

Teaching International Relations to a Multicultural Classroom

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This article argues that instructors should adopt a more multicultural perspective when designing syllabi for and teaching undergraduate courses in International Relations (IR). The examination of teaching practices in IR draws on the personal experiences of the authors as foreign natives and instructors of IR at two American universities. The authors examine whether instructors face different challenges when teaching IR to American and foreign undergraduates, and identify the pedagogical challenges of teaching multicultural, globalized and networked students. Suggestions for improving flexibility and balance in IR curricula are provided. In addition, the paper suggests that IR instructors need to be aware of language and cultural barriers in their classrooms, and of differences in students' understanding of world events and history. The recommendations in this paper for dealing with potential western/American biases in courses might also be of interest to instructors of other subjects.

This paper draws on the authors' experiences as foreign natives who trained in International Relations (IR) and subsequently taught undergraduate courses in IR at American universities. We ask whether there are differences between teaching IR to American and foreign undergraduates, and identify the pedagogical challenges of teaching multicultural, globalized and networked students. We argue for a measured balance in IR curricula—while it is useful to include certain “core” themes, concepts, readings and historical case studies in the syllabi of core IR classes, an instructor of IR in the 21st century must consider the range of and at times divergent interests and questions that students of various backgrounds bring to the classroom. In IR classes, the variation in students' broad research interests and questions is likely to be correlated with the type of pre-university education they received in world history and the type of political system in which they grew up (which in turn forms the basis of their perceptions about key actors and ideas in international politics).

From a pedagogical point of view, we suggest that instructors of IR allow for sufficient flexibility in their syllabi to accommodate varying interests in a globalized classroom, notwithstanding the need for a set of “core” ideas and reading canon that should ideally be transmitted to young political science scholars. As natives of foreign countries, we acknowledge and emphasize the need to be aware of and to try and bridge language and cultural barriers and differences in the level of students' understanding of world events and history.

The Introductory IR Syllabus in American Universities

Other scholars have noted that the teaching of IR and IR syllabi in American universities are geared toward an American audience, and focus mainly on

American theories and theorists. Critiquing IR as a discipline, Tickner (2003) points out “the lack of correspondence between standard IR terminology, categories and theories, and third world realities, and the examination of national and regional IR perspectives outside the core” (p. 296). Tickner further notes that “IR teaching, notwithstanding repetitive calls for cosmopolitanism, remains essentially parochial, not only in the US but in many other parts of the world as well” (2003, p. 298). Writing from a U.K. perspective, Smith (2002) asserts that “mainstream U.S. IR defines the appropriate methods of how to study international relations in such a narrow way as to restrict understanding of other cultures and rationalities” (p. 67).

It is worthwhile revisiting the critique of IR syllabi in today's globalized classroom and university, to investigate whether IR instructors are preparing their students sufficiently for the world in which they live. The following observations may not be applicable to all IR course syllabi, but are probably reflective of the typical Government/Political Science Introduction to IR courses in many universities in the United States. Each professor has some leeway to customize her syllabus, but most instructors will recognize and acknowledge explicitly to students and colleagues that there appears to be a core “canon” of IR theories that each instructor must teach.

In a typical American classroom, a professor would teach an introductory class in IR by introducing in chronological order the main theories of classical Realism and Neorealism, followed by Liberal Institutionalism, and then constructivism. Most of the historical references used to illustrate and support these theories would be Western or Euro-centric events, wars and personalities, starting with the Peloponnesian War and Thucydides, and moving through the course of Western (i.e., European and North American) history to the Cold War, possibly touching on proxy wars such as the Korean War and Vietnam War, and ending with the

global “war on terrorism.” Except for issues like the rise of China and transnational Islamist terrorism, a large part of the typical Introduction to IR course will focus almost exclusively on how particular theories arose from scholars deliberating the great Western wars, the primacy of great (Western) powers, and the maintenance or possible decline of the US’s status as the sole superpower in the 21st century.

In introductory IR syllabi, prominent IR scholars based in North America, such as Kenneth N. Waltz, Stephen Walt, John Mearsheimer, Robert Keohane, and Martha Finnemore, are often the main thinkers cited. There is likely little or no mention of European, Latin American, or Asian IR theorists, or of work done outside American academia in IR theorizing in either the syllabus or the classroom. Robles (1993), writing from his personal experience as a non-American IR instructor in the United States, has used textbooks written by Norwegian and Australian authors, and assigned readings by European and Middle Eastern writers. Another way to incorporate diversity in the syllabus would be to discuss empirical examples drawing from the histories of countries other than those in Western Europe and North America.

An argument against including additional details and citing foreign scholars would be that this is unnecessary for undergraduate students taking an introductory IR course in the US. We would argue the opposite: even introductory courses in political science should prepare students for the world they currently live in, and the reality that North American thinking on IR is but one strand among several schools of thinking that exist in the scholarly realm. Furthermore, if classrooms are increasingly globalized in that students hail from different countries, instructors should adapt their pedagogy and syllabi, including core or introductory syllabi, to better reflect students’ needs and interests.

Our experiences in teaching IR first as teaching assistants, then as instructors, brought into sharper relief the various tensions and challenges that foreign students might face in an American classroom. From conversations with students from Mexico and elsewhere, and student responses in informal surveys, we gleaned that foreign students dealt with different challenges from their American counterparts when taking an introductory IR course. In order not to alienate these students, and to ensure their academic success notwithstanding language barriers and other concerns, we had to adapt to their needs while bearing in mind that we could not stray too far from the syllabus. We also had to teach a class that would remain useful and relevant to North American students.

The teaching and learning of IR theory at the undergraduate level in North American universities is naturally influenced by the fact that most students taking courses in IR will be Americans or foreign

students with significant exposure to American culture and thinking, and by current realities on the international stage. We need to be mindful that foreign students in US classrooms might find a US-centric IR syllabus less useful and interesting. On their part, American students might be learning in a manner that is unhelpful to them in a globalized world, where multiculturalism and exposure to different viewpoints would be assets, rather than liabilities.

Diversity in the Classroom

In this section, we deal with the challenges of teaching IR in a diverse classroom, in which more than half of the students may be foreign nationals. While there appears to be considerable recognition amongst American teachers at the high school level of the need to be culturally aware in a multicultural classroom, there seems to be less focus on the need to tailor undergraduate syllabi and teaching methods to a multicultural university-level student body. Gay (2010), writing about high school teaching, reminds us that “culture is at the heart of all we do . . .” in education, and that culture “. . . determines how we think, believe, and behave, and these, in turn, affect how we teach and learn” (p. 8-9).

The point about “culture” being a powerful filter through which “we think, believe, and behave” and that it affects “how we teach and learn” deserves further scrutiny when we think about teaching IR to foreign students. First, a growing number of IR scholars have pointed out that the field itself is not so very *international*. Hoffman (1977) kicked off the debate with his seminal article, which argued that it was in the United States where IR became a discipline within political science. While Hoffman (1977) acknowledged that foreign-born scholars had contributed to the discipline, he contended that the predominant doctrines within IR remained American ones. In the decades since then, American, European and Asian scholars alike have noted how American theories, scholars and ideas continue to dominate the field of IR, leaving little room for influences from other countries and regions (Crawford & Jarvis, 2001; Kang, 2003; Qin, 2007; Smith, 2002; Wæver, 1998). Indeed, IR theorizing is famously Euro-American-centric, as scholars have built theories based on the recurring dynamics of European historical events such as the two World Wars, the Peloponnesian War, or the Concert of Europe. Second, the fact that the field is primarily interested in understanding only politics amongst great powers has left very little room for the study of small states’ behavior. This could pose a challenge to instructors who teach IR to foreign students who do not come from countries that are considered great powers, because it can limit the range of socio-political realities to which the students can relate.

These two characteristics of IR pose at least two very subtle but real challenges for those teaching IR to foreign students. The first challenge is linked to the question of national identity and how identity often is a powerful mental framework through which individuals analyze issues and make judgments on what they learn and what they should do to address problems. Studying IR is about studying relations between nations, and teachers and students may find themselves carrying their awareness of who they are in terms of national identity, knowingly or unknowingly, into classroom discussions. Understanding the dynamics of relations between states cannot be thought of without first invoking the concept of *national interest*, and this could potentially highlight students' national origins by asking whose national interest a particular strategy or foreign policy serves. In a seminar setting where students were encouraged to freely debate about how the US should deal with China's rise, for example, we noticed that the presence of Chinese students in the classroom sometimes changed the tone of the debate, as there is a cognitive identification of China with Chinese students.

The question of identity is perhaps most acute when we teach issues of national security. Major IR theories tend to regard states as major actors in international politics, and the study of inter-state relations can often be dry and impersonal, with little regard for human emotions or the human being as a unit of analysis. Some of the language that is used in IR, particularly in security studies, reflects this tendency—civilian casualties in war or from nuclear explosions are termed “collateral damage,” for instance. When value-laden terms such as “target,” “threat,” “adversary” or “rogue state” are used to indicate particular countries, it is possible that they can generate tension or cause offence in the minds of students whose national identity is related to those countries.

The above observations are subtle, but we have experienced that individuals' national identities compel us to think harder about where the pedagogical wisdom lies when it comes to encouraging respect for foreign cultures and different national interests while teaching the seemingly “objective” facts and theories of international politics.

Another challenge is to make the theories and topics in IR more relevant to what students “think, believe and behave.” In addition to cultural differences and barriers, foreign students often have difficulty comprehending assigned readings. Their diverse educational and cultural backgrounds often mean that they have different concerns and research interests, compared to their American counterparts.

For example, while balance of power theory is regarded as one of the most prominent theories in IR in light of the diplomatic history of Europe, it is possible

that students from non-European and non-North American countries might find this theory less appealing given their own countries' diplomatic history. For them, theories remain as theories, and this may reduce their interest in the lesson. It is worth considering that many foreign students are from countries whose national resources and power do not command significant attention in the field of international politics. Instructors would want to develop an IR curriculum that is useful and interesting to these students, regardless of their national origin.

To create challenging syllabi that speak to our students, it is essential to listen to their feedback on how IR is taught and what is taught. It may be important to switch topics or alter our focus where possible, to add interest or address curiosity, in order to sustain our students' attention. Several of our foreign students have noted that in their IR syllabus, limited attention is paid to institutions such as the United Nations, the significance of (or lack of) regional institutions such as the Organization of American States (OAS) and the Association for Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), even though there is some mention of the European Union when the class discussed topics like International Political Economy and Liberal Institutionalism. There are practical ways to deal with this challenge. For one class, for example, students voted on what topics the class would study for their last two class sessions. They decided on human rights, and human security in Africa, topics which rarely make the list in more conventional introductory IR classes. Students from Latin America were more interested in Institutionalism and constructivism compared to their American counterparts, who seemed more attracted to Realist theories.

Teaching the Networked Generation

Tapscott (2009) points out that given anyone's ability to check factual information and acquire “knowledge” online, and the typical scenario of how young people aged 25 and below are likely to outshine their older colleagues and even their professors in their knowledge of all things technological and involving the Internet, “for the first time ever, in one domain, the students will be the teachers and the teachers will be the students” (p. 29). Tapscott (2009) then describes how these students will become knowledge workers in businesses and companies, and highlights how “the successful companies will be those that recognize that networked structures work more effectively than old-fashioned hierarchies” (p. 29). He also notes how “peer collaboration drives innovation and new approaches to management and government” (Tapscott, 2009, p. 29)

We believe that Tapscott's insights into the power of online collaboration and the democratization of

knowledge acquisition and access in today's networked world are applicable to academia. They strongly support our intuitive thoughts on the need for constant revision and creative thinking about the teaching and pedagogy of a core course such as Introduction to International Relations to undergraduates. Students from our classes are used to a rigorous and collaborative existence using Gmail, Gchat, Facebook, YouTube, Dropbox and other file-sharing or online interfaces with their peers on class projects (where group work is mandated or allowed) in a way that most instructors have not experienced even in graduate school and certainly not when we were undergraduates ourselves. Often, the product of such collaboration is creative, informative, and of an impressive caliber. The value of such collaboration is that the students in using these interfaces subliminally absorb the concepts and ideas taught in class, as they have to re-invent and re-interpret the concepts and ideas in order to present them to the instructor and to their classmates.

Among Tapscott's most useful insights is that "for anyone wanting to reach this age group, the best strategy is candor" (2009, p. 81). He suggests providing "Net Geners with ample product information that is easy to access" (Tapscott, 2009, p. 81). Young people would then decide whether they would purchase the product. Arguably, students similarly "shop" for courses, and instructors should be cognizant of the need to provide product information in the form of an up-to-date, relevant syllabus for the course they are teaching. The point on candor reminds us that students can tell when we are not being truthful instructors. Acknowledging the variety of thinking and scholarship on IR beyond American academia, for instance, would increase the level of respect for diversity in the classroom, especially for foreign students. The following section expands on our assessment of how best to think from the perspective of "the other"—in this case that of foreign students in American universities—to deepen the multicultural aspect of the classroom experience. We provide ideas on how to improve the relevance of existing syllabi, and acknowledge the role our students can play in shaping the lessons they learn in class.

Accommodating Different Student Interests in IR

We suggest that instructors of IR allow for flexibility in their introductory syllabi to accommodate the different interests of their students in a globalized world and classroom, notwithstanding the need for a "basic" or "core" set of ideas on IR they must transmit to their students. These approaches are likely to benefit not only foreign students but also American students. It is possible to deal with this challenge in the following ways:

1. Choice: Where possible and within limits, allowing students to choose the topics the class will study, especially if the class is discussing current topics in IR.
2. Connectivity: Instructors of courses have the option to use software packages such as Blackboard, which connect instructors, teaching assistants, and students online and allow users to share files, download reading and other material, blog, take online tests and assignments, and collaborate without meeting face-to-face. Given advances in social networking technology, applications such as *Google Docs* and *Facebook* are even more user-friendly and useable in the classroom context. In addition, we recommend sharing with students via regular e-mail updates, which contain useful and interesting links to websites and online archives to aid their research or prompt them to do further reading on particular topics.
3. Challenge: Students respond well when challenged to think about how to make the class and syllabus more relevant to their needs and academic interests.

Accommodating Differences in Language Proficiency, Prior Knowledge, and Cultures

More pragmatically, instructors need to be aware and conscious of language barriers and differences in students' level of understanding of world events in a culturally diverse classroom. Gay (2010) defines "culturally responsive teaching" as "using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them" (p. 31). It is worthwhile making the extra effort to know a little about each student's background, and his or her particular learning challenges, and to check each student's weaknesses or gaps in prior knowledge where IR or world affairs are concerned. It is of course impossible to do this for a large class of 100 or more, in a typical fall or spring semester introductory IR course. However, where the opportunity presents itself, it is possible to reduce students' concerns and doubts regarding the coursework by acknowledging and understanding their challenges and cultural differences.

Dilg (2003) reminds us that "we need to construct our courses, design our reading lists, and make choices regarding pedagogy in ways that acknowledge the complexity of identity and identity development in a multicultural society" (p. 88). Where necessary, we suggest that it is possible to adapt one's syllabus and teaching style in the following ways.

Diversifying Academic References/Resources

Where possible and where it makes sense, the instructor can include foreign language references to certain articles and documents, especially where material is available online. A good example is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (the UN website has official versions in various languages).

Being able to read a complex document relevant to one's IR course in one's native language arguably makes one a more confident student, as one can appreciate better the nuances in that document. Foreign students can then supplement their knowledge with or compare the document in their native tongue with the English version. American students who are fluent in a second language and who are up for the challenge can also look at foreign language documents to supplement their learning, if they are willing and able to do so.

Developing Grading Rubrics and Students' Writing Skills

Hardt (2010) points out the advantages of using grading rubrics, saying that, "Rubrics make grading easier for professors because standard comments can be pre-typed as explicit criteria and/or written as checkmarks and circles over pre-written comments" (p. 10). In particular, by setting clear standards for students, rubrics help professors "be more fair and accurate with their grading," and "make grading complex assignments much easier" (Hardt, 2010, p. 10).

We suggest that a grading rubric is useful not only for capstone courses, but also introductory courses. In a diverse classroom, such a grading rubric makes clear the instructor's expectations of each student, and leaves less room for ambiguity.

Demystifying Presentations Where Possible

For example, some students find it challenging to complete assigned readings and to understand complex concepts and theories such as constructivism. For the instructor, going through lecture slides to reduce verbiage and/or simplify the language used, to increase the level of clarity without sacrificing content, is one way to clarify her message. The instructor can ask students to approach or to speak up if they encounter terms with which they are unfamiliar or find difficult to grasp.

In addition to the language barrier, foreign students are likely to be much less familiar than their American counterparts with the historical details of the two World Wars, not to mention the Peloponnesian War. Sachleben (2010) notes this phenomenon of a lack of prior knowledge even among American students:

For smaller and medium sized regional universities overcoming parochial ideas and preconceptions about the "other," especially in relation to topics and people that are international, becomes a significant challenge. Most international relations classes begin with the assumption that students have the necessary tools to engage and appreciate theoretical debates. Often students are only vaguely aware of the realities of the international system. (p. 2)

For an introductory IR course, the discussion of key world events drives much of the basic understanding of core concepts and theorizing. It is thus important for instructors to make up for any gaps in students' knowledge quickly and effectively. To some extent, this can be done by providing students who want the additional information with references to more articles, books and online reference material on the various wars that the class will cover in the Realism portion of the course.

Conclusion

Through this paper, we join an informed conversation with American and international colleagues on how professors might teach IR more effectively in a globalized, culturally-diversified classroom. Although the nature of the field itself, ironically enough, tends to make the task of internationalizing the curriculum more challenging, we believe it is possible to be engaged, culturally aware, and sensitive instructors. Being such instructors would enhance our students' learning of certain subjects, including IR. Instructors would benefit by being innovative and mindful of challenges in their pedagogical approaches and teaching methods. The practical insights derived from our teaching experiences are likely to resonate with broader challenges that the professoriate in North America and elsewhere teaching IR at the undergraduate level are facing:

- Internet-savvy students who are constantly connected to their friends, family and community online, and who are used to working collaboratively via the Internet, and who might thus view traditional teaching aids and paper textbooks as outdated;
- A diverse classroom where some of the students may not be native speakers of English or may not be proficient in academic English. Students may not possess what instructors too often assume, sometimes erroneously, to be "common" prior knowledge regarding world events relevant to IR, such as the two World Wars, the Cold War; and
- The rapidly evolving set of what is deemed to be "current challenges" and issues in IR.

Potential topics for study include the foreign policies of emerging markets including in Latin America and Asia, human security concerns, human rights, and transnational crime. These issues have not been a traditional focus in basic IR classes, and instructors may neglect to pay particular attention in updating their syllabi with resources and new scholarship on the issues in which today's students are interested.

The above discussion is not an attempt to suggest that professors should try to be all things to all students, nor to insist that all core course syllabi be drastically revised to meet the needs of today's diverse student body. But we believe that there is an urgent need for professors in US colleges to be cognizant of the challenges that certain students might face. These are heightened especially when students are from a foreign country with different cultural backgrounds and national identities, if they are not native speakers of English, or if they have not had the same exposure as local students to Western history prior to taking an introductory IR class. We acknowledge the core canon of IR theories and concepts that must be taught to each introductory undergraduate class, but argue the considered use of new examples and current issues to keep alive students' interest in the subject of International Relations, and to succeed as instructors in a multicultural, globalized classroom.

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