

Teaching International Relations as a Liberal Art

Written by Lisa MacLeod

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LISA MACLEOD, APR 16 2021

This is an excerpt from *Signature Pedagogies in International Relations*. Get your free download of the book from E-International Relations.

Shulman's original application of the signature pedagogy (SP) concept focused on professional education and the ways in which students develop the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to be accepted as a competent practitioner in their chosen field. Although Shulman did not address the relationship between SPs in professional training and those that might exist at the undergraduate or other pre-professional level, he confidently asserted that SPs 'operate at all levels of education' (2005, 53) and that 'education in the liberal arts and sciences can profit from careful consideration of the pedagogies of the professions' (2005, 58).

Two edited books — *From Generic to Signature Pedagogies: Teaching Disciplinary Understandings* (Haynie, Chick, and Gurung 2009) and *Signature Pedagogies in Liberal Arts and Beyond* (Haynie, Chick, and Gurung 2012) — build on Shulman's foundation. In these volumes, the SP concept is considered in the context of undergraduate education. With the knowledge that undergraduates frequently do not become practitioners of their undergraduate major, liberal arts educators,

pride themselves in training their students to be critical thinkers, strong writers, and adept in quantitative skills, essential, but generic skills that aren't unique to specific disciplines. Most [disciplines in the liberal arts and sciences (LAS)] ... have core content areas they expect their students to master in addition to the aforementioned skills, so the primary focus of LAS programs is to convey such content and skills (Haynie, Chick, and Gurung 2009, 3).

This dual purpose — helping students develop disciplinary content knowledge and generalist skills of critical thinking and communication — has informed my approach to teaching International Relations at a small liberal arts college. I know that most of my students will not become diplomats or international civil servants, nor are they likely to join the next generation of International Relations scholars. The best service I can provide my students is to use their interest in International Relations to help them build the 'liberal arts skills' that, in the words of Jan Lüdert, 'serve as stepping-stones ... for a wide range of possible careers' (Lüdert 2020).

The Liberal Arts

The debate over what constitutes the liberal arts, and what *should* constitute the liberal arts, has ancient roots. What has remained largely consistent is the purpose of a liberal arts education. In the Western tradition, it emerged as a means of training *free men* to participate in public life as political and cultural leaders. Despite a shared general understanding of the purpose of education, there has always been some disagreement over the substantive content and skills that best produced this result (Kimball 2010). As the liberal arts have evolved, the skills of critical thinking, persuasive communication, and capacity for self-directed learning have remained at its core.

One aspect of the liberal arts education that is often under-appreciated is its moral ethic of civic engagement and active citizenship. The revitalization of the ethical core of the liberal arts education has allowed it to survive criticism that it was an elitist bastion for the Eurocentric study of the writings of dead, white men. As Martha Nussbaum argues, the critique of traditional sources of authority is at the core of the Socratic tradition that "insists on teaching

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students to think for themselves” (Nussbaum 2010, 16). Liberal education should be “committed to the activation of each student’s independent mind and to the production of a community that can genuinely reason together about a problem, not simply trade claims and counterclaims” (Nussbaum 2010, 19). Liberal arts education serves a larger social purpose; “[t]o unmask prejudice and to secure justice” (Nussbaum 2010, 533). The deep structure of a liberal arts education has never been the pursuit of knowledge solely for knowledge’s sake.

The skills and habits of mind, combined with the ethic of civic engagement, have allowed the liberal arts to survive the culture wars and continue as the touchstone for undergraduate education. It is not because the Ancient Greeks discovered ‘Truth.’ They embraced a process of questioning, thinking, and argumentation that was driven by a social purpose. Because it is not rooted in any particular set of ‘great books,’ a tradition that originated in one place and time has responded to criticism with new inputs. The call for greater representation of non-Western and non-male voices has contributed to the emergence of the global liberal arts. As students, faculty, and curricular content have become more diverse, the larger purpose of liberal arts education—its *deep structure*—has remained true to its roots. The creation of liberal arts programs throughout the world testifies to the broad appeal of Global Liberal Arts (“Liberal Arts Alliance” n.d.; “Alliance of Asian Liberal Arts Universities|AALAU” n.d.). Students are trained to become lifelong learners, independent and critical thinkers, and skilled communicators so that they can effectively participate in civic life. Contemporary liberal arts education—in the words of my own institution’s mission statement—is designed ‘to foster a steady stream of global citizens committed to living a contributive life’ (Soka University of America, Mission Statement). One cannot help but hear the echoes of Shulman’s view that signature pedagogies teach students ‘to think, to perform, and to act with integrity’ (2005, 52) and Reus-Smit’s and Snidal’s contention that International Relations (IR) is fundamentally about understanding ‘how we should act’ (2008, 7).

Teaching Introduction to International Relations to Aspiring Global Citizens

When deciding what content and skills to teach in my own ‘Introduction to International Relations’ course, I try to balance teaching content and liberal arts skills, particularly those that are likely to apply beyond an academic environment. A quick survey of the many available textbooks reveals the discipline’s surface structure with limited variation in content and organization. The real challenge of teaching International Relations as a liberal art has been deciding how to pare down content to ensure adequate opportunities to practice liberal arts skills. Nonetheless, I feel an obligation to students to cover a fair bit of the content shared across most introduction to International Relations textbooks so that they are well prepared for more advanced undergraduate International Relations courses and meet disciplinary expectations for those who pursue graduate education.

Decisions about pedagogical choices have been much less straightforward. This is one indication that International Relations does not yet have a signature pedagogy; at least not one that provides a widely shared learning experience across instructors and institutions. Rather, my experience as an undergraduate IR major and my early career teaching experience was with *expedient* pedagogy characterized by ‘one-way transmission of ideas and information ... in which instructors race to cover the [discipline’s] “canon”’ (Maier, McGoldrick, and Simkins 2012, 100). Although both signature and expedient pedagogies can be characterized as the conventional mode of disciplinary teaching, they are motivated by very different purposes. In Shulman’s account, SPs are designed to provide training in the knowledge, skills, and habits of mind necessary to become a competent practitioner of a field. In the context of undergraduate liberal arts education, SPs aspire to establish a ‘harmony of purpose, practice, and results in teaching and learning’ (Ciccone 2009, xvi).

In contrast, an expedient pedagogy is much less focused on training students to think and act as disciplinary practitioners. Maier, McGoldrick, and Simkins (2012)—using survey data of economics instruction in American undergraduate programs (Becker and Watts 2001; Broshardt and Watts 2008)—describe students as passive recipients of textbook-driven, lecture-based teaching. This description of the student-teacher relationship is very similar to Freire’s banking (or narration) model of instruction.

Narration (with the teacher as narrator) leads the students to memorize mechanically the narrated content. Worse yet, it [turns] them into “containers,” into “receptacles” to be “filled” by [the] teacher. The more completely she fills the receptacles, the better a teacher she is. The more meekly the receptacle permit themselves to be filled, the better

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students they are (2008, 163).

Although I was unable to locate data on teaching practice in political science or International Relations, there is sufficient anecdotal evidence to suggest that, for the most part, undergraduate teaching in International Relations also uses an expedient pedagogy driven by “convenience, custom, and inertia” (Maier, McGoldrick, and Simkins 2012, 100).

Despite long-standing criticism from Scholarship on Teaching and Learning (SoTL), the American undergraduate education system strongly supports continued reliance on expedient pedagogy. Most college-level educators are not trained as teachers. Academics often begin their teaching careers with little pedagogical training or guidance. Thrown into the classroom as graduate teaching assistants, or as all but dissertation (ABD) or newly minted-PhD instructors, it is only natural that they recreate the lecture-based mode of teaching they most likely experienced as students. Even in teaching environments with small class sizes that should be most conducive to student-centered learning, expedient pedagogies creep in. So-called class discussion can quickly turn into an instructor-focused *semi-lecture*, emphasizing *correct answers* rather than Socratic dialogue supporting the development of critical thought processes.

My own path as an educator began with the advice to not “waste” too much time on undergraduates at the expense of my research. For too many in academia, teaching, especially undergraduate teaching, is viewed as a necessary evil rather than an endeavor worthy of the same creativity and dedication invested in research and writing. Pedagogy articles with titles such as ‘Running Simulations without Ruining Your Life: Simple Ways to Incorporate Active Learning into Your Teaching’ (Glazier 2011), make it easy to see why many instructors shy away from these teaching strategies. Those who have not achieved some degree of professional security in the form of tenure are often hesitant to make innovative teaching a professional priority. This is not to say that there are not excellent undergraduate teachers, many of whom are also innovative and productive researchers. Professional rewards, however, tend to place much higher value on writing and research than on teaching.

Further contributing to the durability of pedagogies of convenience in university teaching are broader economic trends. As with other career fields, “the Boomer Blockade” has contributed to a very competitive job market as senior positions are held by incumbents working well past the traditional age of retirement. At the same time, the number of tenure-track positions at American colleges and universities has steadily declined while the number of non-tenure-track and part-time instructor positions has risen (Millerd 2020). In 1979, 43% of faculty positions were non-tenure track; this percentage rose to 53% in 1989, and to 65% in 2016 (TIAA Institute 2018). When the rare tenure-track position does become available, the candidates’ publication records often determine who will make the first cut. For those that successfully land a tenure-track position, tenure and promotion committees tend to prize publication over innovative teaching that improves student learning outcomes.

The relatively low status of pedagogy in IR is also evident in the work of the Teaching, Research, and International Policy Project (TRIP). If there were a research group within the discipline positioned to document IR’s signature pedagogy, TRIP would be it. The TRIP Faculty Survey focuses on the linkages between academic research and policy. Questions about teaching are primarily related to content (e.g., theory, methodology, and epistemology). In TRIP’s most recent faculty survey (2017), the only question related directly to teaching and pedagogy asks, “Is/Are your IR course(s) for undergraduates designed more to introduce students to scholarship in the IR discipline, or more to prepare students to be informed about foreign policy and international issues?” (“Faculty Survey | Teaching, Research, and International Policy (TRIP)” n.d.). This emphasis on content transmission in the absence of questions related to training students “to think,” “to perform,” or “to act with integrity” (Schulman 2005, 52) indicate that the SP concept is not yet incorporated into the survey. Despite this shortcoming, the TRIP Project plays an important role in creating awareness of the disconnect between the academic and policy worlds. To date, it has encouraged academics to “bridge the gap” through policy-relevant research. A natural extension of this initiative is the development of a graduate-level signature pedagogy to better prepare students for careers as IR practitioners and scholars. It is hard to imagine that such an initiative would not also positively impact pedagogical practices at the undergraduate level.

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An Emerging International Relations SP?

The International Studies Association (ISA) has two sections focused on teaching International Relations: The International Education Section (IES) and the Active Learning in International Affairs Section (ALIAS). The IES promotes itself as “an essential forum for conversation about international studies and study abroad programs, including their curriculum, identity, assessment, and administration that is not available elsewhere” (“International Education (IEDUC) Section 2019 Annual Report,” n.d.). Since 2005, the section’s membership has rarely surpassed 100 members. As of 2019, it was the smallest ISA section. The future of this section is uncertain as it struggles with low membership numbers and declining active participation by section members (“International Education (IEDUC) Section 2019 Annual Report,” n.d.).

In contrast, ALIAS and the American Political Science Association’s (APSA) Political Science Education Section have both grown steadily. Case-based teaching was pioneered in IR in the 1980s. From 1990 to 1995, efforts to develop case-based and active-learning pedagogies were continued through Harvard University’s Pew Faculty Fellowship program (Pettenger 2010). ALIAS became the institutional home for this work when it was established in 1996. Among its other initiatives, ALIAS has collaborated with Georgetown’s Institute for the Study of Diplomacy (ISD) to support the development of resources for case-based teaching (“Institute for the Study of Diplomacy, Georgetown University, USA,” n.d.; “Case Studies for Students” n.d.). Members of ALIAS contributed to *The New International Studies Classroom: Active Teaching, Active Learning*, which focuses on the case method, simulations and games, and technology in the classroom (Lantis, Kuzma, and Boehrer 2000). Similarly, APSA has sponsored an annual Teaching and Learning Conference since 2000; the first edition of the *Journal of Political Science Education* followed in 2005. Since 2018, APSA has held a teaching and learning conference in conjunction with its annual meeting. ALIAS held its first Innovative Pedagogy Conference in 2018.

That case-based and active learning pedagogies are framed as “new” and “innovative” is evidence of the prevalence of textbook and lecture-based pedagogies of convenience. Nonetheless, there are promising signs that active learning strategies, especially case-based learning, simulations, role-play, and games, are becoming part of the mainstream. Whereas, historically, the SoLT has been limited to journals focused on the highly specialized subfield of pedagogy, it has become more common to see essays devoted to teaching in International Relations in widely read disciplinary journals including *International Studies Perspectives* (Asal and Blake 2006; Bridge and Radford 2014; Ehrlander and Boylan 2018). The essays in *Pedagogical Journeys through World Politics* (Frueh 2020) are but the most recent contribution to the ongoing conversation about pedagogy in the discipline.

Although there are many reasons for the continued predominance of expedient pedagogy, this is not to say that signature pedagogies cannot emerge in IR. An active group of dedicated teacher-scholars is working to develop and share active-learning strategies informed by student learning outcomes. As the COVID-19 pandemic has forced all of us to rethink curriculum, course content and adjust to alternative teaching modalities, these teacher-scholars have provided significant support. ISA’s ALIAS and IES, The ISA Innovative Pedagogy Conference Initiative, *International Studies Perspectives*, Paul Diehl, and Mark Boyer co-sponsored a day-long webinar in early August 2020. Georgetown’s Institute for the Study of Diplomacy sponsored two webinars featuring Eric Leonard: ‘The New Reality: Teaching International Affairs On-line’ (August 2020) and ‘Making the Case: Case Studies in Online Classrooms’ (September 2020). These webinars addressed the short-term concerns of teaching during a pandemic and highlighted ways in which technology can support active learning strategies.

Pedagogies of convenience take hold when there is absence of incentives to do otherwise and when support for doing otherwise is not available. I believe that the forced experimentation with teaching strategies spurred by the pandemic will inform my teaching for years to come. The switch to remote teaching forced me to actively seek new teaching strategies. These webinars provided practical advice, allowing me to adapt and scale active learning exercises to my teaching environment and instructional goals. That so many of us are going through this process at the same time creates a wonderful opportunity for the disciplinary conversation needed to develop a signature pedagogy.

IR, Liberal Arts, and Wicked Problems

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Active learning strategies are especially appropriate for the liberal arts. Nussbaum (2010) reminds her reader that, rather than teaching students to be “passively reliant on the written word,” books should “make the mind more subtle, more rigorous, [and] more active” (34). The active pursuit of knowledge takes place in a “messy, puzzling, and complicated” (35) world. Kolko’s (2020) conception of “wicked problems” is quite similar,

[Wicked problems are] a social or cultural problem that is difficult or impossible to solve for as many as four reasons; incomplete or contradictory knowledge, the number of people and opinions involved, the large economic burden, and the interconnected nature of those problems with *other* problems (10).

IR is one of many disciplines focused on “wicked problems.” Training across the liberal arts provides students with the tools to seek, create, analyze, and communicate the knowledge necessary to find appropriate responses to the wicked problems of today and tomorrow.

My courses are shaped by a sense of obligation to students who do not aspire to careers in foreign affairs as much as to those that do. The surface and deep structures of IR present no conflict between disciplinary socialization and teaching the discipline as a liberal art. Both require that students appreciate the interconnectedness of a globalized world and practice skills necessary to become lifelong learners. Through formal academic writing and presentations, nonacademic writing (e.g., blogs, editorials, policy papers), and role-play simulations, students develop research, critical thinking, and communication skills. These assignments also ask students to engage the ethical and pragmatic concerns of implicit structure. Pandemic teaching has spurred me to learn much more about my institution’s learning management software (LMS). It offers much more than drop box, email, and gradebook features. Discussion or chat features (or shared reading annotation software) can help students to better understand assigned readings, share ideas, and collaborate. If you are not fortunate enough to have a Center for Teaching and Learning at your home institution, Vanderbilt’s Center for Teaching provides many easy to implement resources. “Flipping the classroom” (i.e., recording short lectures that students can view outside of class) creates time for these activities. Although the process may sound intimidating, it requires minimal technical expertise.

IR is especially well-suited to the use of role-play simulations as an active learning strategy. With the right preparatory and debriefing assignments, they can provide a rich learning experience beyond the day of the simulation. Statecraft Simulations (<https://www.statecraftsims.com/>) and the University of Maryland’s International Communication & Negotiation Simulations Project (ICONS Project) (<https://icons.umd.edu/>) offer excellent resources to help students and instructors navigate the process. It is not too difficult to create your own role-play experience. Dividing students into “country expert” teams is an easy way to create an “expert symposium.” Collaborate with your library staff to ensure students know how to use library databases and access internet resources. Ask teams to give a briefing explaining their country’s concerns and preferred outcomes. Ask them to analyze the domestic and international factors shaping likely events in the region. After this exercise in peer teaching and learning, students are well-prepared to write individual essays. In the process, they gain a greater understanding of regional issues and have an opportunity to practice liberal arts skills. Providing students with frequent opportunities to practice oral and verbal communication, problem-solving, and critical thinking and reading skills is an excellent antidote to expedient pedagogy.

When I talk to former students about their undergraduate education, they are much more likely to recall exercises designed to support their development as liberal artists than disciplinary knowledge. Some have pursued careers in diplomacy and international civil service. There are even a few in academia. Many more work in the public and private sectors, whether for local NGOs or multinational corporations. They have pursued careers in teaching, journalism, technology, law, consulting, and entrepreneurship. Teaching International Relations as a liberal art is about nurturing your students’ love of learning and coaching them to become better critical thinkers and communicators. My students acquire both transferrable liberal arts skills and disciplinary content knowledge; they are well-prepared to pursue the path of their choosing. Creative problem-solving is needed to address some of today’s most “wicked problems.” IR content knowledge will likely play some role; liberal arts skills most certainly will.

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