

A Global Survey of the IR Curriculum

Written by Daryl Morini and Christian Romuss

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DARYL MORINI AND CHRISTIAN ROMUSS, OCT 1 2012

A survey of IR students' views of their curriculum is long overdue. It is, in fact, the ultimate test of the discipline's commitment to self-reflexive education. In this vein, today marks the opening of a global survey of the IR curriculum, as seen from the perspective of its main audience – you.

International Relations as we know it is an intellectual state of nature. Life in IR is solitary, (financially) poor, (intellectually) feisty and of the wonkish sort. No school of thought can seek to impose its hegemony on others, lest it face a balancing reaction from a coalition of belligerent schools of thought. This perpetual state of war of all against all is the nature of our discipline. Even IR may be reduced to the restless human ambition for power and social prestige. As Thomas Hobbes noted, “knowledge and honour are but several sorts of power.”

As a research programme, IR is inherently anarchical. And so it should be. But should IR, insofar as it is taught and its knowledge diffused, be responsive to the will and preferences of its principal audience – undergraduate students – residing amongst which are the discipline's heirs?

Should an education in the discipline be delivered on the assumption that every student wishes to become an IR theorist? Or should such an education take stock of the manifold interests of students, which may or may not be inclined toward the purely theoretical?

We think that these are among the most important, ignored questions in IR pedagogy.

There is a long-standing debate in IR on the ideal balance between theory and practice the discipline ought to strike. Today the theory-practice debate continues unabated. A group of policy-oriented scholars – including Stephen Walt, Alexander L. George, Robert Jervis, Joseph Lepgold and Joseph S. Nye – have pushed the agenda of bridging the gap between theorists and practitioners. Lamenting IR's “cult of irrelevance”, Walt rhetorically asked: “should scholars in the Ivory Tower really be *proud* that so few people care about what we have to say?” Another group of IR scholars has started to hit back. “Don't blame theory,” they reply, arguing that a turn to pragmatic problem-solving is not the right path for IR.

The theory-versus-practice debate is arguably one of the discipline's most important. Interestingly, both sides have so far argued primarily from the perspective of IR as a research programme. This is a very academic debate, written by, for, and of academics to convince fellow academics. But very few have conducted the debate from the viewpoint of the discipline's other purpose: education. What better way is there to gauge the balance between theory and practice in IR education than to ask the people on its receiving end, undergraduate students?

For this reason we are calling on all IR students currently studying or having graduated from undergraduate IR into a career or higher academic research to tell us exactly what they think, not only of the theory-practice balance, but of their IR education in general.

In doing so, we must make certain points clear. Some academics and IR departments might not like holding this conversation. Some might see in it the danger of vulgarising academia, inviting student meddling in the academy's sovereign realm, contributing to the commercialisation of education and violating the intellectual integrity and

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traditional purpose of universities as seats of detached, scholarly inquiry. With regards to the discussion that we propose, such fears would be unfounded.

The purpose of involving students and recent graduates in this conversation is not to put IR education at their mercy, but to gain an insight into the discipline's larger social purpose from a non-academic viewpoint. Asking students and graduates to describe their expectations and to reflect on them in the light of experience is a necessary part of that process. Certainly, it might be said that students, being by definition less knowledgeable than their teachers, are ill-placed to have a valid opinion about what they ought to be taught. This would also be a misunderstanding of our purpose, which relates not to this or that particular theory but to the varieties of intellectual experience students ought to have, in respect of which their opinions do count.

Uncle Thomas had some strong views on education. He suggested that the Sovereign of a Commonwealth should be the “judge of what doctrines are fit to be taught [to his subjects].” Such centralisation of IR curricula is not our design, and we trust that it is not that of our teachers either. Instead, we agree with Milton that the reforming of education is “one of the greatest and noblest designs that can be thought on, and for the want whereof this [Discipline] perishes.” Whether modern IR students desire “a compleat and generous Education...to perform justly, skilfully and magnanimously all the offices both private and publick of Peace and War” is an open question. As is the question of whether they agree with Milton's damning verdict of the “Scholastick grossness of barbarous ages” which he saw in the Arts curriculum of his days.

The American satirist Ambrose Bierce defined a lecturer as “[o]ne with his hand in your pocket, his tongue in your ear and his faith in your patience.” The last of these attributes – faith in patience – is accurate, and need not be censorious. It is part of our role as students to accept that the worth of our formal education may not always be immediately apparent to us, and therefore to have patience in what our teachers would have us study. But this patience stems also from a reciprocal faith that what we are formally taught is worth our effort and patience in studying.

On this question, at least, you have an equal say.

We think this is a conversation worth having, in order to keep the discipline relevant, accountable, and representative. We do not call for a revolution; we invite reflection, encourage debate, and seek reform. We cannot undertake to do this solely through the force of our personal experiences. So we turn to you for help.

What are your experiences in, your expectations of, and your hopes for IR?

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Daryl Morini is a PhD candidate in IR at the University of Queensland, specialising in preventive diplomacy. Follow him on Twitter: @DarylMorini

Christian Romuss is studying for a BA/BSc in International Relations, German, and Biochemistry. Contact the co-authors about this project at reformingIR@gmail.com

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