

New Semester, New Textbook

Written by Dylan Kissane

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2013/10/22/new-semester-new-textbook/>

DYLAN KISSANE, OCT 22 2013

An email arrived this week from one of our Pedagogy Assistants here at CEFAM asking professors to nominate the textbooks they will use in the Spring semester beginning in January. For the last couple of years I have promptly responded that I won't assign a textbook in my courses or that I will be using an e-Book (OpenStax has a wonderful sociology text I use) or a collection of readings I will gather independently.

There are a couple of reasons I moved away from traditional textbooks in my international politics course.

First is the issue of cost. Textbooks are expensive for students to purchase and with a full schedule of six classes in a semester the cost of books adds significantly to the cost of learning.

Second, teaching in English in a French speaking country means that books are not always available and, when they are, they can take a long time to arrive on campus.

Third, the campus bookstore tends to price things well above Amazon or equivalent online retailers and, for administrative reasons, the book lists are often not provided to students in advance meaning that the bookstore takes the students for a real ride every semester.

Fourth, from a pedagogical point of view, there is not always a textbook that matches the course I am teaching. I much prefer to add journal articles and chapter extracts to my courses to reinforce learning than to try and design a course around a textbook.

With all that in mind, it might surprise you to know that, for the coming semester of the POL 210 course, I have decided to reintroduce a basic textbook.

While I will be continuing with readings assigned from journals and books that I have gathered together over the last couple of years and which students can access for free via databases and our intranet, I am adding the entry level book *International Relations: The Key Concepts* to the reading list to try and build a better foundation of knowledge about international politics. This was a text that, in its first edition, I used while an undergraduate in Australia. Now into its third edition, it remains a book that explains in easy to understand language what the major elements, actors and concepts in IR are. For students coming from a business background and who, in most cases, will only ever take one IR course in their academic career, a book like this will help students to quickly grasp the basics of the things we talk about in class and provide a ready reference for them as they work through the more difficult readings in the course.

Is it going to cost the students more? Yes, but with new copies going for less than \$30 and used 2nd editions less than \$10 I think the cost will be bearable for the students.

Will they be able to get it? I'm assured that they will be able to purchase it in time, and the book is already noted on the intranet as a required purchase so students can order through Amazon now and get it quickly (and more cheaply) than through the bookstore in January.

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Will it change my teaching or will my teaching have to adapt to the book? I don't think so, no. Indeed, I think having a reference to push students towards that clearly explains the key concepts of IR is going to aid the course as it is currently delivered. Someone starts talking about the G-20 and students want to know who is a member? Check the book, keep the class moving. Someone is having trouble differentiating realism and neorealism? The book provides some good jumping off points for an interested student.

More than that, though, the book has a rather extensive bibliography that will allow students researching a theme to be directed to three or four classic articles related to each topic. This means that, instead of coming to me to find out where to start reading about game theory, for example, the student can read the two page summary in the book and find a list of three or places to keep reading. Anything that encourages the student to follow up on a topic, find some more articles, then chase footnotes in those articles to read even more is a good thing, in my opinion.

Of course, on the downside, there is going to be some student grumbling, there are going to be students who don't buy the book and, yes, there are going to be some students who buy the book, never open it, and then plan on reselling it at the end of the semester. These issues aside, though, I think the choice of textbook for the coming semester makes a nice balance between being mindful of student finances and my own pedagogical practice, and ensuring the best possible outcomes for the course

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Read more from Dylan Kissane in his e-IR blog [Political Business](#)

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