Editorial

In this issue of *Learning and Teaching: The International Journal of Higher Education in the Social Sciences*, authors from Denmark, the United States, Taiwan and the United Kingdom analyse serendipity in anthropology teaching, the use of lecture videos in political science, peer dialogue in education studies, polarisation anxiety among social science students and active learning in criminology.

In the first article, Regnar Kristensen explores serendipity in research and teaching. He describes how two projects based on indirect cultural exchanges of food, stories and performances between humanities students, cultural organisations and local residents grew out of a dinner-table conversation between friends. These projects provided both a focus and a broader context for the ethnographic work undertaken by the students and for class discussions in the first part of the anthropology courses concerned. But the collaboration and energy generated by the exchanges did not persist into the second half of the courses, perhaps because there was insufficient time for collective reflection. The changing circumstances of the leading participants also meant that the projects lasted only two years. Nonetheless the whole experience showed that opportunities for unconventional learning and creative teaching can arise unexpectedly and are worth taking up.

In the second article, Barbara Robertson and Mark J. Flowers report on the results of their investigation into the effect of lecture videos on student performance in an introductory US government course. Some of the student groups were taught online and the rest face to face. In order to prepare for a short quiz on the role of the Electoral College in US presidential elections, all students had access to the course textbook and PowerPoint slides created by the lecturer. The control group had no additional study aids. Some student groups had a lecture video about the topic as well, plus detailed notes to go with the PowerPoint slides. Other groups were given the lecture video but not the notes and some had the notes without the video. As measured by the students' scores in the quiz, video with PowerPoint and notes had the greatest positive effect on their grades, followed by video with PowerPoint but no notes. Whether the students had been taught in class or online did not have a statistically significant effect on their marks for the quiz.

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In the third article, Shih-Hsiung Liu evaluates the use of dialogue-based peer learning during eight sessions of an advanced course on curriculum development and design. After the students had read the supporting material and the discussion questions, they were asked to come to their own conclusions before sharing their ideas with other students. The next stage was to ask and respond to questions from their peers and the final stage was to adjust their own opinions. Most students believed the exercise was useful for deepening their understanding and strengthening their critical thinking skills but some found it difficult to form their own initial judgements. Careful structuring of the exercise, clear advice to students and random allocation of discussion partners were all vital for the success of the activity.

In the fourth article, Jose Leonardo Santos discusses how cultural polarisation in US society impacts on classroom dynamics in the social sciences. He interviewed professors of anthropology, political science and sociology at an elite Southern university and a public Midwestern one. He asked them about students' feelings about and reactions to controversial issues and how they dealt with them. The interviewees in both these very different universities recognised that conflict, silencing, anxiety and withdrawal from class debates were all a reflection of wider social, political and ideological divisions, particularly when core issues in the social sciences, namely race, class, gender and identity, were under discussion. The professors aimed to reduce student anxiety by various means, including collective discussion of ground rules for debate and stressing that intellectual disagreement was entirely normal and not a threat to anyone's identity.

In the fifth article, Jill Dealey demonstrates how undergraduates and postgraduates on criminology courses can benefit from working on real-life cases of alleged wrongful conviction. Her university offers a final-year option on miscarriages of justice and students can also apply for work placements as researchers, mentors and teaching assistants. As well as the intrinsic interest of the topic for many students of criminology, the activity illuminates the more abstract aspects of their studies, develops their research and enquiry skills and extends their capacity for creative and independent thought. The placement also, enables the students to be of service to others and has the potential to enhance their career prospects. Extracts from the reflective writings of six students who undertook work placements endorse these benefits.

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Penny Welch and Susan Wright