

# The Use of Metaphors, Simulations, and Games to Teach International Relations

Written by Ismail Erkam Sula

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

This chapter discusses signature pedagogies in International Relations (IR) and introduces three alternative techniques to active learning, which are used to teach challenging topics in the undergraduate classroom. The first technique is the strategy game, which is designed to encourage students' active participation and help them grasp key concepts. The second technique is a simulation that aims to let students experience a hypothetical international crisis as representatives of states and understand difficulties in conflict resolution scenarios. Simulations are generally inspired from certain real-life crisis and developed with a touch of entertainment. The third technique is the use of metaphors or stories. It aims to explain the literature on "sciences" and "methods" in the IR as a discipline via a fictional story and the use of certain metaphors. The chapter first reviews existing teaching techniques in the academic literature. It lists and discusses various "game/simulation designs" built by scholars in the field. Second, it introduces the three techniques as part of my signature pedagogy with examples from previously applied cases. This part details the design of each technique in a step-by-step format to make them replicable for readers. Third, the chapter discusses the applicability of each technique. Combined, these three approaches give fruitful results especially when applied to undergraduate students of politics and IR. The chapter ends with a set of recommendations on when, with whom, and how to utilize each technique.

IR is a content-rich discipline with no clear-cut disciplinary boundaries. This variation and breadth make it a challenging task to decide on what an IR signature pedagogy should look like. There are certainly many similarities as well as divergences on how IR is taught as a profession across the world. Like most social science disciplines, IR education also has conventional or traditional pedagogical techniques. After summarizing my take on the traditional ways of teaching IR, this chapter delves into recent and innovative techniques. The chapter analyzes active learning and other alternative practices in IR education and assesses the capacity of those techniques to inform my signature pedagogy.

The chapter first looks at the definition of signature pedagogy to discuss how an IR signature pedagogy may look. Here, I emphasize that what we teach as IR and how we teach it are closely related. The section argues that these two questions need to be considered together when thinking about IR as a profession. Accordingly, while making an assessment of the former question of what we teach as IR, the first section connects it with the latter question of how we teach IR. The section discusses both conventional and non-conventional techniques that are used in IR education and provides examples from the academic literature on participatory learning practices employed by IR educators across the world. The second section discusses the use of three alternative education techniques: (1) strategy games, (2) simulations, and (3) storification. The second section also shares my own teaching and learning experiences, as well as suggestions on the use of each alternative technique. The chapter also evaluates existing active learning practices by discussing the advantages of each technique while providing suggestions for overcoming certain disadvantages. It concludes with a discussion of how my teaching approaches can contribute to an IR signature pedagogy more broadly. By doing so, this chapter aims to add to existing ways of teaching IR as a profession.

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## Signature Pedagogies and IR Education

The IR discipline is quite rich in content. Accordingly, the curricula of IR degree programs contain a variety of topics and courses. The tendency in most IR undergraduate programs is to start with certain core introductory social and political science courses in the first years of study and then delve into field-specific ones for the final years. IR-specific courses include various forms of theoretical, historical, and methodological topics to equip students with a toolbox to analyze world politics. After the knowledge-base is set up with required courses, students are offered a selection of issue-specific courses depending on the expertise of professors irrespective departments. Required courses are mostly similar in many departments across the world, yet the extensive scope of the term IR usually results in a picturesque scene of various elective courses in different IR departments. There are no clear-cut boundaries of the IR discipline. Indeed, everyone understands that the discipline has boundaries, but most of them are unsure about where those boundaries are or how to set them. This unbounded (or multi-, inter-, trans-disciplinary) nature of IR provides an important maneuvering capacity to educators in their task of teaching IR. This maneuvering capacity affects both what we teach as IR and how we teach it; hence, both direct us to open up a discussion on signature pedagogies.

Signature pedagogies are “types of teaching that organize the fundamental ways in which future practitioners are educated for their new professions... These are the forms of instruction that leap to mind when we first think about the preparation of members of particular professions” (Shulman 2005, 52). Each field develops signature pedagogies that educators use to teach what they think are fundamental requirements of their specific profession. Indeed, every profession has its own signature pedagogy where “novices are instructed in critical aspects of the three fundamental dimensions of professional work – to *think*, to *perform*, and to *act with integrity*” (Shulman 2005, 52). These fundamental dimensions are closely associated with what we teach and how we teach the concepts and content we want to teach. In the IR discipline, an important aspect that educators need to think about are the skills and knowledge to transfer in the class to get students ready their careers. This requires us to decide what IR as a profession means. Here, the above-mentioned characteristics of the discipline complicates things as graduates of IR degree programs are not directed towards a single profession. What we do, instead of directing students towards a single profession, is generally to transfer main and core topics as a toolbox and leave it up to students to decide their area of expertise. What we teach at the core and beyond becomes quite important as we let the student construct their profession at the end. Regarding signature pedagogies, what we teach is followed by how we teach it. Indeed, as has been noted, signature pedagogies are more concerned with how educators transfer knowledge rather than what content they teach (Lüdert 2016, 1).

IR education, like most of the other social science disciplines, contains traditional methods of course design, evaluation, and in-class activities. Traditional methods generally follow similar routines:

1. Design a syllabus that contains essential information about the course
2. Develop a weekly course plan including required readings (textbook chapters or articles).
3. Deliver regular lectures in-class based on these readings.
4. Add some student participation component (attendance, single or group presentations).
5. Evaluate performance through exams and written paper assignments.

In this traditional approach, the degree of knowledge and skill transfer in the class is dependent on the educator’s performance and her/his skill in using classroom technology. Indeed, education techniques are abundant and are usually based on the creativity of the educator. New and innovative approaches have also been developed over time. Especially as technological capabilities have increased, scholars have started to look for alternative ways of transferring knowledge and skills to students. One aim of these innovative approaches has been increasing student participation and designing more interactive in-class and off-class routines. Here, the topics are taught through a set of activities to train students via active participation. Active learning techniques have increasingly become an important component of signature pedagogies in IR.

Active learning is defined as “an education process that takes place through student engagement with the content through different types of activities that encourage reflection, in order to promote active thinking” (Alves, Silva, and

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Barbosa 2019, 1). The educator uses novel approaches, including simulations, games, case studies, and other innovative techniques to encourage and monitor student participatory learning. The process shifts the educator from being mere lecturer towards a learning coordinator. Of course, the balance of this shift between lecturer and coordinator is determined by the educator's own preference and teaching style, creativity, skills, and institutional and technical capabilities.

The most common technique is the use of simulations in the classroom. The academic literature offers abundant examples of the application on simulations (Shaw and Switky 2018; Shaw 2004; Asal and Blake 2006; Asal and Kratoville 2013; de Freitas 2006; Wedig 2010). Simulations have been used in teaching various IR topics, including international human rights (Killie 2002), peacekeeping (Shaw 2004), diplomacy and the UN (Chasek 2005), international law (Ambrosio 2006), theories of international political economy (Boyer, Trumbore, and Fricke 2006), international negotiations (Shaw 2006), international trade (Switky and Avilés 2007), humanitarian intervention (Switky 2014), the European Union (Elias 2014), and decision-making (DiCicco 2014).[1] Particularly, Killie (2002, 271–272) asks students to prepare a draft international human rights treaty to simulate international negotiations and encourage student interest on various IR concepts, including “diplomacy, two-level games, international law, human rights, and group decision making.” Chasek (2005) offers a crisis simulation based on multi-lateral diplomacy, where participants try to resolve a hypothetical UN Security Council crisis. Similarly, Switky (2014) uses a crisis simulation to let students experience the difficulties of decision-making in “humanitarian intervention.” Ambrosio (2006, 159–160) utilizes “Problem Based Learning (PBL)” techniques to teach international law, “in which students assumed roles in a mock war crimes trial.” In the mock trial, the author uses a real-life case and designs a hypothetical trial to (1) deepen student understanding of the material, (2) give :hands-on experience in the difficulties associated with interpreting and applying international law,” and (3) bolster student interest in the topic (Ambrosio 2006, 160). Boyer, Trumbore, and Fricke (2006) use a family card game “Pit,” to help students understand abstract theories and concepts of international political economy and increase their interest in course material.

Scholars also use in-class games (Alves, Silva, and Barbosa 2019), mock trials (Ambrosio 2006), zombie simulations (Horn, Rubin, and Schouenborg 2016; Drezner 2014), fiction (Boaz 2020) and novels, series, and popular movies like the Lord of the Rings (Ruane and James 2008; 2012), Harry Potter (Nexon and Neumann 2006), Game of Thrones (Young and Ko 2019), Star Trek and Star Wars (Dyson 2015; Campbell and Gokcek 2019), and others (Weber 2014; 2010; 2001). Through such approaches, IR educators both aim to encourage student participation and make it easier for students to understand challenging topics in IR.

## Teaching Challenging IR Topics: Three Alternatives

Active learning tools are utilized by educators to (1) let student participate in crisis-like situations and have them experience the practical side of the profession and (2) help student understand abstract theoretical and philosophical topics through metaphors and real-life examples. Each technique, as will be outlined in this section, has advantages and disadvantages. Here, I find it useful to group these techniques into three teaching approaches: (1) strategy games, (2) crisis simulations, and (3) storification. These techniques assist educators in teaching a variety of complex topics. For instance, as part of my own signature pedagogy, I have actively used strategy games to teach about collective action dilemmas, security dilemmas, and theories of IR, crisis simulations to let students experience certain international political crises that require skills in negotiation, conflict resolution, and coordinating summit meetings, and storification to teach philosophy of science debates in IR theory.

The first technique, strategy games, has a specific purpose: to learn and teach IR in an entertaining manner (See, for instance, Thomas 2002; Freitas 2006; Boyer, Trumbore, and Fricke 2006). A strategy game can be defined as a teaching technique that is used to explain and introduce fundamental concepts in IR, such as security and foreign policy, in a smooth and swift manner. It is smooth as the alternative actions, turns of the game, and number of actors are all predetermined and controlled by the instructor. It is swift because the waiting time between the turns in limited, and the games end in approximately 40 minutes. These games are especially useful as icebreakers (to introduce participants to each other) and as short, entertaining breaks between lecture weeks in course design and syllabi. In my classes, I generally prefer an adjusted version of the “Isle of Ted Simulation” designed by Glen Dale Thomas (2002). Isle of Ted is a turn-based game-like simulation where participants represent certain actors and interact with

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each other according to pre-determined rules. After letting participants play this turn-based interactive game, the educator can cover a variety of topics in IR, such as independence and sovereignty, complex interdependence, security dilemma, collective action dilemma, and others. An important aspect here is to monitor how the participants interact with each other throughout the turns of the game as each specific round of the game with different participants uncovers interesting points for discussion and lessons for reflection.

Strategy games have certain, specific characteristics. First, these games are designed to finish in a relatively short amount of time. Since there is a limited number of decision and action alternatives for the participants, the game will start to repeat itself after several turns, which diminishes the entertainment factor for both participants and the educator. Second, unlike simulations, in strategy games the educator's role is more active as she/he must keep participants on the move and active because of the time-limit. Third, the application of these games should be carefully designed to make it both engaging and easy to grasp. It should be designed practically and not require advanced prior knowledge, long readings, or lectures to prepare the participants. Last but not the least, the strategy game should be adjusted in creative and imaginative ways to be relevant to the student population. For example, the educator may change currency denominations to "York Liras" (rather than dollars or euros), include chance moves in the game (like dice-rolling or coin-flipping to decide faith), or may use imaginary country names, such as "Kolombistan, Tartartolia" (rather than real country names). Adjusting the game in these ways helps keep students actively engaged rather than focused on being overly realistic and stale.

Strategy games are highly useful in teaching key concepts of IR (e.g., anarchy, collective action dilemma, conflict vs. cooperation, absolute vs. relative gains) and the existence of multiple actors in IR (e.g., states, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), intergovernmental organizations (IGOs)). As such, they are more suitable to use as complementary educating techniques to support lectures throughout the semester. Depending on the preferences of the educator, strategy games may be used as icebreakers in the first weeks of any class or might be applied occasionally throughout the semester to consolidate and evaluate what knowledge has been transferred to the students. According to my experience, they serve as great icebreakers, increasing the self-confidence of the students by letting them know each other and feel more comfortable to participate in in-class activities throughout the semester. This technique is more suitable to early-period, junior students, who do not have preliminary knowledge of the field or topics to be covered.

The second technique, crisis simulation, is usually based on a replay of a real-life crisis (see Chasek 2005; Ambrosio 2006; Switky 2014, among others). A crisis simulation in IR is a pedagogical technique based on a scenario to create a situation inspired from real life, which is used to train, give experience to, and inform participants of the probable behavior alternatives to resolve international political crises and conflicts. It is very useful, as there are many cases in IR that can be simulated in this technique (the Cold War, the First and Second World War, the Abkhazia Crisis between Russia and Georgia, the Economic Crisis of Greece and the European Union, the establishment of the European Union, etc.). The scenario is often created by an educator who is an expert in this area of research. Real-life crises are employed (1) to teach specific topic areas, such as causes and reasons for war and conflict, and (2) to illustrate and let participants experience how difficult it may become for practitioners in the field (state leaders, diplomats, politicians, IGOs and NGOs, civil society) to resolve conflicts on the ground. In this sense, crisis simulations differ from strategy games. In simulations, participation is made as realistic as possible and entertainment is not necessarily a consideration. However, in strategy games there is a careful balance between teaching and entertainment, which requires more imagination and creativity. In addition, simulations aim to transfer experience to the participants through illustrating the process of crisis management while strategy games mostly aim to teach fundamental concepts.

Simulations have their own strict rules, but they are not carved in stone. For instance, if the simulation is prepared to resolve conflict, participants may not have the option to resort to violence (declare war) until a certain turn comes. However, these rules are not as mechanical as those of the strategy games. Since simulations take longer (ranging from half a day, a whole day, a couple of days, and even longer), the educator may let participants decide how to deal with the situation through diplomacy and other measures. In strategy games however, there is a time limit, and rules are typically stricter and less fluid. Indeed, in simulations the result of crisis-management or conflict-resolution processes are left to the participants to decide. For instance, in one of the cases, I was expecting the participants to

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come to a summit and resolve their differences there. However, it was a surprise for me to see the participants revealed that they signed a secret treaty instead of using open discussion channels. This turned out to be an interesting example on what can be achieved by leaving some space for the creativity of the participants. I took it as an encouragement for increasing students' participation during the flow of the simulation and for leaving more space to the participants by letting them to come up with alternative more creative courses of action. Compared to strategy games, I think simulations give the educator an increased maneuvering capacity both in terms of content and encouraging participants involvement.

Typically, simulations are based on a common design that includes:

1. Creating teams according to the class size and number of participants
2. Determining the number of turns and length based on the allocated time
3. Establishing a communication platform, such as a roundtable that participants use as a summit to discuss their differences
4. Preparing and distributing a strategy document for each team at the beginning of the game that the participants use a guideline
5. Establishing an international media team through which participants receive news about each other
6. Starting the simulation, monitoring the turn-based flow, and letting the participants resolve the conflict

The educator generally gives information to the participants before the simulation starts, monitors the flow of the simulation, assesses the simulation at the end, and covers relevant topics afterwards. Once the details of this simulation design are established by the educator, it becomes easier to write an IR crisis simulation on any topic in international politics. While scenarios and minor details change across different simulations, there are certain common characteristics as well. First, simulations usually take longer than other techniques. Since the alternatives are not constant for participants, the simulations do not fall into repetition after a couple of turns like those in strategy games. Second, the main aim of simulations is to create a realistic scenario.

Crisis simulations are not games, they are intentionally designed with the aim of transferring realistic experiences from the IR profession. Last but not least, crisis simulations need substantial preparation and prior knowledge of the topic. Educators often need to assign selective readings to participants, explain rules in detail, and allocate sufficient time for participants to prepare for the simulation.

Simulations require a longer time for preparation and are best used to educate senior students who have prior knowledge of the key concepts in IR and the case at hand. Compared to strategy games, I recommend that simulations be used with relatively more experienced IR students. However, the educator may prefer to prepare more detailed instructions and allocate more time for preparation. Crisis simulations are great ways to let students experience IR as a profession through diverse perspectives. Students experience many aspects of IR as a profession at different stages of the simulation, including, but not limited to the difficulties of reaching consensus in international negotiations, the effort needed to reach a common ground in diplomacy, the challenges in the process of peaceful resolution of disputes, the alternative ways of representing a state as a diplomat, the importance and role of communication and international media, and the role of international institutions in world politics. The educator needs to follow the simulation carefully and take notes of the topics to evaluate at the end of the simulation. The evaluation at the end of the simulation is of key importance since the educator makes a final assessment to connect her/his observations during the simulation with the knowledge she/he intends to transfer to the students.

Finally, storification, is a technique that I use to teach science and methods in IR to undergraduate students with no prior knowledge (see Ruane and James 2008; 2012; Nexon and Neumann 2006; Young and Ko 2019 among others). I invented a story titled "The Tale of Two Villages: Rationalia and Reflectia" with the goal of explaining to students and helping them understand the so-called great theoretical debates and rationalist-reflectivist divide in IR (Luleci and Sula 2016; Sula and Luleci 2015; Sula 2019a; 2019b). The story is about people living in two distinct neighborhoods, their different lifestyles and the events happening after their first encounter. The story starts by describing life in Rationalia. Residents of Rationalia have quite similar lifestyles and daily routines where they construct and live in very similar buildings and houses. Then the story continues with residents of Reflectia, who live

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in very different conditions. Reflectians do not have similar houses, routines, or priorities but enjoy uniqueness in the lives of each resident. The story continues with the first encounter of Rationalians and Reflectians and with how Rationalians try to keep Reflectians out of their life. Rationalians even build huge walls, put gatekeepers to stop Reflectians from entering their sacred territories until a certain natural disaster (an earthquake) destroys their walls. After telling this short story, I ask the students to speculate and discuss the metaphors in the story. For instance, the towers of Rationalia representing the rationalist research programs, the huge wall-representing disciplinary boundaries in IR, the earthquake representing the end of the Cold War, and other metaphors that I inject into the story. When this technique is combined with creativity, and prior readings on the topic, it helps the student understand and remember the discussions made in the classroom. Just like the use of popular series, movies, and novels, the use of storification and metaphors also has the potential to help educators simplify the topics and transfer knowledge to their students.

I use this technique to transfer knowledge of complex theoretical topics in IR to students through simplifying and using metaphors. Storification highly depends on the creativity of the educator. I suggest that, before creating a story, the educator think whether the metaphors she/he uses in the story truly represent the knowledge she/he intends to transfer to the students. Based on the feedback that I get from the students, on certain occasions I realized that I have been telling "The Tale of Two Villages: Rationalia and Reflectia" in a way that directs the students to support one side of the debate more than the other. Since that was not my intent, I had had to explain the students that I do not support any of those theoretical positions more than the other. This feedback required me to readjust and think about the ways I tell the story in the classroom. Hence, carefully assessing what knowledge has been transferred to the students is an important aspect of this technique. If the course has reading material on complex theoretical topics, the instructor may ask the students to read the material before telling the story; then, after telling the story in class, give students additional time to think about the reading and assess the transfer of knowledge through discussion of the metaphors used in the story. Thereby, the educator can assess the degree of knowledge transfer and check if she/he transferred any unintended positions to the students.

## Conclusion

The abundance of alternative pedagogical techniques helps educators formulate innovative, participatory, and efficient ways of teaching IR as a profession. Indeed, the usefulness of each technique depends on how the educator designs her/his education profile and what she/he understands as IR signature pedagogy. My experience is that each approach has advantages and disadvantages in teaching and learning IR. One of the shared aims of the approaches discussed above is to transfer knowledge and experience to the participant through a simplified and entertaining process.

There are a couple of important aspects to remember while utilizing these techniques: (1) the educator may miss some important details of the topic that she/he wants to cover while trying to use these techniques, and (2) maybe more importantly, the educator may transfer the wrong message to the participants. Both aspects require the educator to carefully assess the degree of knowledge and experience transferred to the participant and fill in the gaps and correct information if identified. My experience is that the educator may quite easily transfer unintended messages to participants turning them into fanatic supporters of a specific way of thinking in IR (realists, liberals, rationalists, etc.) or nationalist supporters of one of the countries in the simulations. This is especially so when the participant does not have prior knowledge of the topic. Therefore, I prefer using these techniques after letting students understand the basics of the course (usually after a couple of lecture weeks throughout the semester).

Specifically, strategy games are great icebreakers in the undergraduate classroom, letting students know each other before continuing the course throughout the semester. Other two techniques are more suitable for explaining certain topics in detail. Since crisis simulations require prior training, it is better to use them towards the final weeks of the semester. They may even be used as exams to assess and evaluate student knowledge and experience at the end of the course. Storification can be spread throughout the course depending on the creativity of the educator. I use stories and metaphors as discussion starters just after lectures and other times when necessary.

The education techniques discussed in this chapter are quite useful, as their structure is open for adjustment, their

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design can be updated, and their application is open to variation. However, while these techniques encourage active participation, it is the educator that puts the signature at the end. What the educator teaches and how she/he teaches it determines the definition of IR as a profession. Regarding the abundance of alternative education techniques in the current state of the literature, it is a great time to start discussing signature pedagogies in IR.

## Notes

[1] See also various other simulation, problem based learning and active learning examples: Switky (2014); Horn, Rubin, and Schouenborg (2016); Zappile, Beers, and Raymond (2017); Kempston and Thomas (2014); and Thomas (2002).

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