

Pedagogy and Pop Culture: Pop Culture as Teaching Tool and Assessment Practice

Written by William Clapton

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Popular culture is today an intrinsic element of social and political life in many societies, particularly those that have reached advanced stages of industrialisation and development. Wherever we go and whatever we do, we are exposed in one way or another to elements of popular culture. The development and advancement of communication networks and technologies, particularly the internet, has only hastened the spread and penetration of popular culture into our everyday lived experiences. As Webber (2005, p. 389) notes, we live in a world of fantasy, exposed to a massive array of both interactive (video games) and passive (movies, TV) fictional entertainment. This is not a particularly novel claim and has been recognised many times before elsewhere, both within and outside the discipline of IR (for example, see Grayson, Davies and Philpott 2009; Ruane and James 2012). The discipline of International Relations (IR) has been generally lethargic, however, in recognising the value of popular culture for both learning and teaching and the production of knowledge about the international.

Still, today there is a growing literature that interrogates the intersections of popular culture and global politics (for example, Der Derian and Shapiro 1989; Weldes 2006; Neumann and Nexon 2006; Carver 2010), and the work of scholars such as Ruane and James (2012, p. 8) has made a strong case for employing popular culture in the classroom. As they and others (Tierney 2007; Dougherty 2002) have argued, using popular culture as a teaching tool can aid in stimulating students and developing their excitement about both the IR courses that they take and the content that is delivered within them. It can also help teachers to ground content (such as relevant IR issues, theories, concepts and events) in a way that is potentially more relatable and accessible to students.

I have used popular culture in my own pedagogical practice in two ways: as a teaching tool for developing understanding, and in assessment practices or regimes. An important caveat here is that what follows is based largely on my own personal observations and experiences and on anecdotal evidence from students and other teaching staff in the courses I have delivered that have actively employed popular culture in learning and teaching. Overall, my general observation is that popular culture can be very effective as a teaching tool when it is used to promote and enhance understanding of complex theories and concepts. It can also be very effective when used as part of a specific assessment or assessment regime. However, popular culture in the learning environment is not without its drawbacks, which I will discuss further below.

I have used popular culture as a teaching tool for the last three years. The initial impetus for doing so was my desire to try to make lectures more interactive and promote active student learning and participation, rather than have students passively sitting and listening (or not listening) to what I was saying. I was also looking for a way to try to make the content more engaging – even I found some of the content delivered in my courses to be overly dry, and one of the areas that I identified for improvement was making my lectures more stimulating and engaging, to encourage students to participate more interactively in my lectures and, to a lesser extent, tutorials.

I resolved in 2012 to begin using popular culture in my lectures as a way of generating greater student interest and

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engagement. This was consistent both with my own love of all things popular culture and my burgeoning research interest in the area of popular culture and global politics. I took the position (and still do) that the value of popular culture as a vehicle for the construction of knowledge and the development of understanding within the learning environment is significant and, I would argue, fairly obvious. Students today are often completely immersed within various forms of popular culture from a very young age. From movies to television shows to video games, students often come to the IR classroom already steeped and well-versed in popular culture, much more so than the disciplinary knowledge that we seek to impart on them. This is to say that students' understandings of global politics are often shaped in significant ways through their interactions with popular culture for a long period of time before they even arrive in the IR classroom.

It seemed to make sense to me, then, to explore the use of popular culture as a teaching tool, a vehicle through which teachers can explain and develop student understanding of key theories and concepts. Leveraging some of the material that I was reading and writing as I commenced my research in this area in my teaching also seemed like a logical and efficient thing to do. Initially this began as small examples and questions put to students within specific lectures or tutorials – what can we learn about power, political violence and authority, for example, from *Game of Thrones*? Does the zombie genre in general, and specific shows like *The Walking Dead*, offer a useful way of highlighting and understanding competing theoretical perspectives on anarchy and its consequences? In particular, what does it tell us about the specific assumptions regarding humanity's innate nature that inform the perspectives of classical realism and liberalism?

Over the last two academic years (2013 and 2014), this has expanded to include dedicated lectures covering critical IR theories and 'alternative sites of analysis' (popular culture) in both a first-year introductory IR course, and a second-year 'theories and concepts' course. My use, then, of popular culture as a teaching tool has been twofold: first, I have used it to generate greater interest in some of the content I have delivered and promote greater student comprehension and understanding of key IR theories and concepts. Second, I have also invited students to reflect more broadly (and critically) on general methodological and epistemological issues in the discipline, such as what counts as valid forms of knowledge, what the appropriate or legitimate methods are for attaining it, and where we can find them.

I have found students' reaction to the use of popular culture as a way of generating understanding to be broadly positive, and from my own perspective it has seemed, at least anecdotally, to generate greater enthusiasm and interest in both the large (lecture) and small (tutorial) learning environments. Online feedback received after the 2013 iteration of my first-year introductory course, for example, included: 'References to pop culture throughout the course kept it interesting and engaging', and that it was good to be able 'to discuss the content and [be] able to understand international theory through everyday examples like [G]ame of [T]hrones'. Other students commented to me in person after lectures or tutorials that they enjoyed the popular culture examples that were used and found that they made classes more engaging and made it easier to develop their comprehension and understanding of the content that was being delivered. In general, my own experience and the feedback that I received suggested that utilising popular culture artefacts in the learning environment is a useful way of conveying and explaining content that students may sometimes view as arcane or difficult to comprehend.

One interesting observation, however, is that while the majority of students I spoke to or who provided feedback on course evaluation forms appreciated the use of pop culture examples as a way of explaining or describing concepts and theories, reaction was more mixed to the lectures I commenced in 2013 about popular culture as an alternative site of analysis. Several students were rather sceptical about the value of popular culture as a site for conducting analysis and research in the discipline. While they accepted that popular culture was an interesting and engaging way of learning about IR, they were far more reluctant to accept that popular culture could be used to generate and construct knowledge about the international. These students generally seemed to me to fall into one of two groups. The first were those students who rejected the idea of constructing knowledge about the international through the research and analysis of popular culture based on a broader scepticism or rejection of the basic elements of a post-positivist epistemology – namely, the idea of the socially constructed, subjective and inherently partial nature of knowledge.

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The second were those students who rejected the idea of popular culture as a site of analysis within the discipline based on their perception that popular culture is just a bit of 'silly fun' and is not really 'serious IR'. This actually feeds into one of the main drawbacks I have experienced thus far in using popular culture as a teaching tool, namely that some students do not take it seriously, or at least do not take it as seriously as they should. That is, using popular culture to try to teach more complex and potentially dry concepts or theories actually seemed to further disengage some students. Related to this, there was another problematic issue I have experienced. When using popular culture as a way of developing understanding of something else, the popular culture example or artefact can overshadow the 'something else' that you are actually trying to teach. In other words, students do not actually apply popular culture to whatever it is that you want them to learn or appropriately engage with, but instead focus only on the popular culture artefact itself.

In one of my tutorials in 2013, I particularly remember telling five students during group discussions on *Game of Thrones* and political violence that the purpose of the discussion was not just to discuss *Game of Thrones* itself (which is what they were doing), but to apply their knowledge and understanding of the show to the issue of political authority and how it manifests internationally. While the students who declined to take popular culture seriously, either as a learning tool or as a site of research and analysis, were a minority, it is still an issue that I am grappling with: how do I encourage students to engage seriously when I employ popular culture? How do I encourage them to see beyond the sheer novelty and entertainment value of using popular culture sources in the learning environment and connect with the actual content that I am attempting to deliver? This is not to suggest that popular culture is not useful or that this drawback is insurmountable, but it is something that teachers need to be aware of when employing pop culture in their teaching and learning practice.

I also set two formative learning activities (therefore no marks available) in a second-year undergraduate course on IR theories and concepts. The first tasked students with conducting a short analysis (approximately 500 words) of what one of two artefacts tell us about international law and order: the film *Team America: World Police* and a video of a panel on 'The War on Whistleblowers' held as part of the Sydney Opera House's 'Ideas at the House' panel series. The second activity tasked students with preparing a 500-word analysis of a meme of their choosing that related to one or more of the course topics and themes. One of the key lessons I wanted students to take away from the exercises was that there are critical possibilities evident in sites of analysis beyond the IR textbook, article or monograph, the things that are published by experts. Critically reflecting on and engaging with theories issues or concepts associated with the international need not only take place within the specific sites or forums that we in the academy have constructed. While I am certainly not arguing that conventional disciplinary 'outputs' are not useful and important in terms of both teaching and research, the idea that these outputs are the only legitimate or valid arenas through which knowledge about international relations can be produced feeds into the general disciplinary narrative that only IR experts and practitioners (states-persons, diplomats, etc.) are 'doing' IR.

What I wanted students to see and appreciate is that IR is 'done' in many forums and in many ways that are sometimes far removed from the worlds of scholars and practitioners, that 'normal' people do IR on a daily basis. Ultimately, I wanted my students to begin to reposition themselves as something other than passive learners of what experts tell them IR is. More specifically, I wanted (and continue to want) my students to see themselves as active learners and 'doers' of IR, to recognise that they are actively involved in the production of knowledge and understanding, and to engage with other 'everyday' people who are doing IR in areas and sites with which my students are potentially more familiar – memes, the internet, film, TV, etc.

In terms of the impact and efficacy of the activities, I will say first that they both proved to be very popular with my students, particularly the memes analysis activity, which was embraced by students to such an extent that some of them not only analysed memes, but created memes of me (with rather humorous and incisive comments based on things I had said or done during the lectures). The analyses provided in both exercises were also of a generally very good quality, with a number of excellent, standout analyses provided. In the second activity, in which students were required to analyse memes, for example, the range of memes and topics covered was diverse, ranging from the ways in which critical perspectives are devalued in mainstream disciplinary discourse to the way in which gendered norms of heterosexuality serve to reproduce both gendered understandings of 'male' and 'female' and ultimately political actors and depoliticised subjects. Ultimately, though, the most pleasing aspect of the activity was that several

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students appeared to grasp and acknowledge that politics takes place at sites beyond the IR text. Several students conveyed to me not only the fun that they had in completing the activities, but also their interest and enthusiasm at being able to engage substantively with the politics of selected popular culture artefacts.

It should be noted, however, that these formative assessments had a very specific purpose, to impress upon students that there are potentially valuable insights to be gleaned from popular culture, one that went beyond simply developing and testing students' understandings of specific content. That is, popular culture and its appropriateness as a site of analysis in IR were a substantive component of what I wanted students to learn, understand and appreciate as part of completing these activities. Popular culture was not simply a vehicle for learning about something else. This is potentially beyond how others might use or employ popular culture as part of their assessment practices and of course may not be fit for other courses, depending on the teacher's own particular purposes. The activities were also formative and did not contribute to student's overall grades for the course. At face value, I did (and continue to) question whether this encouraged students to be more 'adventurous' and creative in the analyses that they produced for both activities. While I have no significant or substantive evidence to prove or disprove this, I do wonder whether students might have approached the activities differently had marks been allocated to them.

In conclusion, popular culture has much to offer as a teaching and learning tool. My experiences have been generally positive and I intend to continue to explore ways in which I can integrate popular culture into my teaching practice, both in terms of delivering content in the classroom and as part of the assessments that I set in my courses. While popular culture is not without its potential problems and pitfalls, it offers differing, potentially more accessible insights about the international that generally are not found in standard IR textbooks. This is not to say that traditional methods of learning and teaching in IR or traditional disciplinary artefacts are not as valuable or are not valuable in general, far from it. However, it is to contend, based on my experiences, that our students and we potentially have much to gain in terms of the quality of our teaching, the student experience in the learning environment, and ultimately students' realisation of the learning outcomes that we set in our courses, from diversifying and broadening our teaching practices to include popular culture.

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