Towards a 'Challenge-Driven' International Relations Education?

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In my experience, the best students are always looking for a challenge, preferably a real-world one. The world has seen a crop of “challenge-driven” educational enterprises (see this interesting article by the *Economist*). Some of these institutions are quite old, but newer programs such as Coursera, EdX, and Udacity use the logic of individual learning, web-based delivery, and gaming to provide students with a challenge-based learning experience. In most of these classes, students try to learn the subject matter for themselves, interact with other students in online forums, and then complete projects to demonstrate their knowledge. When interactions do occur with professors, they occur on an *a la carte* basis. These programs often have capstone projects where students work on real problems in the world. For example, in a data analytics course I recently took I had to work with real data from a company to make a five-minute presentation recommending a business process change.

These programs have thrived in subjects that seem to naturally fit project-based learning: computer programming, app design, and data analytics. But, can these models also be applied to International Relations (IR) courses?

In some ways, we can already think of the “challenge-based” IR classroom as upon us. Instructors have already integrated class discussions, short writing assignments, presentations, role playing, and model scenarios into their classrooms. Each of these activities is “real world” in the sense that they are part of many professional jobs in IR and are fungible across a number of non-IR jobs.

Some classrooms may extend the logic of “challenge-based” learning by having students write project proposals to address local challenges with global consequences or by having students do field research. A number of graduate programs are also moving away from the thesis towards a capstone project that is sponsored by an organization outside of the university. These capstone projects are more common in international management and global public policy programs than they are in IR programs, but there is a case to be made for giving IR students the option to do a capstone project instead of a thesis or written exam.

So, what are some pathways towards challenge-driven education? What are some problems to using this approach?

One of the key problems that IR will face in creating a truly challenge-based classroom is that students cannot do IR in the same way that engineers can design and build in university workshops or computer scientists can code on a laptop. A great deal of the important business of IR takes place on a stage far removed from the university. Students can get involved in local activism, school-related campaigns, or participate in model simulations, but a great deal of diplomacy is still done outside of the classroom and outside of the students’ local area (unless they are lucky enough to study close to a nation’s capital).

In the absence of really good ideas, sometimes the best method is to float some bad ideas, even seemingly ridiculous ones, and see if any of them lead to productive conversations.

Here is a list of ideas that might help IR classrooms become more challenge-driven:

The obvious ideas:

- Use the flipped classroom whenever possible. Have students learn key concepts outside of the classroom and use their knowledge and skills inside the classroom in simulations, exercises, and activity-based projects.
- Require students to do research outside of the classroom, whether it be interviews, surveys, field trips, or job experience programs.
- Have students engage a local problem with global dimensions. Some examples could include: city diplomacy activities, programs to help immigrants, volunteer organizations and NGOs with a global impact, or programs to help international students on campus.

Some less obvious ideas:

- Hold off teaching theory until later in the curriculum. This may seem counter-intuitive, but I've always had a feeling that presenting students with too much theory early on inhibits critical thinking skills and the desire to go out and learn things for themselves.
- Encourage students to try to implement a practical project of some kind and to write up the results as part of a paper. This same logic can be applied to the thesis or dissertation requirement for graduate degrees.
- Consider recruiting graduate students with unique skills sets that can be useful for tackling projects in teams. These skills might include language skills, GIS, coding skills, or project management experience.
- Encourage team research at the graduate level. Create a culture of cooperative research and problem-solving.
- Think about creating a norm in the larger IR community that rewards students for doing a graduate degree in a language other than their native one.

About the author:

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