Marks That Matter: Slow Letters to Authors and Selves

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ERZSéBET STRAUSZ, APR 29 2021

This is a excerpt from *Signature Pedagogies in International Relations*. Get your free download of the book from E-International Relations.

Whenever I ask students at both Bachelor of Arts (BA) and Master of Arts (MA) levels what brings them to the study of world politics, most of the time there is some indication, even if hesitant, of wanting to make a difference to the world studied. While BA students, especially at the very beginning of their studies, may be quick to picture themselves as future UN diplomats or international lawyers, it all becomes more ambiguous and ambivalent at the MA level. "What is the purest intention, the strongest motivation that drove you here?" I start off the first seminars every year with this question. As I listen to the diversity of responses, I tend to hear the desire of wanting something "other" or "more" in an affirmative sense: more knowledge, more expertise, better job prospects, alternative opportunities to do something, searching for ways and means to be recognized, seen, heard and, as such, to be able to speak, act, and make a difference of some kind. I translate these responses for myself as an educator and my constantly evolving pedagogical philosophy as aiming for more agency, more *power* to do something and awider horizon of sociological imagination to facilitate change at some level—be that personal, collective, local, global, or whatever form "change" may take beyond established categories of recognizability. When I ask my students, however, where they saw their place in International Relations (IR) as an academic discipline, if they felt that IR theory spoke to their lived experiences in any direct or meaningful way, most of them choose to remain silent. As the number of years of IR socialization increases, the silence, more often than not, deepens. Maybe, at first, the question doesn't even make sense to some – after all, getting to know the "discipline of the discipline" takes some time (Doty 2004, 380), but what may be the reasons for the disconnect to grow, rather than lessen as their knowledge base expands? Where and how have dreams, curiosity, ambition, passion, forward-lookingness slipped away, disappearing out of sight and thinking processes?

The affective and cognitive states of journeying in and through the discipline not only shape the kind of "knowing subject" that emerges after several years of active learning and socialization but also the future professional who—knowingly or unknowingly—will contribute to the making of the "world" in an even more intimate fashion through the intellectual, social, and ethical capital acquired. I engage Lee S. Shulman's notion of "signature pedagogy" for re-thinking pedagogical practice in IR primarily through one of the key questions asked by this volume: "What values and beliefs about professional attitudes and dispositions do we foster and in preparing students for a wide range of possible careers?"

Shulman describes "signature pedagogy" in terms of those formational practices through which "future practitioners are educated for their new professions" (2005, 52). My point of departure lies with the distance between "knowledge" and "life" that can be established, named, and felt early on in the journey and the corresponding "subjectivity" —a professional subjectivity in the making—that continues to carry this disconnect as an imprint within itself. The cultivation of "habits of mind," those internalized, routine-like modes of acting and behaving that we no longer think about since we learn to think with and also *through* them, takes place in teaching practice that imparts a sense of how "to think, to perform, and to act with integrity" in a given field, albeit with unequal emphasis on these three distinct elements (Shulman 2005, 52). Beyond the operational acts that are instrumental in delivering the subject matter ("surface structure"), there is also a pedagogical know-how ("deep structure") and a moral dimension ("implicit structure") that transmits "a set of beliefs about professional attitudes, values, and dispositions" (Shulman

2005, 54–55) about the epistemic community of scholars and the possible "worlds" that may emerge through an "IR" lens.

The relationship to the discipline and the world that is simultaneously studied and inhabited by its students, teachers, and practitioners is crafted particularly through the latter two aspects. That is, to paraphrase Robert Cox's (1981, 129) original statement, who may IR (theory) be for and what can be done with this knowledge? It is through the below-the-surface planes of the architecture of classes, course design, the economy of small tasks and gestures, the often invisible staging of readings, debates and bodies of literature—who, what, and how is made visible, accessible, and rendered as legitimate sources of knowledge—that students (and teachers) make sense of both "the profession" and themselves as possible actors, stakeholders, participants, or passive recipients, objects, bystanders in it. Despite their strong discursive and communicative features, signature pedagogies "prefigure the cultures of professional work" (Shulman 2005, 59) in a fundamentally material, hands-on manner. "The way we teach" what we teach has a direct impact on what will be affirmed, validated, perpetuated as professional ethos and expertise for everyone involved.

While there may not be a single distinctive "signature pedagogy" in IR, the lived experiences of "early socialization" and exposure to particular texts, as well as ways of speaking, thinking, and writing uncover a cultivated sense of separation and disconnection where knowledge offered via disciplinary practice may not be immediately accessible, relatable, or translatable, let alone empowering. Shulman (2005) notes that already existing routines of imparting and receiving knowledge may be hard but not impossible to change, especially when external circumstances prompt a shift in the organization of professional life. The move to online teaching may act as such a trigger, making us reflect more, for instance, on knowledge, authority, learning, and responsibility in the virtual classroom and beyond. However, by directly engaging the "implicit structure" of IR pedagogy—for instance, by asking holistic questions about what kind of "mark' is made on future professionals as both knowing subjects and ethical beings—options become available from within. Turning these considerations into actual teaching practice may facilitate transformation from within the structures and habits of academic socialization as well as initiate a continuing mechanism of reflection that can guard against the shortcomings of a "compromised pedagogy," where the balance between "the intellectual, the technical, and the moral" legs of teaching is hierarchically distorted (Shulman 2005, 58). As Shulman (2005) stresses, signature pedagogies are important not least because contemporary societies' reliance on experts, the quality of their knowledge, and behavior is unlikely to lessen. What might the hologram, the blueprint of the future IR professional look like, who is able to hold on to their ambition to make a difference, is equipped with the appropriate thinking tools and ethical resources, and feels connected and empowered enough to act?

Writing, Telling, Slowing Down

I prefer to keep this question permanently open as a guiding principle that guards against closure in both what I could do as a teacher and how students may inhabit the frames and spaces of instruction. To facilitate a diversity of professional futures that are critically and ethically engaged, aware, and resourceful, I actively work with the affective landscapes of disconnection and alienation in learning experiences and academic study more broadly.

The literature on IR pedagogy documents two main sources of classroom failure. First, there is a lack of personal connection to the subject matter where a range of abstract concepts, data points, and distant considerations mark out the proper place of "International Relations" within the realm of "high politics." IR taught and represented as the terrain of rational statesmen, soldiers, and diplomats (Drainville 2003) seems far from the contingencies of everyday life and the actual circumstances of students who, despite what their training might suggest, experience, embody, and enact International Relations from one moment to the next. Second, the lack of alternatives in facilitating social change leaves students feel disempowered: while critical analysis throws light on what may be wrong with social and political structures, it often stops at projecting an even worse scenario without any indication of where more promising horizons and vistas of action may be found (Inayatullah 2013, 150–1).

I seek to transform such experiences by locating IR as already part of everyday life—showing how knowledge about International Relations and International Relations as lived experience are unfolding right in front of us—and affirming

the possibility of other ways of sensing and sense-making, which may move us and our thinking forward, beyond the proverbial "boxes" of both the discipline and social structures. I design simple, accessible exercises emerging from everyday routine, which have the potential to open up and reveal surprising connections and new planes of solidarity across cultural, textual, and epistemic divisions. Taking inspiration from a growing interdisciplinary literature on slow scholarship (Mountz et al. 2015; Berg and Seeber 2016) as an alternative "signature pedagogy," I curate learning journeys where a range of encounters enabling ethical reflection on selfhood, Otherness, and lived experience are staged throughout the curriculum. While slow movements primarily aim to subvert the consumerism and labor politics of late-capitalist production, an important aspect of slow philosophy is to find ways of becoming present to ourselves and our circumstances. Cultivating such awareness makes possible more accommodating, more caring, embodied modes of being and being-together, and the recognition and appreciation of value, which may otherwise not be readily perceptible and recognizable. Slowing down is not only about "finding a slower way of doing scholarship," but rather, as Jasmine B. Ulmer writes, dwells in the open-ended question and quest for "how we can find a slower way of scholarly being" (Ulmer 2017, 202).

In my pedagogical practice, I draw on the transformational potential of narrative writing and the everyday politics of storytelling as sites of intervention. Slow scholarship inspired practices that refocus on the small, mundane aspects of "habit" and open them up for introspection, connection, and co-creation. Slowing down taught me to look for sources of inspiration and provocation in what is already here, turning the familiar into a site of surprise and learning by changing my relationship to it. I use the intellectual resources of IR's "narrative turn" both as texts that I systematically integrate into my syllabi in order to make visible the personal, political, lived, and living nature of knowledge production and as examples of non-mainstream, creative scholarly practice in the discipline. Stories, anecdotes, fragments, accounts of cultural encounters—of how people experienced and made sense of events, circumstances, that is, the everyday fabric of International Relations—invite closeness, intimacy, and emotional learning. They bring complexity to stripped-down notions of statehood, power, and the political, foregrounding the "how" of "know-how," which simultaneously emerges as IR knowledge and personal, perhaps accidental wisdom of how to live or, at least, strive towards a reflected, rounded life.

In the process of telling, seemingly disparate worlds meet, dualities collapse, the usual divisions and distinctions—such as here and elsewhere, then and now, researcher and researched, student and teacher, us and them—no longer hold (Edkins 2013, 292). As we re-enter the discipline as vulnerable living beings who are already experts in their own lives and embrace the "other" in their same capacity (Nagar 2019, 31–33) world, self, and community lose their abstract qualities and take on a living, felt, hands-on dimension. When concepts are opened up to multi-dimensional engagement—intellectual, sensory, affective—new possibilities arise for both creativity and problem-based thinking and ethics. Learning how to engage with the "context" of what is habitually presented as "content" and its politics—that is, where representations, concepts, thoughts, images, ideas, practices may come from and with what significance—has the potential to fundamentally rewire sense perception and meaning-making. Equally, how to take the courage to think, feel, and explore beyond them are important transferable skills that nurture resourcefulness, sensitivity, and a reflexive self-presence when it comes to cultivating professional attitudes in and beyond academia.

"Letters to the Author"

In turning the habitual practices of reading and writing into a form of narrative exploration, I have developed a series of writing exercises within a Teaching and Learning Development Grant at Central European University titled,*Mindful Writing* and subsequently applied them in two MA-level IR theory courses, *Knowing, Narrating, (re)Writing International Relations* and *(Mis)Performing World Politics.* These exercises—developed in line with some of the philosophical underpinnings of slow scholarship—aim to craft alternative relationships to text, self, and the "lives of others" about which IR scholarship often writes uncritically.

One creative writing practice that I would like to share is an iterated, interactive, and adaptable exercise called "letters to the author," where students are asked to write letters to the authors of the assigned texts. I have used this practice with some surprising and mostly heart-warming results for teaching non-mainstream IR theory, which included in-class and asynchronous letter writing exercises, as well as responses in the form of video messages,

emails, and Skype-ins by academics, artists, and professionals as "authors" whose work we have read. Expanding the range of interactions in this way not only brought "theory" to life in a democratic fashion where students' reflections drove the conversations but also enabled a more collaborative academic and professional spirit among students, teaching faculty, and guests when the context, ambitions, motivations, ethics, and politics of their own writing were shared.

Letters Unsent

"Letters to the author" unfolded as an exercise that now has two iterations: letters unsent and letters sent. In its most basic format, letters remain unsent and their primary aim is to encourage a different kind of relationship to texts and knowledge by subverting the passivity of reading and re-staging it as part of an exchange or imaginary dialogue with another human being. The prompt is simple: "start with an address, as 'Dear…' and sign off by writing your name." In-between the frames of the letter form, the relationship can be established and molded in any way, with, of course, respect and appreciation. "You can ask questions, share your reading experience, you can tell the author anything that may come to you. Before you finish, please don't forget to thank them though—your reflections and whatever you may find out in the process were inspired by their efforts, research, and writing." The letters, written offline or on-site, are not shared in class, unless someone volunteers. Students discuss their experiences with each other and I only inquire about what it was like to write a letter to the author, maybe for the first time.

Letter writing is particularly fitting for the first three weeks of the course*Knowing, Narrating, (re)Writing International Relations,* titled "Situatedness: Where Are We, Who Are We in International Relations?" This section problematizes subject positions and what it may mean to "know" in and through the discipline, specifically engaging "the making of the knowing subject" and showcasing a range of intellectual resources for thinking about the lived experiences of research, teaching, and thinking. Through the personal accounts of established and junior scholars presented as autoethnography, autobiography, or in any other narrative or creative form, we discuss what may prompt curiosity, what life events and negotiations inform the production of "knowledge," when and how learning and discovery may take place, and what we bring with ourselves to these conversations as experience, wisdom, or "raw material" for intellectual, emotional, and creative processing.

I stage these encounters at the intersections of the "personal" and "the academic." We read, for instance, Carol Cohn's "Sex and Death," Roxanne Lynn Doty's "Maladies of our Souls," Ken Booth's "Reflections of a Fallen Realist," Richa Nagar's *Hungry Translations*, Jenny Edkins's "Object among Objects," Oded Löwenheim's "The 'I' in IR," and Himadeep Muppidi's book chapter "Shame and Rage."'. I frame the invitation to write a letter to the author with the aid of a quote by bell hooks. In *Teaching to Transgress*, she writes that "theory is not inherently healing, liberatory, or revolutionary. It fulfills this function *only when we ask that it do so* and direct our theorizing towards this end" (hooks 1994, 61, my emphasis). In writing a letter to the author, the theorist, the scholar, the living being, we may experience a way of asking "theory" to do these for us.

Modes of Address

"So how did you address the professor that you wrote a letter to? What followed after 'Dear?'" My first question already brings some interesting responses:

dear bell (I stylized in all low caps like she does)

Dear Professor Muppidi

Dear Professor

Dear Carol

Dear scholar Edkins

I started with "dear Oded," but switched to more formal "dear prof"

About half of the letters started formally. For one student, it was impossible even to think of addressing anyone, especially a professor by a first name, as culturally it was not permitted. Others, who chose to address the author by their first name, mentioned that they did so because they were talking to an author, *not* the professor. "Somehow I felt my letter was emotional, so there was no need to address them as 'dear professor' as I was not critical of their work, I was not suggesting different theories or nothing super professional, it was more like my personal feeling, how I felt reading her text." Someone else added, "I didn't even reflect much when I addressed the professor as dear Professor Muppidi. But then, when I looked at my letter and realized that it was extremely emotional, I could see that there was a disconnect maybe in some way of the address and the content of the letter." Going deeper into the process of writing and how students navigated the intersecting terrains of personal experience and academic reflection, I could see smiles on the screen, even if not everybody chose to speak. To engage in an unscripted manner brought a palpable sense of freedom. "In my previous university, I was encouraged to express my opinion but even if I liked the professor, I would refrain from expressing my reflection," recounts someone else, and "this letter encouraged me to give feedback more, of what we do, how it affects me," to share and show appreciation. This exercise helped to break through institutionally conditioned passivity and humanize relationships in other ways, too. "We should send more letters!"—someone interjects passionately. "We have been getting these very long letters from professors. You sent us a 15-paragraph email at the beginning of the course—you put a lot of thought into that. And then I don't respond. I feel bad! Maybe this is a sign that I should respond more."

The letter writing exercise will return later in the course. These responses made me appreciate and nourish even more the courage to express without judgement, the ability to put into words how something may *feel* in the first place, before intellectual processing and disciplinary ordering kicks in. In thinking about what it offered to students who had already done it multiple times, I asked Olga and Vladimir[1], who took the course last year and the year before, to look back on their experience. They recorded the following conversation:

OLGA: This was the first exercise of this kind that I have ever done in my life. The biggest impact it had on me was the realization that I actually have something to say, even though I am an MA student with no publications, no work experience. Our education is built in such a manner that there is always some kind of hierarchical relationship. Of course, I always feel the distance between me and the author. Whenever a professor assigns an article, even if I don't know anything about the author, I always approach it with respect and admiration. "Oh my God, I'm just a student, I haven't published anything, while this person has already written so many articles!" So my first feeling was not… aversion, but pure surprise. In the beginning I thought: "Does this person really want to hear my voice?" But then, after the professor's affirmations, "yes, you write for yourself, write no matter what," it was easier to begin. Suddenly, I realized that I had something to say. It is comfortable that no one is going to read it but even if someone does, it is not a big deal. You realize there are some things that you think about differently. This was really valuable for me.

VLADIMIR: Imagining a person behind the text, a "*you*" standing in front of my simplified writing. You do not have to know much about the author during reading/writing; the point is to understand that there is a living being behind the words which may seem like plain, academic prose. Understand, apprehend, and appreciate that person and their efforts. The exercise made me reflect on myself, the way I learn. When I was doing it, I paused to think: "What is actually happening here? Who, what am I in that situation?" And then: "How *can* I write, what *can* I say in relation to another human being?" When you reflect on what you are actually doing here, right now, on the space, process, people, and objects involved, there is more room for ethical engagement with the text, for probing your own ethical approach towards theory, towards the case—in writing. There has been a lot of talk about intersubjectivity in IR but intersubjectivity never happens when you write *about* it (intersubjectivity objectified)—it takes place when you write *to* somebody. This exercise has never been purely subjective for me. It has been an opportunity for proper reflection about the "relations"—that part often forgotten in IR—interpersonal, intercultural, interdisciplinary—whatever.

OLGA: I agree, it is important to notice these things—intersubjective conversations between seemingly different levels in IR academia. What I realized is that, unfortunately, one read is not enough to comprehend the text. Whenever I re-read the text for the second time, it was always a revelation for me. And it is crucial that you not only

understand that there is someone behind it but you put both yourself and that other person on the same level. You can address this person equally.And it is important to keep this thought with you along your studies and along your life. Only recently did I realize the importance of writing. I write to the professor because I have a deadline, I write to a bureaucratic institution because I need to get some papers. I always write for something, to someone. But this exercise is about writing for yourself. So, it is important to keep returning to that practice, that experience of writing to an author, or even writing to yourself. Even when you write a letter to an author you still write to yourself, and for yourself.

VLADIMIR: Yes.I used that exercise later on to begin writing whenever I experienced a "writing block." Writing in a dialogical form simplified even the most complex conceptual reflection, so crucial for my current PhD work. I find my "voice" through it.

Letters Sent

Letters written to the author got actually sent to the addressee in the course *(Mis)Performing World Politics,* an experimental course that explicitly works with the scripts, dramaturgy, and performativity of knowledge practices, including pedagogical relationships and the design of class interactions as they unfold in real time.For a week on creative practice and performativity in IR, we watched two performance pieces by Catherine Chiniara Charrett: "Politics in Drag: Sipping Toffee with Hamas in Brussels" (2014) and her latest one, "The Vein, the Fingerprint Machine, and the Automatic Speed Detector" (2019). Catherine is a dear friend and co-traveler in the creative re-thinking, subverting, and re-invigorating of disciplinary practice and its politics. I asked Catherine if she was willing to read letters from my students about her performances. She enthusiastically agreed and, upon the receipt of fifteen letters, sent us two video responses, addressing each letter writer and their questions. The power of the exercise was manifest when the author, the artist, the person writing and creating came alive, generously offering even more insight, more food for thought. The exercise, however, worked on multiple planes. As teaching faculty, I felt both liberated from the weight of "authority" of classroom design and fulfilled as a curator of learning journeys when viewers and artist entered a conversation on their own terms. I asked Catherine what it was like for her to receive "student letters" that directly engage her work, inviting her for an equal exchange. Taking forward the energy, the spirit of these serendipitous connections Catherine took genre-bending to the next level. This time she responded with a piece where "letters to the author" are further animated as objects, media, and vehicles of dialogue, extending beyond the question-response format and the initial queries of actual participants. The original written collage composed by Catherine for the purposes of this book chapter explores and reimagines what a "letter" may do for our practices of sense-making when we embrace the profoundly relational quality of what it might mean to be human. In the space where habitual academic scripts no longer hold, ultimately, we arrive at the dimension of being and being-together:

"Receiving a letter.

Thank you for being you. The circulation of an object that allows me to show you me. And you saw; and you thanked me for it.

'I would like to express my gratitude to you for your impressing activities to support Palestinian people and to condemn aggressive Zionism.'

'Thank you for changing the safety of the writing desk for the exposition of the stage.'

'Thank you for the love, for the rupture.'

'Your research on Hamas and the EU is a result of your intense work, but it is a presentation.'

'Throughout the performance, I could not stop thinking about the type of person you are.'

'Through the openness of your performance to let the viewer make its own thoughts.'

We are always creating things. Writing things. Editing things. Sharing things. But what are those things that we share. And what do they do to us. What have they done to us?

Sara Ahmed (2006, 2-5) describes how bodies circulate around and through different objects. Bodies sit at desks. Bodies reach out to pens. And through this reaching out different objects are already in place. We are imprinted by the objects. As we use these objects in turn shape us.

I sit at the desk. I type. I worry. I read. I type. I try to cover my voice. I try to give you want I think you want from me. I seep out the edges. I fall out of the margins. You receive a completed blank sheet.

Our bodies circulate around and through these objects.

What if we didn't write? What if wrote differently? What if we inhabited objects differently? What if we inhabited different objects? What are the objects? And do they allow me to show you me?

I think about intention. What object turns me into a resource, and how does using a different object allow me to flourish?

I wanted you to see me. I wanted you to know what I felt about Palestine. I wanted you to know what I saw in Palestine. I wanted to account of the horror.

I made something that was a reflection of me and what I saw and felt.

You asked them to write me a letter. A letter circulates. It moves. It expresses. It carries. In the letter they put their thoughts. They put their gratitude. In the letter you asked them to say what they wanted to say.

Thanks.

Making objects. Always making objects. And, in those objects, we are lost and we are found. In those objects, we find and lose others. In these objects, we lose and find ourselves.

I receive a letter. I receive an expression of gratitude.

'I would like to thank you. For your courage, creativity, enthusiasm, and unhinged sarcasm.'

Thank you for being human and showing us what kind of human that is."

Making Marks Matter

"Letters to the author" as one particular feature of an alternative "signature pedagogy" transforms student experiences of disconnection into dialogue and (self-)discovery, facilitating embodied modes of learning that find value and creative opportunity in the already familiar. Slowing down, re-directing attention to the here and now, expanding our awareness of academic habit, and staging new relationships with how we read, write, or express reveal that neither IR, nor new social imaginations or windows for change may be that remote.

Through writing letters to the author, the scripts and subject positions of "student" and "teacher," novice and expert open up, enabling students to realize a form of agency that may not have been noticeable or accessible before—although it has been there all along. They turn from passive recipient of both "knowledge" and institutional support into active participants who may come to experience that communication, and with that, connection is already present. All of a sudden, it may be revealed to them that they already have something to say and have the power, the talent, the resources to express what they may carry in themselves. There may be room for dialogue in unexpected places. Beyond the default mode of disembodied critique, writing to the author and simultaneously, writing for oneself anchors the writer in their body, their own process of reflection. In this way, concepts lose their

abstraction, exposing that disconnection is only one possible experience that has conventionally turned into a "habit of mind" and that it can be turned around by the creative labor of making, assuming connection, by acknowledging the text as "living."

Actual responses from the author reinforced this message about communication and connectedness even more firmly. Catherine's collage shows how texts, letters, and video messages are "objects" only: objects of knowledge that we engage and produce, which also constantly point towards and circle back to life that provides context for anything that may appear as "content." There is always a bigger picture with more complexity, yet also resources for thinking, writing, and knowing otherwise. For me, a "signature pedagogy" for IR serves as a vehicle, a gateway for dwelling deeper into experiences and questions of living, being, becoming, and being-together. Our sensing, feeling, affective bodies and the practices that can activate emotional learning are the bridge—and the crux of pedagogical know-how as "deep structure." Whatever may be taught as the subject matter ("surface structure"), it can be made relatable, actual, or urgent, while always fluid and emergent, subject to negotiation in limitless ways. Students can be invited to probe into their call, what brought them to the study of IR and develop ownership over their formation as "knowing subjects" in a meaningful way for their purposes via small, everyday gestures. At its core, and as its "implicit structure," the teaching of IR (theory) should be life-affirming for everyone involved, where the hologram, the blueprint of the future IR professional would be designed, crafted in a fashion that its silhouettes merge with the singularity of other living beings, eluding narrative or disciplinary closure.

I thank Catherine, Olga, Vladimir, and all letter writers and receivers for their courage and ingenuity. Let us make marks matter—the ones that have been left on us via encounters with the social, the disciplinary, the human, and the ones that we choose to make from here.

Notes

[1] Students have given explicit written consent for their answers and names to be used in this chapter.

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