

# Active and Student-Centered Teaching and Learning Methods in International Studies at the University of Miami

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Dr. John Twichell

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# Paper abstract

Active learning techniques including simulations have been employed successfully in international relations courses since the 1950s. Interdisciplinary international studies (IS) programs date back to the early onset of globalization in the 1970s and since then they have become more common on campuses as well as more popular among undergraduate students coming of age in a more interconnected yet more complex world. Amidst this complexity, student-centered teaching methods are receiving greater attention in the literature and in the classroom. This paper explores the value of student-centered “in context” learning in IS programs. We evaluate application of and key benefits of different hands-on activities such as debates and simulations. Building on the existing literature, we describe the active learning techniques we have adopted for introductory undergraduate IS courses at the University of Miami. The debates and simulations, which find students working collaboratively in teams, are structured to meet clear learning outcomes. These techniques concurrently provide a student-centered classroom setting that we find conducive to more effective learning of International Relations theory and to greater understanding of complex global problems. Our paper further explores how to best relate these student-centered teaching strategies with “outside the classroom” capstone and internship experiences. We envision our paper promoting dialogue consistent with the conference workshop themes and objectives.

# Introduction

My (Twichell's) perspective (based on my PhD training):

- Earned a PhD in International Studies (UMiami, 2015)
- Trained in comparative politics and IR theory by poli scientists
- Served as Adjunct in both Political Science and International Studies (during PhD candidacy), hired as IS Lecturer in 2016
- Always given space and agency to explore T&L innovation
- Mentored by colleagues, served as TA, and 'inherited' courses
- With 10 years of teaching experience, recognize the factors converging and prompting changes in T&L methods
- Increased University-level effort (under leadership of President Julio Frenk) toward interdisciplinary research and studies bringing more non-INS students to the INS classroom who want to be engaged in pedagogically innovative ways

# Introduction

- My understanding of IS and my perspective on IS has been shaped more so through the perspective of the discipline of political science, and much less so as an interdisciplinary effort.
- This was reinforced by my teaching history, which began with my being appointed as an Adjunct to instruct Intro to Comparative Politics courses in the Department of Political Science.
- I subsequently was assigned as TA to an Oxford DPhil in International Relations faculty in IS who I trained under in methodology and methods, both quantitative and qualitative, for several years, as she also served on my dissertation committee.

# Literature Review

- Four contributing (non-competing) schools of thought inspired by Lantis et al.'s *Active Teaching and Learning: The State of the Literature* (2019):
  - SoT1: descriptive
  - SoT2: process-oriented
  - SoT3: in-classroom
  - SoT4: beyond classroom



# SoT1: Descriptive (What is IS?)

- Descriptive, survey-inspired works that seek to arrive at a comprehensive yet commonly understood definition of international studies (IS) as an undergraduate major.
- The purpose of these works (Brown, Pegg and Shively 2006; Blanton 2009; Blanton and Breuning 2016; Gibbs-Knotts and Schiff 2015) is to distinguish IS from traditional academic disciplines and to recognize its contribution as an interdisciplinary major for undergraduates.
- “The assumption is that any student interested in international studies is not favoring one discipline over another, but instead approaching the major with the cross-disciplinary appeal that it presents to those studying the world” (Zartner et al. 2018, 152).

## SoT2: Process-Oriented, Best T&L Practices in IS

- The purpose of these works (DeMatos-Ala and Hornsby 2015; Maurer and Mawdsley 2014; Lee, Foster and Snaith 2016; Ahmad 2019; Simon 2014) is to raise awareness of the need to move beyond content-based toward a process of student-centered teaching and learning. This process involves recognition of important linkages within the classroom and between the classroom and the real world.
- Zartner et al. (2018) explore ways to help faculty better assist undergraduate students prepare for a career that requires the kind of skill set in demand in today's job market. Such a skill set includes skills in critical thinking, analysis, verbal and written communication in more than one language, adaptability, and cultural competency.

## SoT3: In-classroom engagement

- The purpose of these works (Canhoto and Murphy 2016; Gastinger 2016; Orsini 2018; Hirst 2019) is to describe and explore ways to promote innovation in the classroom.
- As noted by Orsini (2018), “when adequately organized – not too long, with debriefing after the game and during lectures, and with clear rules, short game series can improve attention, understanding, memory, general learning atmosphere, and favour success for all” (in this case in teaching and learning the main competing theoretical perspectives of IR).
- “Instructors face a trade-off between teaching transferable skills and substantive knowledge and should locate their simulations at either end of this continuum” (Gastinger 2016).

# SoT4: Beyond the Classroom

- The purpose of these works (O'Neill 2010; Kukier, Hodson, Omar 2015; Robinson 2013a; Robinson 2013b; Sweitzer and King 2019; Collum 2019) is to highlight the various ways students are able to apply and try out the knowledge and skills they learn on campus and in the classroom to practical real world experiences, through volunteerism, community engagement, and internships.
- Such experience enables IS undergraduates to hone both their hard and soft skills, thereby better preparing them to develop as students, in-demand skills in the career marketplace.
- “Experiential learning is a process of learning requiring active involvement with an experience” (Canhoto and Murphy 2016).

# Twichell's experiences

- Hired f-t in 2016, I had been regularly instructing two courses in the IS undergraduate program: INS202 and INS519.
- In addition, I was hired f-t to lead the [Arts & Sciences Program for Internship-Related Experiences](#) (ASPIRE).
- Through this combination of assignments, in addition to the College of Art and Science's effort to transition IS toward becoming a truly interdisciplinary academic program more closely resembling IS programs at other universities, my teaching and learning outlook has evolved as well.

# Twichell's experiences

- As the number of semesters I instructed INS202 accumulated, my experiences in the classroom left me realizing the need to move away from strictly content-based toward active and student-centered teaching and learning.
- Besides the fact that comments made by students in course evaluations spoke of boredom with the course material and that they felt they could be engaged more effectively, I also wanted the students to see more clearly the long-term benefits of mastering the material, especially in terms of its applicability to internships, graduate school, and to their long-term career.
- I honed the INS202 course into one that includes the methodological debate and more group discussion/ simulation.

# Twichell's experiences

- After I had developed INS202 into the course as outlined above, I took on the role of assisting INS students in finding internships and instructing them in INS519 (the Internship course).
- I soon discovered a pool of internship candidates in a majority of the students in INS202. as the transferrable skills the students were introduced to in INS202, i.e. the logic of inquiry, making and substantiating claims with empirical data, probability and statistics, effective argumentation, debate and writing skills, and application of SPSS, transformed them into in-demand internship candidates in a variety of sectors and industries.
- Five years later, INS519 has become the unofficial capstone course of the INS major in addition to it having become a course often taken by undergraduates from majors University-wide.

# Twichell's experiences

- Following SoT4, in INS519 I instruct upper-level students to reflect upon their practical internship experience either after they have completed it, or throughout the process itself.
- Aligned with the University's mission to “transform lives” there is an important civic engagement component to the course that is influenced by my training in comparative politics and thus promotes examination of the concept of social capital and its influence on democracy and societies in general.
- Student-interns are challenged and encouraged to envision their practical ‘real world’ internship experience as more than work; rather, it is an opportunity to engage civically and socially and to make a difference in the world, no matter how big or small.

# Twichell's experiences

- For their final paper and oral presentations delivered at the conclusion of the course, these INS519 assignments are structured as a simulated job interview in which the student-interns are asked such questions as:
  - “How has your major in INS prepared you for the 21<sup>st</sup> century workforce?”
  - “Draw connections between your summer 2019 internship with FAO and your INS coursework. In ways did your INS coursework prepare you to make contributions and apply skills during your internship?”
  - “On your resume it says you spent last summer interning with the UN. Please tell me how that experience prepared you to work with our firm.”

# Twichell's experiences

- In its latest iteration, INS519 is being offered for Summer 2020 in Rome, Italy with Twitchell as Instructor.
- This Rome Internship program leverages the University's long-term relationship with American University Rome (AUR), and is an effort to establish an internship exchange program for AUR students to spend 4 weeks of the summer in Miami engaged in internship experiences, and for UMiami students to spend 4 weeks of the summer in Rome engaged in internship experiences.
- This exchange initiative is also reflective of the University's goal to increase its offering of international internship opportunities to students, in part to enable them to apply their classroom and on-campus training in cultural competence, to a real-world setting abroad.

# Tentative Assessments



"I remember when you used to look for answers using your astute powers of deduction."

- Must balance the complex relationships between research and teaching innovation as PhDs
- To some, content- versus student-centered T&L represent incompatible positions
- However, others challenge this view, and cite the growing appeal of methods that bridge this perceived divide

# Questions for the conference

- Following Gastinger (2016), must we choose between teaching transferable skills and substantive knowledge and locate our classroom simulations (or other methods) at either end of this continuum?
- What are advantages of in-classroom vs. beyond classroom experiential learning? Is there a trade-off between the two? How can they be combined to complement one another?

