23. Teaching international relations

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In recent years, the calls to internationalize the curriculum and to prepare our students to be global citizens have grown ever louder (e.g. Barber et al. 2007; Breuning and Ishiyama 2007; Rajaee 2005). The demand comes from university administration, government and industry, but also from the students themselves. Global intelligence is seen as increasingly important in terms of career and life preparedness.

In the face of these demands, the question of how best to teach international relations becomes ever more important. This chapter outlines some best practices for teaching international relations (IR), drawn from research in the field, peer-reviewed publications and my own experience. The diverse ideas presented here are by no means exhaustive. Instead, the purposes of this chapter are twofold. First, because learning happens best when students are interested in what they are studying (Colby et al. 2003), I present the case for making student engagement a central teaching goal. Second, I provide readers with a variety of proven teaching strategies to help reach that goal.

MOVING BEYOND LECTURE

If we really want learning to happen, we have to go beyond the surface of communicating facts and figures and get students to connect with the material—by making it engaging and accessible. This is easier in international relations classes than in many other courses. In a globalizing world, the things that we are teaching our students in IR are increasingly part of their lives. Students experience and contribute to globalization as they simultaneously learn about it (Amoore and Langley 2001; Darling and Foster 2012). Research tells us that students remember information when they need it (Burch 2000) and when they see its applicability in the real world (Asal and Kratoville 2013). Thus, one key to engaging students is meeting them where they are (Cox 2003). IR instructors can use the relevance of international issues to teach important IR concepts to students in an engaging way that makes sense to them.

Getting students engaged in IR takes more than just talking at them. Interestingly, the specific non-lecture teaching strategy one chooses is not all that important. Much more important is simply moving from solely passive learning to incorporate some active learning techniques (Taylor 2013). As Powner and Allendoerfer (2008) conclude, all forms of active learning, whether simulations, discussion, role-play or beyond, are ‘equally good for improving learning’; it is engagement itself that ‘increases student performance above lecture-only’ instruction (p. 85). Thus, no instructors—not even instructors of very large introductory courses (De Matos-Ala and Hornsby 2013)—should feel that engaging students is out of their reach.

The techniques described here can help students move from a simple interest in international politics to a deep understanding (Taylor 2013). Of course, the pragmatic...
question of exactly how to do that takes some time to answer. And there is no one answer; the specifics will depend on the instructor’s goals and teaching style. Let us turn now to the nuts and bolts of making engagement happen.

**STRATEGIES FOR ENGAGING STUDENTS**

Once you have decided to get beyond lecture and engage students in learning about international relations, the choices for how to do so are vast. Here, I highlight a few options that have pedagogical and empirical support.

For those venturing out of the safe harbor of lecture-only teaching for the first time, the waters may be a bit daunting. Instead of becoming overwhelmed by the multitude of choices, a good strategy may be to select one of the suggested options and try it out in a class. In the face of so many new ideas, it may be tempting to force a teaching technique that you are not comfortable with. Don’t. As Baum (2002) cautions, adopting a teaching style that is not natural for you will probably be counterproductive. Instead, consider the advice of other instructors and then innovate within the framework of your own personal teaching style. If you are excited about your teaching, the students will be, too. If you are skeptical about a strategy, the students will not buy in to it. Find something that you can get behind and embrace it.

One additional cautionary note, especially for junior faculty: be careful to maintain balance. What that balance—among teaching, research, service, family, and life in general—will look like depends on your personal preferences and the incentive structure at your institution. Some departments and universities are more supportive of teaching innovation than others are. Know where yours stands—and what your own priorities are—before making significant investments in major teaching overhauls. There are many suggestions in this chapter, but do not be limited by them. We are part of an incredibly diverse and surprisingly creative field. Perusing past issues of teaching journals will reveal articles on teaching IR using zombies (Blanton 2013; Hall 2011), *The Lord of the Rings* (Ruane and James 2008) and *Harry Potter* (Nexon and Neumann 2006). Although the options may be nearly limitless, I recommend a pragmatic approach to teaching innovation: limit yourself to one new teaching technique each time you teach a class. This approach is also better for assessment, as it means limiting the number of new variables introduced.

Speaking of assessment, if you want to know if your departure from lecture-only teaching is working as you intend, collect data (Raymond and Usherwood 2013)! What happens to test scores, to student engagement, to retention, to your own evaluations? My advice to those teaching IR is to read carefully the following suggestions (or search the literature for ones you like better), pick one to try, and start assessing its effectiveness in your courses. Chapter 36 has some great advice on how to get started in the scholarship of teaching and learning.

**Simulations**

From war games in the 1950s (Guetskow et al. 1963) to diplomatic training in the 1970s to complex computer-based models today (ICONS 2013; Statecraft 2013), simulations
have a long history in IR, both inside and outside of the classroom. Although the use of simulations for research has declined over time, the use of simulations for teaching has greatly increased (Starkey and Blake 2001). Today, simulations are one of the most widely used and written about methods for actively teaching IR.

There is some controversy over how much simulations may or may not improve learning (e.g. Christopher 1999; Ellington, Gordon and Fowlie 1998; Raymond 2010); however, many studies support the use of simulations, demonstrating improvements in student engagement (Hess 1999; Wolfe and Crooktall 1998; Ruben 1999; Brown and King 2000; Smith and Boyer 1996), content knowledge (Krain and Shadle 2006; Asal 2005), retention (Shellman and Turan 2006; Krain and Lantis 2006), complex and abstract thinking (Starkey and Blake 2001; McIntosh 2001) and empathy (Stover 2005). A more complete discussion of simulations and how to design them is available in Chapter 26. I have personally found simulations to be a great way of engaging students in learning about IR. Of course, there are also drawbacks to using simulations, mainly in terms of the time and effort required to carry them out (McIntosh 2001; Asal and Blake 2006; Glazier 2011; Haack 2008; Rivera and Simons 2008).

If you decide to try simulations, there is no cookie cutter approach (Wedig 2010; Asal 2005; Asal and Blake 2006). Simulations range from the highly formal and structured—for instance, models of important decision making bodies like the United Nations (Taylor 2013; McCartney 2006; McIntosh 2001), the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (Melleshevich and Tamashiro 2008) or the UN Security Council (DiCicco 2013)—to the comparatively simple and informal (Asal 2005; Glazier 2011). No matter the simulation, there are some best practices to keep in mind (Asal and Kratoville 2013).

Think carefully before you begin
The most important part of a simulation happens before class (Asal and Blake 2006; Shellman and Turan 2006; Youde 2008; Raymond 2010; Wedig 2010). Simulations should make reaching course learning goals easier. Keep those goals in mind when considering which type of simulation to use, the method of delivery, the length and the assessment mechanism. Adding a simulation to a course for its own sake risks doing more harm than good (Wedig 2010). There are a few key articles that can help first time or experienced simulation users think through some of these central decisions (Asal and Blake 2006; Wedig 2010; Asal and Kratoville 2013; Schnurr, De Santo and Craig 2013).

Connect the simulation to the class
Make the connection of the simulation to the core concepts of the class central throughout. It should be clear to the students how the simulation is related to the materials they are learning in the class. Talk about theory before, during and after the simulation (Asal and Kratoville 2013) and ‘debrief’ after the simulation is over (Asal 2005; Asal and Blake 2006; Shellman and Turan 2006; Wedig 2010; Van Dyke, DeClair and Loedel 2000; Youde 2008; Lederman 1984).

Start out simple
Particularly for those instructors who are new to using simulations, it is okay to start slow. Teaching and learning journals are filled with simulations that can be easily
adapted. Some of these are simple activities that will take no more than a portion of a class period, like Asal’s (2005) Classical Realism game or Powner and Croco’s (2005) Prisoner’s Dilemma reenactments. Others may take a single class period to implement, like the simple simulations Glazier (2011) recommends or Thomas’ (2002) Isle of Ted simulation. Still others require much more class time, but they also come with a significant amount of technical support and material preparation (for a small fee), like the ICONS simulation (Brown and King 2000; Starkey and Blake 2001; ICONS 2013) or Statecraft simulation (Statecraft 2013). Instructors could even consider giving up a large amount of the control and allowing the students to design (Frombgen et al. 2013) or run the simulation (Raymond 2010).

Civic Engagement and Service Learning

Another area where teaching and learning scholarship is on the rise, and where some best practices for teaching IR can be found, is in civic engagement and service learning. Courses that are designed to incorporate civic engagement and/or service learning are great at engaging students—taking them beyond learning facts to participating in informed advocacy. Although most of the research has been done on engagement in the American political system, civic engagement is much more than that (McDonald 2012; McCartney 2006). As civic engagement and internationalizing the curriculum both garner increasing attention as educational goals, more instructors are combining the two in an effort at international civic engagement. Although often resource intensive, engaging students globally provides a unique experience that students are likely to appreciate, value and learn from (Lorenzini 2010; Marlin-Bennett 2002), in addition to preparing students for success in an increasingly globalized world (McCartney 2006) and preparing them to make valuable contributions to their communities (Jacoby and Brown 2009).

When it comes to fostering civic engagement at the global level, there are four different approaches identified in the literature (Lorenzini 2010). First is international service learning. These courses involve traveling abroad with students to participate in a community service project and are challenging to teach for a number of reasons, including costs and logistics. Despite these challenges, international service learning experiences can truly be transformative for students, instilling in them a deeper understanding of the world and even a greater sense of justice (Grusky 2000; Monard-Weissman 2003; McKay, Gaffoglio and Esquibel 2008; Brunell 2013).

Second is transborder service learning. For this type of global civic engagement, students in one country participate in service learning in another country, but without the time and expense of a traditional study abroad experience. One transborder service learning experience, in which students conducted a food drive and delivered the donated food to poor children in Nogales, Mexico, is described by Cabrera and Anastasi (2008). McDonald (2012) provides another example: an innovative microfinance project that takes advantage of technology to help students have a truly international service learning experience without traveling abroad at all.

Third are placebound interactions, where students stay in their country of origin. Koulish (1998) describes a service learning course in which students assist immigrants with learning English and US history in preparation to become citizens. Dicklitch (2003) similarly has students work with non-US citizens, helping prepare cases of asylum
seekers. Another example comes from Patterson (2000), whose service learning course involves students in the work of an NGO dedicated to refugee resettlement. Although certainly resource intensive, these kinds of global civic engagement experiences can really bring home to students the reality of international issues. Topics like human rights become much more real when students work with international human rights advocates (Marlin-Bennett 2002), participate in the asylum-seeking process (Dicklitch 2003) and begin to understand what life might be like for victims of human rights abuses (Krain and Nurse 2004).

Finally, there are international civic engagement projects, where the focus is less on the international component and more on the civic engagement element. One great example of this kind of global civic engagement is the high school Model United Nations conference McCartney’s (2006) students hosted. Another example comes from a marketing professor, whose capstone students operated a collegiate chapter of a non-profit engaged in international community service (Metcalf 2010). In these classes, students are working on international issues—and teaching others about them—right in their own backyards. This combination of global focus and local action is a perfect way to foster civic skills and engagement.

I have had success teaching courses on international organizations with an international civic engagement component. In one of my courses, students participated in a regional Model Arab League simulation and helped host a Model Arab League simulation for local high school students. The depth of knowledge about international organizations and processes that comes from participating in intensive simulations like these is hard to replicate in a traditional classroom. In addition to content knowledge, the benefits of engagement with global issues and civic efficacy that often accompany these and other international civic engagement opportunities provide clear reasons for trying these teaching techniques.

**Technology and Media**

Taking the material to where students are today invariably means using technology, and media and technology are a great way to get students engaged in IR. Research indicates that using multimedia forms of instruction makes the presentation of material clearer and engages students—increasing both their attention and their motivation (Bartlett and Strough 2003; Seaman 1998; Ulbig 2009). And it is not surprising that improvements in learning are seen as well (Frey 1994; Mayer 1997; McNeil and Nelson 1991; Sekuler 1996; Smith and Woody 2000; Welsh and Null 1991), including improvements in test scores (Bartlett and Strough 2003; Erwin and Rieppi 1999; Smith and Woody 2000) and even civic engagement (Ulbig 2009). Learning happens best when students are interested in what they are studying (Colby et al. 2003). Using technology and media also helps prepare students for success in an increasingly plugged-in world.

With research demonstrating that multimedia instruction significantly improves learning, instructors have a number of options to choose from when it comes to incorporating media and technology into their teaching. One of the most popular, although admittedly not all that high-tech, is using film. Film is a particularly useful way to engage students, to provide them the foundation to move on to more complex topics (Valeriano 2013; Swimelar 2013; Waalkes 2003; Engert and Spencer 2009), and to
improve their retention and cognition (Kuzma and Haney 2001; Pollard 2002). In one way, film can be thought of as leveling the playing field for students. Students come to a class with different levels of preparedness; a movie can provide a common background and a springboard for discussion (Krainer 2010; Valeriano 2013; Kuzma and Haney 2001; Boyer et al. 2002).

Although some are concerned about the academic seriousness of film (Broughton 2008; Sealey 2008), there are strong reasons to believe that it can be a useful teaching tool. Success depends in large part on thoughtful film selection (Boyer et al. 2002). Tangentially related films or those introduced only superficially may end up confusing students more than helping them (Swimelar 2013). Engert and Spencer (2009) identify four main ways of utilizing film in the IR classroom: to teach events, issues, cultural identities and theories. Instructors interested in using film should think carefully about the desired learning goals first and then begin selecting movies. There is a long tradition of using movies to teach about war in IR (Lieberfeld 2007), although scholars have found that it is also very useful for teaching IR theory (Simpson and Kaussler 2009), or specific concepts like the state (Waalkes 2003) or human rights (Swimelar 2013). Robert Gregg, one of the central scholars in the field of IR and film, even curated a list of the ten best films for IR (Gregg 1999).

These are all excellent starting points for instructors interested in incorporating film into their teaching, but selecting the film is not the end of the road. Instructors must decide when to screen it, how much class time to devote to discussion and what, if any, assignments to tie to the film. If time is an issue in a shorter class period, students can be assigned to watch a film outside of class. I have used *Ghosts of Rwanda*, an excellent documentary available for streaming from PBS, to teach my IR students about genocide, humanitarian intervention and the responsibility to protect. I have found that a few thoughtful discussion questions, together with some direct links to course concepts from the instructor, are usually all it takes to get students thinking critically about a film and using it to understand IR. I am always impressed with how many students end up referencing a film in their research papers or final exam essays.

Beyond the movies, there are many additional media and technological resources to improve teaching and learning. Increasingly, the Internet is changing the way we teach and the way we research (Carpenter and Drezner 2010). As Darling and Foster (2012) argue, today’s global policy debates take place online. Getting students engaged in IR by getting them online not only exposes them to current international developments, but also provides them the opportunities to develop the kind of communication skills and visual literacy they will need to be relevant in the 21st century (Selcher 2005; Felten 2008; Sealey 2008; Swimelar 2013). Although some may fear the future of teaching with technology, IR scholar/teachers are increasingly encouraging their peers to embrace the potential benefits. As Brunell (2013) recommends, “rather than thinking of technology as alienating and causing students to become more socially isolated and political disengaged, we need to start thinking of technology as a means to increase their global interest and political engagement” (p. 18). Take, for instance, videoconferencing, a technology that makes it possible to bring globalization into the classroom like never before (Martin 2007). Instructors are also beginning to take advantage of the benefits of technology to incorporate simulations into online or hybrid classes (Parmentier 2013; Schnurr, De Santo and Craig 2013).
When it comes to using media and technology, a word of caution is appropriate: do not go overboard. It is possible to get too much of a good thing. For instance, while images are helpful (Ulbig 2009), animation is not shown to add any additional gains in learning or engagement (ChanLin 1998), and too much busyness in a presentation or the superficial introduction of multimedia materials may end up as a distraction that could even hinder learning (Hashemzadeh and Wilson 2007; Mayer et al. 1996; Swimelar 2013).

**Current Events**

While some of the previous suggestions may call for major course overhauls, other strategies are more easily implemented. For instance, one simple and effective way to engage students in learning about IR is through the use of current events. The fascinating daily developments in global affairs are one of the reasons why students are drawn to our field in the first place. Instructors can take advantage of this interest by connecting concepts and theories to the ‘real world’ of IR. Many instructors do this almost intuitively—having newspapers as required readings, taking a few minutes to discuss current events at the beginning of every class, or bringing up recent developments to illustrate a concept (Kahne, Sporte and De la Torre 2006; Niemi and Junn 2005; Levine 2007). Using current events more systematically is one change almost any instructor could make with relatively little upfront cost.

Almost as easily, instructors can put a twist on current events that students are sure to love by incorporating satire into their IR courses (Glazier 2014). Using editorial cartoons to illustrate political problems or critiques is a classic teaching tool in the field of political science (Hammett and Mather 2010; Stark 2003; Baumgartner 2008). More recently, satirical sources like The Onion, *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* have expanded the world of satire that instructors can draw on and that students are regularly exposed to (Beavers 2011; Baumgartner and Morris 2008). Far from feeling guilty about ‘wasting’ class time on clips from *Saturday Night Live*, instructors should embrace the pedagogical benefits of satire. Studies show that viewers of late night satire are more informed about politics (Young 2004; Pew Research Center 2008), more confident about their ability to understand politics (Baumgartner and Morris 2006) and more likely to be politically active (Moy, Xenos and Hess 2005; Cao and Brewer 2008). If you want to try some satire in your IR class, Rebecca Glazier curates a Satirical Resource Repository online (http://www.rebeccaglazier.net/satirical-resource-repository/), where you can browse satire specific to the field of IR, or search for satire by keyword (e.g., war, realism, democracy, etc.). I have found that assigning students to identify and critically analyze satire themselves leads to even greater engagement (Glazier 2014).

**CONCLUSION**

In addition to the ideas presented here, there are many other ways to engage students in learning about international relations. Instructors should not feel limited by the teaching strategies in this chapter or compelled to undertake major course overhauls. Find an idea that draws you in and make it your own. Instructors could even consider combining some of the strategies discussed here. For instance, using movies to provide back-
ground information for a simulation (Simpson and Kaussler 2009), using the teaching structure of simulations to teach with film more actively (Sunderland, Rothermel and Lusk 2009), using technology to get students civically engaged (Bers and Chau 2010) or infusing simulations with a civic engagement component (Bernstein 2008). These creative combinations are likely to find success, as fostering student engagement through multiple means is a best practice for teaching in the IR classroom and beyond (Krain 2010).

Engaging students in IR can be a rewarding experience for the instructor and for the students. When students care about the material, they are more likely to learn it and retain it (Colby et al. 2003). Whether engaged through the best practices discussed here or through other teaching strategies, students are better learners when the material matters to them. For instructors, engaging students in learning about IR is a goal that is both laudable and achievable.

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