What to Do When You Don’t Like a Topic You Teach?

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GUSTAV MEIBAUER, MAR 12 2019

As I was preparing my classes in a course on foreign policy analysis this week, I was once again reminded that teachers have topics they don’t like to teach (not a super-innovative insight, but hear me out). This dislike can have many reasons: from not understanding the topic to understanding it but feeling it is too complex for a single lecture/class, or disagreeing with how it is conventionally taught, to disagreeing with its value either within a course or even the discipline in general. Disliking topics is not, I think, specific to the seniority of a teacher, or their disciplinary specialization/sub-field (see my very non-representative Twitter survey below). It is also not usually something inherent to a topic. Some teachers dislike very “narrow” things, such as single concepts, specific time periods or empirical cases. Others dislike broad theories, large-scale phenomena, and entire (sub-)disciplines.

Academic/IR twitter: Does everyone have a perfectly fine/established topic, concept or theory that they hate teaching on?

For me, it's "middle powers". I just can't quite figure out what's really interesting about middle-power-ness/what students need to know about it.

— Gustav Meibauer (@meibauIR) March 7, 2019

Aside from why any particular teacher dislikes topics, whether some topics are more easily disliked than others, or whether disliking topics is good or bad, a dislike, once present, poses a practical, pedagogical issue – namely what to do about it in teaching practice. I can think of, broadly, three options available to teachers (I’d be very interested in whether there are additional ones that I didn’t think of, which strikes me as likely given I am not at all the most experienced of teachers).

Option 1 is perhaps the most obvious when you dislike a topic: don’t teach it! There is ample evidence to suggest that teacher enthusiasm for topics translates into higher student motivation and better learning outcomes. If you can’t muster a minimal level of interest and enthusiasm for a topic, should you really be the person to (through gritted teeth) sell your students on it? This can be a call to re-think course design: ask first whether there’s a good reason for your dislike. Is it actually necessary that students know about this topic? Must it be taught as an own topic, or should it be integrated elsewhere?

If it is essential that the topic is covered, is it essential that *you* give the lecture/seminar? Maybe you know a colleague, or a student, or outside expert that could do a better job. I am not suggesting that you just offload your responsibilities to someone else, to be sure. For one, teaching on subjects one is not intricately familiar/comfortable with is part of the job. It also builds relevant expertise, both in terms of teaching as well as content. However, where it would be to everyone’s benefit, including the guest lecturer or outside speaker, the students, as well as yours, mixing up the course in such a way may be good teaching practice. It also usually requires planning effort on your behalf – don’t offload that to already over-worked administrative staff).

Clearly, not every university teacher may have the degree of control over a course that’s necessary to implement such changes or invite guest speakers. How then to get through this one lecture or class next week where you must talk about just war theory, or international organizations, or the democratic peace, because the structure of the

course/curriculum demands it?

Option 2 requires getting your teeth into the topic, and is probably the fall-back option. If you have a vague sense your dislike stems from not knowing enough about the topic, sit down and do the work. You are (hopefully) paid to do this – read up on the topic, figure out the debates, think of questions, etc. What do students need to know about the issue? Why is it interesting? Is there something going on in the world right now that's relevant to the topic (there probably is)? Beyond digging through relevant sources (academic and non-academic) on the topic, you can make use of the scholarly community. Speak to professors, postdocs, students and staff working on the topic at your university or online (Academic Twitter can be an excellent resource). What would they suggest is an interesting question, puzzle or insight that students would profit from? Not only might you learn something about the topic that finally flips the switch, you also learn something from and about the interesting people around you.

Option 3 is what I'd like to think of (tongue in cheek) as a pedagogically informed "cop-out". You've done all the hard work and still dislike the topic. This is when I like to experiment a bit by twisting your methods of instruction – from a place of dislike can flow pedagogical innovation. For example, if you can't muster enthusiasm for a topic, maybe your students can? You could flip the classroom. Let the students teach you, tell you, write to you about what you need to know regarding globalization or the United Nations.

This is pedagogically informed for two reasons. One, it lets students take active ownership of their own learning. It lets them be producers (as well as recipients) of knowledge, if only for the course of one lecture/seminar. Two, it also fosters "soft skills". In their future careers, students might become teachers, or analysts, or consultants, or leaders. It might be desirable to prepare them for these tasks by letting them try their hands at them. How would this work in practice?

Instruct students to prepare a short class themselves for a hypothetical group of other students or pupils. Provide them with a bit of background on lesson planning – a broad framework requiring intended learning outcomes, instruction methods, and ways of evaluating success should be fine. Have them discuss (perhaps in smaller groups) what they would consider important to know on a given topic, and how they would bring it across. Have them present their lesson plans, and evaluate each other's lessons. You can chime in based on your own experience of lesson planning (which hopefully is something you dislike less!).

Let students design a board game or simulation on the topic, be it bureaucratic politics or humanitarian intervention. (Clearly, some topics lend themselves better to gamification than others, but you'd be surprised what students come up with.) There's usually some scepticism when I bring A3/easel pad paper, colour markers, dies, and whatever else my teaching budget allows me to buy to class (there may even be pushback). Explain the rationale behind "gaming" the classroom, or even simulations in serious strategic planning (e.g. wargaming), and let them have at it. Some of the suggestions I have seen so far deserve to be patented. You could even use the designed games on another class – cheeky! (If so, ask for permission, credit the original creators and report back to them.)

Have students brief you on an issue. You're a minister, a dictator, or a higher-up at an NGO. You read something on climate change, non-state actors, human rights law or gender in the news the other day and would like a 5-minute intro by your talented staffers. Let students come up with what they think such a policy task entails: what does their audience need to know? How can they break down the issue, and come up with implications/recommendations? You could also instruct students to write a short memo or a blogpost in class. Conveniently, this familiarizes students, at a very basic level, with different types of writing. All of these methods lend themselves, in principle, to be assessed against intended learning outcomes, in addition to the informal (in-class) or formal feedback you give on them anyways.

Granted, sometimes, none of these options help (here's looking at you, middle power theory). And so the grind continues!

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