

Fun and Freedom at ECE

Written by Dylan Kissane

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DYLAN KISSANE, SEP 24 2013

As well as my classes here at CEFAM I have, for the last couple of years, taught a short seminar series at another Lyon-based school, the Ecole Commerce Européenne (ECE). Now in its fourth year, this seminar is part of ECE's innovative Atlantis Program whereby students study in three different countries (France, the US and Sweden) and earn simultaneous Master's degree from three universities in just two years. My seminar, 'France, Europe and the Twenty-First Century World', is a four session series wherein I move quickly through some basic IR concepts before turning to major political issues inside France, inside Europe, and at a global level, too.

ECE's Atlantis Program attracts a strong group of switched-on students each year and teaching them is a dream. In previous years I have also had a large swathe of non-Atlantis international students who, sadly, did not always have the grasp of English to take much from the course. This year, though, all of the students are either native English speakers or fluent and this makes for an active, invested and interesting classroom for professor and student alike.

In our first session last Wednesday night I introduced a few basic concepts and laid out how the seminar would run. I asked for participation and, boy, did the students deliver. The small group discussions were animated and the whole-class Q&A was lively and fast-paced. I enjoyed the back and forth of the class and hearing their thoughts on the two big concepts we considered during the seminar.

Delivering this seminar series at ECE is very different to teaching a semester long course at CEFAM. For one thing I have enormous liberty to design the course without any of the topic and thematic constraints that CEFAM's international partners place on the content of the POL 210 course. For another, as I only have the students for a limited period of time, the focus is on exciting them about international politics, pushing them to consider the impact of politics on international commerce, and drawing on their critical thinking skills. Without the requirement to build up over the course three months to a final research paper or exam both the professor and student are liberated to keep their minds in the classroom and devote their time to investigating matters at hand instead of memorising facts and figures or passing hours in the library. The chance to lecture, debate and discuss with students instead of routinely reminding them to apply theory X in their paper or review chapter Y for the exam is one I cherish.

Of course, the trade-off here is that you cannot get through nearly as much material in four seminars as you might in a semester long course. As well, the limited time means that there are also limited opportunities to develop a strong foundation of theory before jumping into political issues. For example, whereas I will spend six hours or less than one-sixth on IR theory in POL 210 in the Spring the same six hours at ECE would equate to almost half the course, leaving only six hours to apply that theory before I am done.

It's a trade-off I am happy to make, however. The freedom to lecture on local, regional and global issues of my choosing, to propose new ways of thinking to a group of bright, engaged students and to really have fun in the classroom outweigh the obvious drawbacks of getting through less material. The chance to leave aside my administrative duties, my research and my service projects for a few hours each week every September and October is one I enjoy and I am most certainly looking forward to being back at ECE this Wednesday evening.

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