'.⁵ Digital native students are impatient and want quick results. They are frustrated by the lack of availability of books in university libraries and the time it takes to locate them on the library shelves. A typical comment was 'you spend about an hour looking for books and stuff whereas you could be an hour into your essay'.⁶ Most access their module handbooks online if possible, using hyperlinks to documents to save time. As the face of the student cohort changes and universities see higher numbers of mature students among their undergraduate intake, as well as students combining their studies with part-time work, the efficiency of online information becomes even more important. Students who are unable to visit the university campus every day and who undertake their research outside normal working hours are inevitably more reliant on resources available online as they juggle increasingly busy lives, studying at a time and a place that suits their own personal working habits and lifestyles.

The vast amount of material available on the UK Parliament website thus suits the research strategies of today's students. Yet our focus groups showed that the direct use of the Parliament website by students was infrequent. Although the vast majority claimed to have visited the website, the actual use of the resources within the site is very low. Most had only accessed the site once or twice over the last year, mainly as a quick means of checking facts such as election results and MPs' constituencies; this is despite the fact that about half had a

specialism on Parliament in their degree. The incorporation of parliamentary resources in teaching could therefore add significantly to the research sources currently being utilised by students.

How is Parliamentary Material being used in Teaching?

The use of parliamentary resources in teaching reported by lecturers in the survey was very high (70 per cent), but this generally consists of low-level, superficial activities. Parliamentary material is typically used in an unimaginative manner that does not encourage students to engage deeply with primary material. The two most commonly reported uses of parliamentary material were as a brief illustrative tool and as a feature of module reading lists.

The former is generally used in lectures, predominantly those focusing on the working of the British Parliament or British Government. The lecturer may, for example, demonstrate the work of Parliament by showing students the current list of bills going through Parliament or a short clip of Prime Minister's Question Time. These illustrations are useful in conveying key ideas to students, but in order to be most effective they require some degree of student interaction. Students may therefore be asked to comment on what they have seen, to ask questions or to complete a short exercise in small groups.

The inclusion of references to parliamentary material in module handbooks was the most common means through which parliamentary resources are used in politics teaching, with 32 per cent of survey respondents reporting listing such material in their course reading lists. Although this serves as a useful means of directing students to contemporary primary research material, which will increase their understanding of a topic, there is great variation in the presentation of this material in reading lists. Whereas some lecturers are very precise in their recommendations, others are vague. Students reported that their reading lists would often simply give the web address of the Parliament homepage, not specifying particular sections, committee reports or debates that would be particularly beneficial. As one commented, 'it was just "look through Parliament's website" which is huge, so finding what you're after isn't always easy'.⁷ When faced with very long lists where no specific items are prioritised 'students often simply give up and do not even try' (Leston-Bandeira, 2012, p. 63) to find material. In a world overloaded with information, it has become particularly important for lecturers to provide more specific guidance to research material. We have already noted students' impatience and preference for using Google, which is only encouraged by unspecific references in reading lists. Where the title of a report or the exact date of a parliamentary debate is unclear, students use Google as a fast and efficient means of locating relevant material rather than visiting the Parliament homepage. The most effective use of parliamentary resources in reading lists is therefore that which provides specific details and hyperlinks to material, or where instructions are given to students on how to search for the material

themselves, developing their ability to research the institution. This may be a particular select committee report, parliamentary debate or Library Standard Note.

Some survey respondents did report more innovative uses of parliamentary resources, encouraging students to engage more deeply with primary material. One described her use of a link to a specific Prime Minister's Question Time session (PMQs), which all students were required to watch before coming to the weekly seminar.⁸ In the teaching session itself the students are asked to discuss and evaluate the session they had watched, considering the utility of PMQs as a scrutiny tool. Using a video clip of parliamentary proceedings in this way enables students to develop their skills of critical analysis, in this case applying the secondary sources on their reading list to evaluate a specific PMQ session. Clear instructions are given for a focused task utilising a specific parliamentary tool; students are therefore more likely to engage with the material and the subject matter. When using parliamentary resources in this way, it is important that the resources are not used in isolation. They should 'augment traditional teaching methods rather than replace them' (Lee, 2003, p. 69). Thus, parliamentary material is most effective where it is used in conjunction with more traditional academic books and articles.

Barriers to the Use of Parliamentary Resources in Teaching

Our study also identified the key barriers to the use of parliamentary material in learning and teaching. By far the most patent is the lack of awareness of the nature and extent of parliamentary resources available through the Parliament website. Both lecturers and students underestimated just how much material could be accessed through the site. Many students were unaware that parliamentary proceedings were available to watch online or that they could search for useful resources on a specific topic through the A-Z topics pages, including students with a specialism on Parliament. Similarly, lecturers also wrongly noted that material such as the text of bills and parliamentary amendments could not be accessed via the Parliament website and almost one-fifth of those surveyed commented that material available through the website was 'not relevant' to their teaching; this included staff who did not teach Parliament.

This lack of awareness means that parliamentary resources are often deemed unsuitable for modules outside those specifically relating to British Politics, Parliament or Public Policy. Students and lecturers are thus unlikely to visit the Parliament website when gathering research material for essays or dissertations and teaching sessions if it falls outside the area of British and parliamentary politics or is not focused specifically on the 'institution' of Parliament. A typical response to the lecturers' survey was thus 'I currently do not teach any modules on the UK Parliament'. Whereas parliamentary resources were used by the overwhelming majority of lecturers teaching in the areas of Public Administration and Law, Pressure Groups, Elections and Voting Behaviour, Legislative

Studies, Public Policy and Government, those teaching in the areas of Political Development, Strategic Studies and Political Economy made little or no use of the site for teaching purposes. The implication is that the site is only of use to those researching or teaching within specific fields.

For students this is compounded by difficulties in identifying parliament as an institution that is distinct from government. Therefore, although over 90 per cent of students claimed to have visited the UK Parliament website, later discussions revealed that several had actually visited government departmental websites instead. Students also found it difficult to separate official parliamentary resources from those collated by outside organisations. In particular, many thought that the TheyWorkForYou website, a PMO, was part of the Parliament website. Thus, while familiarity with parliamentary resources seemed high, the distinction between parliament and government and between official parliamentary resources and resources compiled by government and PMOs was much less clear. It is important therefore that students are given some direction in the types of parliamentary material, to ensure that they understand the difference between primary parliamentary material and material compiled by other organisations.

A second barrier common to both students and lecturers is difficulties in locating and accessing parliamentary resources. This is predominantly a product of the Parliament website being process-orientated rather than being organised by topic, making it difficult to locate specific pieces of information. The majority of students noted that they had only visited the site in the past if they had made general Google searches that returned links to parliamentary material. They described the website as 'confusing'⁹ and 'not massively user friendly'.¹⁰ Even parliamentary placement students found the site difficult to navigate, with one noting that 'I'd never go there by choice'.¹¹ Despite this, almost one-third (32 per cent) of survey respondents said that they did not direct their students to any specific parliamentary material as part of their modules. Only a very small number (4 per cent) included information on parliamentary resources in a separate document or held a separate workshop or session for students. For instance, as part of a British Politics module one lecturer explained that a research pack is given to students in addition to the module handbook.¹² A specific section of this pack is devoted to 'Parliament as source of research material', listing 11 areas of the website, with a short explanation of the type of information available and accompanying web address. The lack of direction is perhaps related to the time pressures faced by lecturers who also have difficulties in locating relevant parliamentary material. Lecturers commented that they lacked the time to search for useful material on the Parliament website, finding it to be a frustrating and time-consuming task.

There is an additional barrier to the use of parliamentary resources that is specific to teaching staff and is particularly important here. The Parliament website was generally seen to be much more useful as a research tool than as a teaching tool. They reported that even where they have found parliamentary material that would be of interest to their students, they are often unsure of how best to utilise it in their teaching. This perhaps explains the unimaginative

use of parliamentary resources at present and is a key area for improvement. Lecturers tend to think about parliamentary resources in a much more complex manner, approaching it from a research point of view, and therefore have difficulty in translating this into teaching. There is clearly plenty of scope to encourage a more proactive and innovative use of parliamentary primary sources to support and guide students' learning.

Conclusion

Today's generation of students is utilising a rapidly growing range of online resources. A vast amount of parliamentary material is available through the UK Parliament website and can easily be utilised in the teaching of Parliament to develop students' research skills. However, although a significant number of lecturers are making use of these resources, this use remains very superficial, most commonly taking the form of brief snapshots of the Parliament website or very general links in module handbooks. Although the vast majority of those teaching Parliament-related courses are using parliamentary resources, the techniques they are using do little to encourage students to engage more deeply with the primary material available and to encourage critical analysis. This is a product of three key barriers: a low level of awareness of the nature of parliamentary resources, difficulties in locating relevant material and hesitance from lecturers in how to make the most effective use of material as a core feature of their teaching. There is also a gap between the lecturers' preferred types and format of information and that of students. Whereas students prefer short bites of information, lecturers favour the detailed document; besides different research habits, lecturers view parliamentary resources essentially through their research interest and not necessarily from a teaching perspective.

These barriers will continue to challenge the use of parliamentary material in the teaching of Parliament, but they are not insurmountable.¹³ In particular, students highlighted their module tutors as playing a key role in developing their use of parliamentary material. Lecturers are therefore crucial mediators between students and parliamentary resources. Students felt that in order to make the best use of the parliamentary resources available to them they would first need to be taught how to use the website effectively and efficiently, probably in the first year of their degrees. This was particularly true for students who were not on Parliament-specific degree programmes. Dissemination of resources by the lecturers themselves was the preferred method, suggesting that small changes on the part of tutors teaching parliamentary politics could increase the development of student research skills. Simple changes such as greater specificity in module handbooks and more basic advice and demonstration in how to use the Parliament website would assist students in locating relevant material, while more innovative uses of parliamentary resources in lectures and seminars would help students to engage with the material and the topic at a much deeper level, enhancing their primary research and analytical skills.

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Notes

1. PMOs in the UK include: <http://www.theyworkforyou.com/>; <http://www.publicwhip.org.uk/>. But these have spread across the world. OpenParliament (<http://www.openingparliament.org/>) includes the most comprehensive list of PMOs across the world. All sites accessed on 18 March 2013.
2. For example: a study of politics teaching, also disseminated through the PSA, was based on 71 responses (Blair, Bromage, & Curtis, 2007), while a similar survey by Stammers, Dittmar, and Henney (1999, p. 126) included 92 survey responses.
3. A breakdown of the PSA membership shows a very similar pattern in terms of gender (Male, 72 per cent; Female, 28 per cent) and age, with 66 per cent aged 31–50 years. Information gathered from email correspondence with the PSA, January 2013, on the basis of the 2012 survey of the profession.
4. Participant B, Focus Group 6, Leeds, 18 May 2012.
5. Participant E, Focus Group 6, Leeds, 18 May 2012.
6. Participant C, Focus Group 6, Leeds, 18 May 2012.
7. Participant B, Focus Group 2, Hull, 8 May 2012.
8. Professor Sarah Childs, email correspondence following survey, 17 January 2013.
9. Participant G, Focus Group 1, Hull, 8 May 2012.
10. Participant E, Focus Group 1, Hull, 8 May 2012.
11. Participant E, Focus Group 1, Hull, 8 May 2012.
12. Dr Judith Bara, email correspondence following survey, 14 January 2013.
13. There is relatively low awareness among lecturers, for example, of the support available through the UK Parliamentary Outreach Service. These findings are discussed further in the project report.

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