

What We Don't Teach Students in IR – But Should

Written by Dylan Kissane

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DYLAN KISSANE, SEP 8 2014

The new semester is under way here at CEFAM and the POL 210 course has returned with, as usual, a slightly revised format. The process of continually renewing a course is one that every professor goes through each year, even each semester, and the process by which a course is renewed is one I have devoted time to before here at *The Ivory Tower*. While the basic structure of the course stays the same, the means, methods, cases and activities I use in-class to present the material changes each semester. This keeps the course fresh, the students engaged, and makes it far more interesting for me. It's not simply re-hashing the basics of realism or liberalism in weeks two and three of each semester, it's thinking about ways to make realism and liberalism interesting and relevant while still communicating those basics to the students.

Yet there are a lot of things that I would like to be able to teach my students that I just can't. It's mainly a time issue – I have 13 weeks with two classes per week to get the entire course across – and giving away six or seven of those 26 sessions to something that I think the students need but that are not directly related to the theory or practice of IR is a step I cannot, in all intellectual honesty, take while still calling the course 'Issues in International Politics'.

What is it that students need to learn but won't in my class? Academic skills.

In recent years I have found that the thing that separates the best students from struggling students is not their commitment to the subject, their interest in international relations, nor their ability to understand the concepts I am laying out before them. Instead, the most marked differences between students emerge when some students have better developed academic skills than others. By this I mean they know how to manage their time effectively, how to read quickly and efficiently, how to formulate questions and critically analyse a text, what the difference between quotation and plagiarism is, how to utilise technology to serve their academic needs, and how to work effectively in groups. These sorts of things are transversal skills and could be applied in any academic setting, in any subject, and, indeed, in any workplace upon graduation. But they make the difference between students who can work through the material I lay out for them each semester with speed, agility, and efficiency, and those students who are faced with a pile of Waltz, Mearsheimer, Keohane, and Wendt and don't even know where to start.

There's no place to work on specifically developing those skills in my POL 210 classroom but this year, and after more than two years of lobbying the administration here at CEFAM, there is now a place for it in the wider program. From this year all freshman students entering the school are obliged to attend an series of seminars where they learn how to prepare for class, how to schedule their week and semester, how to take good notes during lectures, how to avoid plagiarism and maintain academic integrity, how to work effectively in groups, how to use cloud IT to their advantage, and how to revise effectively and efficiently for exams. More than just an extended orientation session, each seminar demands that students complete a task and have it checked over for its utility. For example, they were asked to prepare a weekly study schedule or to take notes from a video and submit both for review; where there were issues, the student got additional feedback and links to resources both internal and external to the school.

The goal of this program of seminars is to ensure that by the time the students arrive in upper-level classes like POL 210 they have the skills required to achieve their best results. As a professor, I want my students to do well and I know the importance of developing strong academic skills in achieving good grades. Every IR students should have these skills but there is likely no IR class that can devote the sorts of teaching hours, follow up, and review that

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developing these skills in students demands. I'm grateful that after years of lobbying we finally have a way to develop these skills formally amongst our CEFAM students, but I am sure that other programs – in IR, in political science, the social sciences generally and even beyond – would also benefit from similar skills seminars. CEFAM is nowhere near the first school to offer such skills development seminars, but I am glad we are finally joining those who are leading the way in academic development.

About the author:

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