PEDAGOGY

Thinking, Doing, and Writing International Relations Theory

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This article describes an experientially based approach to the teaching/ learning of international relations (IR) theory. The course is designed with the pedagogical goal of decentering the classroom, which implies taking the focus off of the instructor and creating a more collaboratively oriented learning environment. Students actively engage in peer editing, and review of one another's written work, they work in small discussion/interpretive circles, they utilize the class website to create an international issues forum, they design, format, and participate in a mock conference at the end of the semester, and their capstone project involves the creation of their own IR theory writing portfolio. The theoretical perspectives of realism, liberalism, globalism, constructivism, feminism, and postmodernism are introduced as a series of "lenses" through which students will view various international issues, problems, and events. Our operative premise is that all international events are given meaning by their interpreters; therefore, the lens through which we view the world is crucial. This course is designed to introduce students to the work of the IR theorist in a collaborative and actively engaged educational setting.

Keywords: experiential learning, decentering, collaborative learning environments, portfolio, IR theoretical lenses

What Are the Benefits of Experiential Learning?

Cusimano's (2000:79) observation that "learning based on discovery, inquiry and participation is preferable to passive, lecture-based learning" supplies the key pedagogical insight that inspired me to reconfigure my approach to the teaching of international relations (IR) theory at the undergraduate level. As with any revelatory insight, the problem of actualization is never far behind and the question one inevitably confronts is how to put this insight into practice. This article will describe

how I have attempted to integrate experientially based learning approaches into my teaching repertoire.

As a political theorist, I have always found students to be very receptive and engaged by the study of overarching ideas and large-scale conceptual frameworks. Thus, I designed my course in Contemporary International Politics as a way to introduce students to a series of conceptual, IR theoretical lenses. My objective was twofold: first, to introduce them to the key characteristics of each theoretical approach/paradigm, and, second, to enable them to utilize these lenses as a way to analyze and interpret current international events. I also wanted them to personally experience how each lens directs your view toward certain facets and aspects of international politics, and how the lenses themselves influence how we make meaning out of events. Thus, I wanted to create an academic environment that would encourage intellectual risk taking, critical reflection, and open-ended thinking. It appeared that the best way to accomplish my objectives was to rely upon a set of experientially based learning approaches.[1]

Experientially based learning approaches are specifically associated with three key processes: first, that students become active participants in their own learning; two, that they begin to understand the connections between theory and practice in the outside world; and finally, that they become actively responsible for integrating knowledge into their own conceptual framework (Boud and Pascoe 1978). Experiential learning is distinguished from other approaches on the basis of what Kolb (1984:41) defines as a "process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience." Thus, learning is viewed as a process and according to Kolb (1984), experience provides the basis for developing the ability to reflect, conceptualize, analyze, test, and apply our ideas. Ultimately, the benefits of such an approach to the study of international politics are first that it replicates the complexity of "real-world" politics within the classroom. Second, it makes clearly visible the array of diverse perspectives and meanings that we construct out of international issues and events. Finally, such an approach attempts to foster a sense of tolerance and openness to divergent views because ultimately what is revealed is how multiple and perspectival truth can be.[2]

Decentering the Learning/Teaching Environment

This course is specifically designed with the pedagogical goal of decentering the classroom, which implies taking the focus off of the instructor and creating a more collaboratively oriented learning environment. As Burch (2000:39) indicates, "by decentralizing the classroom students discover the latitude to explore ideas and form and express opinions." Latitude is the operative key in framing an experiential learning approach to the study of IR theory. Students need to be encouraged to try on various lenses, to fumble with their fit, and to strain their eyes to see the world through divergent perspectives. The most crucial aspect of this course design is to ensure that students feel that there is nothing to lose and everything to gain from trying out perspectives, which may in fact be very alien to the way they normally think about international events. Thus, the environment must be made safe for them to not only engage in experimentation, but to be open to experi-

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[1]There are numerous sources that attest to the benefits of experiential learning methods including Keeton and Associates (1976), Keeton and Tate (1978), Chickering (1977, 1986), Kilty (1982), Walters and Marks (1981), Boydell (1976), Kolb and Fry (1975), Kolb (1984), Boud and Pascoe (1978), Boud, Cohen, and Walker (1993), Whitaker (1995), and Moon (2004).

[2]This course most closely approximates the experiential method Henry (1989:32) identifies as learning by doing, in light of which I have attempted to combine both project-based learning with a sequence of activity-based learning experiences. Additionally, I do share a similar outlook with those who use experiential learning approaches as a way to institute social change (Henry 1989:30), by attempting to design an academic scenario whereby a greater appreciation and tolerance for diverse world views and individual perspectives will emerge.

encing vertigo and disorientation in those instances where things begin to appear quite unfamiliar and downright strange.

This course is set up in a series of oscillating concentric circles that move pedagogically from the individual student to her/his small discussion/interpretive circles to the class web international issues forum to research teams, to a mock international theory conference. We move students through a series of different types and sizes of groups in order to encourage them to develop collaborative, cooperative skills across a wide variety of intellectual tasks. The essential point is to foster student confidence and competency and to maintain open flows of communication throughout the entire class.

Thinking Theory

IR theory is fun and the underlying aim of this class is to allow students to sample the intriguing and engaging craft of the IR theorist. Each lens is introduced through a series of introductory readings, which are accompanied by a set of guided reading questions.[3] Students are asked to post their initial responses, questions, and/or comments on the class website, as a way to begin to develop their ability to think theoretically. In class, students form discussion/interpretive circles consisting of about four to five students, their initial task being to decipher the lens. They must arrive at a coherent statement of the key characteristics of the theory or approach under discussion. Next, they must work together to make sure that everyone in their circle has a good working knowledge of this theory and can accurately identify, define, and describe its component parts. Students then engage in a class-wide discussion with the goal of summarizing and compiling an overview of the theoretical approach under consideration. Students are then asked to generate questions about this theoretical approach, which are recorded on the board. Students are advised to maintain a questions log that they can refer to and keep adding to as they move through all of the various theoretical lenses.

Next, students are assigned a set of readings that provide theoretical depth and nuance. These readings are accompanied by a set of guided reading questions. Students are asked to post questions, comments, and other discussion points regarding the readings on the class web discussion board. In class, students assemble into reading teams and are responsible for discussing and preparing a synopsis of one of the assigned readings. Each group selects a presenter who shares their synopsis of the reading with the rest of the class, who follow up with questions, comments, and feedback on their synopsis. The instructor acts as the recorder and keeps track of the key points on the board. Inaccuracies, inconsistencies, and unclear comments are left as is, until the students have finished reviewing all of the articles. Then, students are asked to identify problems in our analysis and raise questions about our interpretation and understanding of the readings. The key here is to begin to model how theorists continually go back over their initial interpretations in order to re-evaluate and reanalyze their accuracy and completeness. It is also important to encourage students to identify puzzles and raise problematic issues as they work their way through the assigned theoretical pieces and to record them in their questions log for future reference.

Doing Theory

The pedagogical metaphor of a series of concentric circles is also applicable to the way in which I introduce students to the work of the IR theorist. After they have

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[3]Guided reading questions are intended to make reading more purposeful and goal oriented as described in McKeachie (1999:27). The aim is to encourage students to read for understanding and retention. Purposeful reading is also designed to help them begin to make connections and integrate new information into their own coherent knowledge structure.

developed a concise, coherent, and clear overview of the key characteristics of the theory under discussion, I usually provide students with an in-class application that I might draw from NPR, the print media, the Daily Show, a political cartoon, a film, or whatever else might strike me as a fertile source for providing students with a risk-free opportunity to try on the theoretical lenses. They work in analysis circles and their goals are to state the key characteristics of the theoretical approach under consideration, to identify the aspects of the theory that help them understand the selected international event, issue, or policy, to explain how this theory helps us make sense of the event, issue, or policy, and finally to identify what the theory does not tell us, what it leaves out that they might think is important for us to know. The professor acts as the recorder as each group summarizes their discussion and shares it with the rest of the class.[4]

For learning to be effective, it is not only essential that the process be experientially based but also that there are constant, dynamic, and evolving opportunities for reiteration and repetition. In other words, students have to keep encountering the information in different frames and in different settings in order for them to really begin to understand, and to deepen their knowledge and thereby make it their own.[5] Several features of this course are specifically designed to achieve this goal. After each set of readings, students are asked to select their own international event, issue, or policy to analyze based upon the model we practiced in class. In addition, they create an international issues forum where they continuously post examples on the class website that they think are particularly illustrative of either realism, liberalism, globalism, feminism, constructivism, and/or postmodernism, and provide a short explanation as to why/how the theory helps our understanding of this particular international occurrence.

After the first lens is covered, all subsequent lenses are introduced with reference to those preceding it. It is through this process that students begin developing the habit of referencing previous theories. They are provided with numerous opportunities to practice learning how to integrate and conceptually organize these various perspectives into their own comprehensive knowledge structure. This is accomplished through a series of written drafts, revisions, and resubmits, in conjunction with peer editing and review sessions that culminate in the creation of their own IR theory-writing portfolio.

Writing Theory

Following our class analysis of the assigned readings and our subsequent application exercise, students are assigned the task of selecting their own international event and interpreting it through the theoretical lens. Students are provided with an expectations sheet, which describes the assignment in detail and specifies the components of a comprehensive and thorough analysis of their chosen event. Students bring their drafts to class and working in small teams they conference with

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[4]This type of student-centered activity is designed to implement what Barr and Tagg (1995) refer to as the creation of learning environments where students become "co-producers of learning." Students are actively engaged in discovering how to make sense of international events and how to integrate this information into broader conceptual frameworks of meaning. They are asked to think critically about an event and in so doing, they actually work through Bloom's (1956) six levels of thinking: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. These skills are continuously reiterated throughout the course, and students are given the time and numerous opportunities to practice and develop their critical thinking skills.

[5]Another issue to keep in mind is "time on task" (Chickering and Gamson 1987) and how to design an experiential learning setting, which enables students to take and make the time to learn. International relations theory is one of the disciplines within political science that absolutely requires time for students to develop the ability to think and write as a theorist.

one another.[6] Students are provided with a peer-review and editing checklist that they use to guide their conference sessions. After they have completed the review process, the group selects examples from their drafts to share with the rest of the class. They are asked to select examples that clearly demonstrate the theory's explanatory power, as well as examples of the theory's limitations, i.e., what it cannot tell us. Our full class discussion revolves around understanding what particular theoretical lenses can tell us about a selected international event, what they do a good job of explaining, and why, but we are also attentive to indicating what the lens fails to account for and why.

Students revise their drafts and submit them for my review. I maintain an open revise-and-resubmit policy until students feel that they have polished their drafts to their satisfaction.[7] I would argue that it is after the conferencing and after the class discussion, perhaps even quite a while after the conclusion of the exercises, that students begin to work through the theories and start to clarify and understand their key characteristics and grasp the nuances and complexities involved in their application. Often, it is only after we have moved through different theories students begin to evaluate different approaches comparatively that and find themselves rethinking how to identify the key characteristics of, for example, liberalism and how to distinguish it from constructivism or postmodernism.[8] Thus, all writing is open to continuous revision and resubmission. The finished individual analysis pieces will eventually become part of each student's final portfolio.

Writing is a vital part of active learning and providing students with the opportunity to read and review one another's work, in conjunction with an open revise-and-resubmit policy, creates the space and time required for students to develop their own self-assessment skills (Hobson 1996). The benefits of such an integrated writing process into the IR theory curriculum are twofold. The first derives from Hobson's (1996:55) observation that "often peer critique is more effective than teacher generated feedback because students often need greater levels of acceptance and praise from peers than they need from teachers." Second, students who engage in peer review and editing become much more acutely aware of their own writing and often find themselves reviewing their own work from a much more critical and analytical perspective (Hobson 1996:55). I found this writing process to be extremely beneficial, especially as it opens up multiple avenues and numerous opportunities for student-initiated intellectual growth and analytical development.

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[6]Holsti's (2000) positive results with student-authored case studies are also relevant to my experience with student-authored theory pieces. As Holsti notes, student motivation is higher when they know that their peers will be reviewing and evaluating their work. Additionally, students benefit immensely from reading and analyzing each other's work because it enables them to reflect upon and develop their own analytical skills. I heartily second Holsti's (2000:267) conclusion that "students who have written a case become more acute readers and analysts of other cases."

[7]All students are responsible for their own work throughout the course and are individually graded on all of the assignments. Some students initially may not be as diligent in preparing for the discussions, which ultimately impacts their ability to write their analysis papers. During class, I constantly circulate among the small groups and keep track of student participation in an effort to encourage thoughtful preparation of assigned reading materials. This also gives me an opportunity to offer suggestions, interject commentary, and indicate where students may need to recheck facts or review their interpretation. Students do receive a participation grade and are ultimately responsible for producing their own critical analytical pieces of writing. Enabling students to revise, rewrite, and resubmit ensures that I can critically evaluate their work and in my editorial comments refer them back to the texts, especially where their analysis is weak, undertheorized, or inaccurate. It is at this point that students become aware, if they are not already, how crucial it is to keep up with the readings. These individual analysis pieces also enable me to ensure that students have an accurate grasp of the key concepts and that their interpretations are theoretically valid. Thus, any misinformation and/or inaccuracies that might result from the peer-editing process can be identified and corrected.

[8]Lantis, Kuzma, and Boehrer (2000) make a similar point in their emphasis on student debriefing and the need for ongoing instructor assessment because of the fact that experiential learning tends to follow the intellectual activity or exercise. I would add that it is also important to provide students with the opportunity to not only continue learning, but to be able to reflect that continuous developmental process in their written work and class participation.

Experiential Learning: Thinking, Doing, Writing IR Theory

Our theoretical endeavors culminate in a mock IR theory conference, which the students design, format, and conduct.[9] Students arrange themselves into theoretical teams, each team representing one of the six perspectives we covered in class. As a class, they decide which international issue, event, or problem will serve as the focus for the conference. They are responsible for establishing the expectations for their own group and deciding how, as a team, they will prepare for the conference. The entire class is responsible for setting the guidelines, the format, and the basis for evaluation of all of the student conference participants. All expectations and guidelines are posted by the students on the class website. Students are also responsible for setting the date for the conference and establishing how the conference will proceed. As an illustration, one class selected the topic of Iraq and posed the following two questions for the conference to discuss and analyze: What is the nature of the threat that Iraq poses and what subsequent actions or policies should be taken and/or recommended?

Each student is required to author her or his own conference paper and I provide each student with a clear set of expectations for this final paper. All discussion, research, and preparation for the conference and the conference paper transpires in their working groups. They are given class time but also find it very beneficial to work through the class website discussion board and via email. The conference achieves several pedagogical goals, the most important of which is enabling students to engage the same issue from varying theoretical perspectives and to provide afford them with the opportunity to see the points of overlap and divergence clearly among the various approaches. They get to speak across the paradigms and to defend their perspective while questioning the interpretation and analysis of their fellow conferees.[10] It is interesting to observe how students adopt the terminology of their perspective and begin to think and speak in terms of its world view.

The class following the conference is set up as a debriefing session. Teams review and analyze the strengths and weaknesses in their understanding and application of their theoretical perspective, which occurred to them as a result of their participation in the mock conference. They are asked to draft a group analysis of their theoretical strengths and weaknesses and to address these in terms of their comparative merit, based upon the other theoretical arguments and points of interpretation advanced during the conference. We conclude with a summary activity that is designed to draw together the key points of analysis offered by each team. This is posted on the board in the form of a chart so that the various points of overlap and divergence are clearly visible.

The capstone project is the compilation of an IR Theory Portfolio, which includes all of the short individual analysis pieces, their final conference paper, and a cover letter. The cover letter provides a summary overview of their assessment of the conference, which includes a statement regarding their own learning experiences throughout the course. They are expected to discuss the explanatory power of the theoretical perspective that they developed in the conference. In addition, they are asked to identify how their lens fits into the study of IR and how it compares, both negatively and positively, with the other theoretical perspectives. Students should

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[9]It is at this point that Gardner and Boix-Mansilla's (1994) stress on "teaching for understanding" comes into play because students have to bring their understanding of IR theory to bear on a new international problem and apply that knowledge in a new and slightly different setting. This mock conference format also offers students an opportunity to engage in what Project Zero (2003) identifies as "performances of understanding" where the key is to enable students to utilize their knowledge in open-ended and unscripted ways. Thus, students develop the flexibility to apply knowledge in novel ways as they respond to the dynamics of the unfolding mock conference.

[10]Here, I am drawn to the observation by Kolb and Kolb (2004:5) that it is the divergence between "opposing modes of reflection and action and feeling and thinking" that drives the learning process. Thus, Kolb and Kolb (2004:5) conclude, "Learning requires the resolution of conflicts between dialectically opposed modes of adaptation to the world."

also comment on how their particular lens influences how they perceive international events and the policy recommendations that they would be likely to advocate. Finally, they are asked to generate a series of questions that their participation in the conference raised in their minds about their particular theoretical perspective, as well as questions regarding the other approaches. The cover letter, their six individual analysis papers, and their conference paper are included in their finished IR theory portfolio, which stands as a summary document of student discovery, inquiry, and intellectual development.

Concluding Observations

Many far-reaching and optimistic educational expectations have been pinned on experiential learning methods. For instance, Rogers (1983:3) equates experientially based learning programs with fostering trust, participatory decision making, student confidence, self-esteem, and the adoption of life-long learning behaviors, among other positive merits. Henry (1989:36) credits experiential learning approaches with providing "self-motivated, assertive, adaptable, able situation improvers and communicators who know how to find relevant information and apply it." Boud (1989:48) concludes with the final observation that such learning "can be a potent influence for human development and social change." Perhaps, the most optimistic expectations for experiential learning are raised by Keeton (1976:11), who sees the potential for such learning to result in "the transformation of experience into ever more maturing insights and the development of the self into an ever more responsive and responsible participant in a mutually fulfilling society." My hopes are much less grandiose and not nearly so expansive.

My objectives for this approach to learning are simply to awaken in my students a sense of what Lyotard (1992:97) says "really matters: the childhood of an encounter." Students should enjoy the moment of discovery and the sense of satisfaction that one derives from doing something to the best of one's ability. I want to engage them with substantive and complex international issues that confront all of us, not just IR scholars and practitioners. Intellectually, I want them to understand the various theoretical approaches to the study of IR, to be able to identify and explain their key characteristics, but most importantly, to use them to make meaning out of international events. In conclusion, I want them to have fun and ultimately recognize that not one of us is in possession of a privileged, Archimedean view. Inevitably, we must work together in a setting of mutual tolerance that we are responsible for putting into place.

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