Enhancing Creativity and Communication Skills Through IR Signature Pedagogies

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Graduated students in International Relations (IR) have a broad number of jobs at their reach depending on their interests, from working in international organizations, governments, and the international departments of companies to working as analysts and advocators of human rights, gender, or the environment, in think tanks or non-governmental organizations (NGOs) of all sizes. But what skills should a student of IR master? A broad survey of IR programs worldwide shows part of the skills students must have to maximize their opportunities once they have finished their studies. We could all agree that communication and language skills, cross-cultural management skills, the ability to write clearly and concisely, flexibility, teamwork, organizational, analytical, and negotiation abilities, as well as autonomy would be some of the multiple skills we expect from IR graduates and that we can easily promote these through our IR signature pedagogies.

As pointed out by some authors (Delors 1996; Martín del Peso et al. 2013), universities play a fundamental role in generating new knowledge through the development of innovative procedures and in offering specialized training adapted to economic and social needs. Thus, teaching plays a fundamental role in which students are educated for their future professional careers, and it is important that students can create routines and actively engage in their own learning during their years of university studies (Shulman 2005, 52–59). Moreover, over the last years, "universities have increasingly recognized the importance of engaging students in active learning, relating that learning to students' lived experiences, and helping them recognize that they are creators of knowledge rather than mere recipients of learned truths" (Hunter et al. 2008, 42).

The aim of this chapter is to focus on signature pedagogies used by its authors with the goal of enhancing the above skills. Although all of these skills are relevant, an internal analysis undertaken by members of the Department of International Relations at the Complutense University of Madrid highlighted that placements where students have undertaken internships rated our IR students' creativity, written and oral communication skills as good yet not excellent. The chapter seeks therefore to share tools that could help improve creativity, written and oral communication skills, in IR degrees, all of them critical abilities in a challenging global landscape where graduates will have to show their expertise to get a job.

Although authors link creativity to divergent thinking, creativity also requires students to evaluate in creative ways and, above all, a great deal of domain knowledge and skills (Baer and Garrett 2010, 7). The purpose of promoting creativity or communication skills among students can by no means be done at the expense of knowledge transfer; what evidence suggests instead is that content knowledge is essential for improving students' thinking in any given domain (Baer and Garrett 2010, 9). Therefore, the use of policy memos or graphic novels, as it will be shown below, would be considered tools to foster basic knowledge using an alternative pedagogy.

Creativity has been portrayed as a tool that provides us with the ability to adapt and resort to imagination or fiction to

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escape from our immediate environment in a way that can be useful (Runco 2010, 15). Creativity has been also recognized as a skill that often leads to beneficial advances in art and literature, science, medicine, engineering, manufacturing, business, and other areas, and as a way of bringing vitality, meaning, and novelty into our lives (Kaufman and Baer 2004, xiv; Cropley 2010, 1; Lundin 2009, xiii). Moreover, there are authors that find creativity and innovation essential skills for meeting the challenges of the early twenty-first century arising from technological advances, social change, globalization, and competitiveness (Cropley 2010, 3; Florida 2004; Nakano and Wechsler 2018) and therefore an ability that must be cultivated in education (Florida 2004; Buzan 2009, xi; Soriano de Alencar, Fleith and Pereira 2017), especially in IR students who, by the nature of their future jobs, will have to face and solve numerous challenges and complex problems along their careers as future leaders, policy makers, managers of NGO, or analysts in a wide variety of institutions. Despite this recognition, universities may not be providing students with the necessary training to face and deal with these complexities. Indeed, surveys reveal that up to three-quarters of recent graduates, regardless of their discipline of study, were considered by employers as unsuitable for employment due to deficiencies in creativity, problem solving, and critical and independent thinking (Cropley 2014; Soriano de Alencar, Fleith and Pereira 2017, 555).

Any improvement in training university students must be based on the development of their communication skills. In the university environment, there are teachers with extraordinary memory skills and hundreds of publications, but when it comes to their performance during the lessons, they may not receive the best scores. The diagnosis is simple: they do not express or transmit their expertise and knowledge effectively to students. Studies such as Haji's et al. (2012), through a mixed method analysis of nearly a thousand Malaysian university students, demonstrate students' limited capacity to respond to what is transmitted to them verbally. This situation is a direct consequence of adopting signature pedagogies that prioritize master classes, in which students assist as passive agents who do not get involved or engage in dialogue during their learning. This lack of engagement is inevitably translated into the students' oral presentations, who often conceal difficulties by resorting to camouflage via innovative and eye-catching digital presentations while avoiding discussing content with depth and subject relevance. At the opposite pole are forms of written communication, such as essays and research papers, which, due to tradition and frequent use, reaches a higher state of development in most students. Without the interaction between the oral and the written, as Avedaño and Moretti (2007) point out, this communicative process is not carried out adequately. Because of these realities, we claim here that it is essential to give meaning to what is transmitted. In fact, innovative IR signature pedagogies present opportunities for IR lecturers to enhance students' education and training through a focus on meaning-making. As we propose in this chapter, the teacher can innovate IR signature pedagogies by designing strategies for translating ideas they assimilate in IR degrees not only via written and oral communication, but also visually—through graphic novels or the use of posters. This way, students would get additional skills to communicate and analyze international events using more visual approaches.

With this in mind, the chapter examines how the use of policy memos, graphic novels, academic posters, and simulations can be an effective tool to increase the knowledge of different IR subjects (e.g., global environmental challenges, international cooperation and conflict, human rights) while concurrently building creativity and communication skills for IR students in an appealing way (Bustos et al. 2017; Moreno Cantano 2019; Ruiz Campillo 2019; Herman 2012; Fernández de Arriba 2016; Kaplan 2019). All of the above tools would fall into the "student as researchers" approach (Walkington 2015) and are good examples of signature pedagogies that Calder (2006, 1361) describes as "ways of being taught that require them to do, think, and value what practitioners in the field are doing, thinking, and valuing.". All of them, at the same time, are approaches through which students can learn basic content, but most importantly, the ability to understand and practice disciplinary ways of thinking or habits of mind (Chick, Haynie, and Gurung 2009, 2). Following Jackson (2006, 12) and Soriano de Alencar, Fleith, and Pereira (2017), the tools described in this chapter promise to enhance creativity in higher education through offering students situations for learning where there are no right answers; providing activities that are meaningful to them; offering opportunities for collaborative working and discussion; challenging them with real, demanding, and exciting work; diversifying the teaching strategies used in the classroom; affording learning situations that are both fun and challenging; and encouraging students to pursue topics that most interest them.

Graphic Novels: Reading and Visual Learning

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There is a vast literature on the educational powers that the use of graphic novels can bring to students, from secondary to higher education. Studies, among others, by Saitua (2018), in reference to historical themes; by Fernández de Arriba (2016) in relation to IR, by Rocamora-Pérez et al. (2017) in the field of physiotherapy, or by Hecke (2011) in reference to foreign languages, highlight graphic novels' multiple applications. Underlying this line of research are a number of elements that underscore their contribution to communication skills and blended learning (Garrison and Kanuka 2004), such as their permeability to transmit values; their capacity to bring other social and cultural realities closer to the student; their accessibility; the possibilities of promoting cooperative work through multiple readings of the same text; or their motivational format, favored by the interaction between images and text.

In our signature pedagogies, the graphic novel, as detailed by Marie-Crane (2008, 13), allows students to "train" and "develop" their visual culture, giving greater weight to images in the study of IR, and increasing students' emotions and empathy to such international tragedies as humanitarian crises or natural disasters. The use of this format in the university classroom or the creation of their own comics for the study of international issues facilitates, from a critical and constructive point of view, and reaffirms the relationship between the textual and the visual (Mannay 2017, 11).

Throughout several courses, we chose two ways to exploit the use of graphic novels in the university classroom, focusing on building students' creativity, capacity for synthesis, and empathy. Firstly, one of the compulsory practices established in the subject of international cultural relations has been the creation of a digital comic book on an international problem, whether it be a war or a humanitarian crisis. The use of the free online program COMIC LIFE was indicated, since it allows the handling of all kinds of images and elements typical of the visual language of comics in a simple way (e.g., text boxes, snacks, thought clouds). In this activity, students must demonstrate their ability and resources when summarizing a large amount of information and highlighting it in a brief and direct manner in a visual format, combining creativity with rigor. Graded evaluations considered the following as obligatory items: capacity for synthesis and textual summary of the event; visual variety; use of explanatory tables, dialogues, thoughts; and diversity of bibliographical sources and images.

At first, students showed reluctance to undertake an activity that departs from the more standardized and traditional IR practices and were more inclined to read academic texts and analyze written documents. However, while going deeper into it and sharing advice and experiences with each other, the final results were surprising and very positive. For instance, students were impressed by how graphic novels were able to capture a documentation of an event while summarizing its complexities in a few strips, or how they could resort to humor without losing accuracy in the data used.

Secondly, it must be highlighted that this implementation of a workshop on graphic novels related to the subject of international cultural relations and Spanish foreign affairs, with topics as diverse and heterogeneous as the persecution of the Rohingyas in Myanmar, the genocide in Rwanda, the Syrian refugee crisis, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the influence of foreign powers in the Spanish Civil War. The implementation of this exercise requires professors to ensure that students can access learning materials in advance. For that reason, months beforehand, a request was made to the faculty's library to provide them with a complete list of graphic novels. Afterwards, a date was set for students—either individually or in pairs—to carry out their case study readings. After a first iteration to this format, students were asked to cover titles and author, with a brief outline of the format; general subject matter; contextualization; analysis through images of the most relevant elements of the comic's narrative and its relationship with the embodied conflict. It was also designed to learn about the students' own assessment of the methodological potential of this format, namely: is the graphic novel a useful tool for the study of IR? Through this type of engagement and reflection, a number of conclusions were reached: participants in this workshop considered the graphic novel as a valid way to study an international conflict, not only because of the detailed documentation behind them, but also because they appeal to engage students in affective learning and empathy. The use of images generates interest and greater awareness in the reader, thanks to the use of secondary plots (love, loss, incomprehension) in a global narrative framework (wars, peace processes, conflict resolution). In general, workshop participants agreed on the need to use this format, as well as all others that favor enhanced interaction between students and our international reality through *serious games* (Robinson 2015; Hayden, Lee, and Shirkey 2017).

Academic Posters: Learning to Communicate Concisely and Effectively

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Researchers examined how the use of posters can contribute to improvements in students' communication skills (El-Sakran and Prescott 2013; Gobind and Ukpere 2014). Indeed, to communicate effectively is a basic ability that all students should be encouraged to develop during their university education. Another important competency informing communication skills is the ability to locate and critically analyze information. Traditional IR signature pedagogies tend to resort to essay-writing as the main tool to assess whether students acquire certain knowledge (mainly finding and transmitting information). The essay, depending on the professor, has a length that usually goes from a few pages up to twenty and can be a good way for students to learn about a specific topic more deeply. Despite its usefulness, professors tend to give students the same types of assignment, which risks turning essay-writing into a mechanical, dull, and repetitive task for students. Academic posters, on the other hand, demand research and analytical rigor from students while also developing their specific communication styles to conveys ideas clearly and succinctly (Hensley 2013, 121) and introducing a level of creativity ranging from poster layout and its display.

Posters give students the opportunity to focus on countless topics of their interest. For instance, and to name a few, the comparison between IR theories through the analysis of one and the same topic (e.g., the Syrian civil war seen from realist, liberal, or constructivist approaches); the impact of climate change in fast fashion; the role of the United Nations in the empowerment of women; links between capitalism and globalization, European Union crisis management, and conflict prevention tools.

It is advisable that professors give students the freedom to choose their own area of interest and examples of how a poster may look along with basic information and minimum requirements (e.g., the size of the poster, the need to include an introduction, a methodology, discussion of results, and conclusions together with the mandatory use of references, all of them presented in an appealing and attractive way). Typically, students choose their topic, obtain approval from the professor and then engage in research. Ideally, they receive feedback on the first draft of their poster before it is handed in for grading.

Both the freedom of choosing the layout and the specific topic (e.g., the rights of girls in country X) within a global subject area (e.g., human rights) are a way of demanding creativity from students (Jackson 2006, 12; Soriano de Alencar, Fleith and Pereira 2017). In addition, asking them to work in teams opens opportunities to learn from each other; exploring weaknesses and strengths in their arguments, deciding through reaching common ground, negotiating how to handle disagreements on a specific issue; or distributing tasks among team members. Depending on the poster requirements, students use a range of communications skills, such as internet search, sending emails, writing formal letters, meeting with experts and academics, as well as giving PowerPoint (or similar) presentations, oral presentations, and submitting final research reports (El-Sakran and Prescott 2013, 76).

Students will give their most in their poster assignment if they are asked to share their work voluntarily with other students, either by exhibiting posters in the department hallways, classrooms, or in widely accessible spaces, such as libraries. Students communicate when displaying posters and making them available for the wider community. Another source of motivation for students is the prospect of recommending the best posters to be displayed at a conference, which can be an extraordinary opportunity for students to participate in academia and research (Hensley 2013, 120). In all cases, asking them to share their own work shifts the nature of student work from cautionary and reactive to reflective and proactive, apart from gaining additional knowledge on issues, such as open access, author rights, and copyright (Davis-Kahl 2012, 213). Thus, posters are an excellent tool for students to develop a wide variety of abilities they will have at their disposal as future professionals.

Simulations: Practicing for Future Professional Positions

Over the past few years, numerous simulations of the United Nations (UN) General Assembly and Security Council, debates on how to address poverty and inequality or increase the visibility of women around the world have been held in our classrooms and with excellent results (Ruiz 2019). These, as part of our IR signature pedagogies, will serve as a basis for sharing and developing best practices.

Simulations have a long history in political science as a means of achieving higher order educational goals (Boocock and Schild 1968; Dewey 1938; Heitzmann 1974; Walcott 1980). They have proven to be an effective way of putting

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students in the role of a political actor, getting them to consider the actor's objectives and the means by which the objectives can be achieved, as well as the possible movements of others in the situation. Ideally, simulations should enable students to gain a deeper understanding of the complex interests and concerns, the way in which decisions are made, the consequences of those decisions, the basics of persuasion mechanisms, agenda-setting and framing of international negotiations, as well as building affective empathy (Lüdert and Stewart, 2017).

Simulations take a global perspective, allowing students to play the roles of countries in the UN General Assembly, the Security Council, or other international institutions. In these simulations, students navigate divergent objectives of these countries as they attempt to forge a consensus. Through the simulation, students are exposed to the complexities of international cooperation and develop their analytical and argumentation skills, and gain abilities to synthesize and present information by interacting with other actors (Bustos et al. 2017, 5; Bernstein 2012). Materials for simulations that the professor can share with students include case study background content, research materials, and assessments adapted to the international agency in question.[1] These types of materials make easier both for the student to start looking for specific information on their role in the simulation and to familiarize themselves with how real actors behave when convening an international meeting, thus helping students model behaviors that directly translate into their careers.

Depending on the IR subject (human rights, climate change, women, conflicts), simulations can be organized not only around the UN General Assembly or the Security Council, but also other international institutions, such as the European Union, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), or the African Union (AU). In all of them, students can be divided into teams to represent the delegation of states or the institutions they will be role-playing (e.g., secretariat members, chairpersons, the President of the General Assembly). Moreover, simulations can be organized in class, creating a situation where students have to solve an existing or imaginary crisis, and decide how to deploy staff in the field or how distribute funds to alleviate suffering or solve a global problem. In such scenarios, students can be assigned additional roles of international emergency organizations, intergovernmental organizations (civil and military), local and insurgency actors, and others.

Simulations allow IR students to explore existing functions of multilateral negotiations, according to the enabling and constraining legal-political parameters of the respective international organizations. In the face of conflicting interests with no possible agreement, simulations highlight the importance of negotiation as options for cooperation and that are beneficial for the majority of actors. Moreover, studies show how mediation must be performed not only between national partners, but also between state interests, which will require a renewed understanding of what diplomacy can do (Stanzel 2018). The fact that the students must logically order their arguments and expose them with determination, allows them to see the reactions of their opponents and force them to adapt their messages to the circumstances.

Understanding a conflict from the need to reach an agreement helps students contemplate other perspectives in their analysis and offer opportunities to cooperate, which will be of value in their future careers. These abilities and skills are essential for work in multilateral organizations, transnational companies, development agencies, and private sector organizations, clear objectives for the future work of International Relations students. As Bernstein (2012, 87–88) remarks, this type of pedagogy allows students to be more engaged in the subject matter, increase their understanding of the course material, and get a stronger sense of their ability to understand the discipline and participate in politics when they are motivated to do so.

Policy Memos: Facilitating Essential Information to Decision-Makers

While something should not be defined for what it is not, allow an exception to be made in this case. A policy memo is not an academic work. However, IR students are trained to produce quality academic works that follow a specific format and a specific structure. That is why it is useful to define a policy memo starting from what it is not: it is not a piece of standard academic work. A policy memo is substantially different from the assignments students typically produce. However, it is one of the most in-demand pieces of writing for politicians, lobbyists, NGOs, community leaders, and public initiatives. At its most fundamental level, a policy memo "aims to communicate essential

information to decision-makers quickly and clearly" (Herman 2012, 2).

We claim that drafting policy memos challenges students' creativity in at least three ways. The first is to provoke a change in the student's approach to a topic. Developing a policy memo requires students to change the direction of the information being transmitted towards decision-makers, not to academic colleagues. This means that only the most relevant information has to be presented in the first paragraph of the memo, using the remainder of the document to justify the initial statements made in the first paragraph. Also, the closing part, where political recommendations are typically presented link back to that first paragraph. For the student, this means a radical change in how they are asked to structure writing content, succinctly presenting information of interest in a quick and almost intuitive manner.

The second challenge concerns the type of language and the extensions of the text. Writing policy memos is most successful the more specific and concise its content is. This often means to craft writing that is simple, direct, and free of adjectives. If the author of a policy memo aims to help a busy politician make a decision based on the information it contains, it should not exceed three pages. To be effective, the concepts and references used in a policy memo should match the political and technical jargon usually employed in the sector addressed.

The third challenge has to do with the purpose of the policy memo. A good policy memo may contain valuable unpublished and primary information, which can be overlooked if it fails to reach the person responsible for making decisions. The goals of a policy memo make it imperative to associate it from minute one to a communications strategy that allows its effective dissemination and overall impact. While standard communication channels in academic work are specialized journals and academic conferences, a policy memo differs and employs a wide range of strategies to reach decision makers; these range from organizing roundtables that integrate all types of actors relevant to the issue, to the creation of databases listing the most relevant actors to be invited to public events where information will be shared and subsequently turned into a policy memo. Without a doubt, this implies having corresponding communication skills and knowledge on using effective media and dissemination channels.

We argue that these three challenges allow for the development of other important capacities, mainly the ability to relate to all stakeholders without excluding ideas, people, or alternative policy preferences. Also, the capacity to have access to the communities where real policies are made helps validate acquired knowledge as useful and applied. It is also an opportunity to actively participate in decisions that allow for the design and implementation of more equitable and less ideological public policies. In fact, higher education institutions like Harvard University's Kennedy School (2020) draw on precise guides of how to write a policy memo. Following a simple, three-step process: think, write and format, and revise, IR students will be able to craft policy memos on a wide variety of topics (e.g., the 2030 Agenda, international crisis, pandemics, election integrity, human rights in a specific country or context) and put themselves in the shoes of multiple actors (e.g., analysts at think tanks, NGOs, military and political advisors, public officers, private companies, etc.). Among others, written communication at the higher education level in particular should, in our view, involve critical and reflective engagement with other's ideas, development and support of one's own thinking, and skills in producing compelling arguments directed to an audience (Sparks, Song, Brantley and Liu 2014, 45). Thanks to the use of policy memos as teaching and learning vehicles in the IR, students can develop essential abilities, which are in-demand in professional settings, as are the ability to define and identify a problem, design policy solutions, and justify these through elaboration and recommendations.

Conclusions

The authors of this chapter contribute to the emergence of new IR signature pedagogies by sketching how graphic novels, simulations, posters, and policy memos support twenty-first century IR teaching. This century, perhaps more than ever, increases the complexities of events and requires IR students to be trained to face problems through creativity, good communication and cross-cultural skills, and the ability to negotiate effectively. The first two decades of the century indeed have included global events, such as the 9/11 attacks and the subsequent global war on terror, conflicts in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Yemen, and, most recently, global pandemics. All these events give us an awesome responsibility as trainers and educators of future decision-makers. More important than ever, this means that IR academics need to adapt and adopt signature pedagogies that can help spark the interest of our students in

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the study of IR. Undoubtedly, uncertainty will be part of this type of teaching, transforming the classroom into a space that may become unpredictable and surprising (Lüdert 2016, 1) both for students and professors, as certainly are the times we live in. But providing students with greater space for practicing creativity also gives them the opportunity to strengthen their leadership capacities and develop creative problem-solving skills with novelty, uniqueness, and unusualness to approach reality (Mumford 2004, 218; Runco, 2010, 17). Giving students a chance to develop their analytical and oral skills in an environment that engages and put students in the shoes of policy makers and IR practitioners ought to be a mandatory requirement in every university in this century.

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[1] Some cases of model diplomacy and case studies can be found on sites such as that of the European Council on Foreign Relations, which offers hypothetical cases in different parts of the world with the aim of increasing students' knowledge and skills, and broadening their perspectives. See European Council on Foreign Relations, Model Diplomacy at https://modeldiplomacy.cfr.org/

Enhancing Creativity and Communication Skills Through IR Signature Pedagogies

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