

Report for Summer 2014 Innovation in Teaching and Learning Grant

Shampa Biswas and Bruce Magnusson
Department of Politics

Our primary goal with this ITL grant was to undertake a substantial overhaul of our current International Politics course (Pol 147) in a manner that would make it non-Eurocentric. We had tinkered with our existing syllabus for years but had grown increasingly dissatisfied with the kinds of incremental changes we had made that had, despite our best efforts, left the structure of the course largely Eurocentric in its design. We realized that part of this had to do with the larger sub-discipline of International Relations from which we drew much of our material and conceptualizations of the course, but we were also interested in seeing how a new generation of professors might be teaching the course differently from the way we had been trained in graduate school. With this in mind, and with the help of a student assistant, we compiled a massive archive of International Relations syllabi from a variety of different kinds of institutions, comprising of both private liberal arts colleges and research universities. We examined both introductory courses as well as some topical International Relations courses, and while our focus was largely undergraduate syllabi, we also looked at several graduate level syllabi. What we found was actually somewhat surprising and quite distressing, although it did confirm for us the significance of the task we had undertaken. The majority of syllabi being used are still quite conventional and profoundly Eurocentric – both in the materials they cover as well as their design – and this is true even for courses taught by freshly-graduated assistant professors from some of the top schools in the country. Although some professors now feel obliged to add a section, often quite minimal, that covers a wide category of what we might call “alternative approaches” (Marxist, feminist, postmodern, postcolonial), this is done in a rather peremptory and additive manner, thus reproducing a Eurocentric narrative in which the (white, rich, masculinist) Western world dominates and to which “others” respond. We did find a small handful of syllabi – although they required some creative digging - that were attempting to do something similar to our plan and we learned from the approaches used in them. Given the paucity of this kind of curriculum in the field and the work we did over the summer to develop an innovative syllabus, Shampa Biswas organized a pedagogy roundtable that she is chairing and at which we are both presenting our findings and efforts in conversation with colleagues who are interested in doing the same at a conference of the Global South Caucus of the International Studies Association (whose theme this year is “Voices from Outside: Re-shaping International Relations Theory and Practice in an Era of Global Transformation”) in Singapore during January, 2015. Our panel is titled “Decolonizing the Teaching of International Relations.”

In addition to the syllabi, we also had our student assistant find two other kinds of resources we were interested in incorporating into our teaching of International Politics. First, we were aware of how much “blogs” on various topics related to International Politics had become an aspect of commentary in the field, and we wanted to incorporate some of the more thoughtful, well-reasoned examples of this for some of the more topical parts of the course. We have always wanted to have our students stay informed about various global issues in the news but have struggled with how to incorporate thoughtful discussions of rapidly changing world events for a generation that is not the most savvy consumers of news. Blogs appeared to be one way for us to

do that, but the trick is to find ones that don't reproduce the same sorts of Eurocentric biases so rampant in both scholarly and popular commentary. With considerable guidance from us, our student assistant was able to identify several blogs that we think have potential, and we are still considering how to make these a productive part of the course. Second, given how much various maps of the world and of world politics have played such an integral part in producing and fortifying the centrality of the West, we were interested in collecting the sorts of cartographic representations that are emerging from fields like critical Geography that subvert and reorganize existing mappings for use in our teaching. Our student assistant was able to find several of these resources, and we are excited to have the opportunity to make pedagogic use of some of these.

To reflect many of these changes, the Politics 147 syllabus this fall began the process of transforming the course. Substantially changing the syllabus and the thematic order of the old syllabus, we divided the course into seven sections:

The (I) "Introduction" to the course began not with the foundations of classical realism in international politics it has in the past. Rather, we chose to begin at the peripheries of the international system of states – where the authority of the state is most under pressure: war zone borders, informal economies, and the political economy of global transportation and trade. We then moved on to (II) "Political Economy: Inequality and Labor;" (III) "Violence, Conflict, Peace;" (IV) "The 'International Community' and Human Rights;" (V) Globalization; (VI) Global Resources and Environmental Management;" and (VII) "Global Orders and Disorders." While these sections might change in the future, we have developed a large menu of resources and readings from which to tailor the course to our own individual interests. For example, Africa played a more central role in my version of this course than it might play in others.

This structure permitted an ongoing conversation between the international periphery and more traditional West-centered texts. As a result, the course incorporated readings from and/or about Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, and Asia. Not beginning with traditional Western International Relations theory liberated students from the hegemonic assumptions of those perspectives and enabled them to approach those texts more critically when we did read them as we moved through the course. As a result, students were able to address traditional issues of sovereignty and security in the international system through the lenses of the concepts of hierarchy, poverty, private sphere, embodiment, and the earth (suggested by Laura Sjoberg of the University of Florida).

In our proposal, we had suggested the possibility of experimenting with a simulation in a revised version of Pol 147, although we were skeptical about its uses. A fortuitous set of circumstances emerging from Bruce Magnusson's participation in a Northwest 5 consortium project that allowed him to run a negotiation simulation regarding a new conservation protection zone crossing five southern African countries. Professors of Anthropology (Willamette), Environmental Studies/Politics (UPS) and Politics (Whitman) developed the outlines for the simulation over the summer and ran it simultaneously in early November. Issues regarding human migration, animal migration, tourist migration, and anti-poaching, security, and other border issues mingle with other localized community development issues and central state – periphery relationships. The simulation requires a great deal of independent and group research outside of class, and incorporated a Skype briefing by a visiting expert from Botswana (resident

at UPS during that week). A simulation of this sort could become a regular part of the course, but would need to be continually updated and revised in order to ensure that it supports the overall emphasis of the course.

We are grateful to the President and to the Provost and Dean of the Faculty for the Innovations in Teaching and Learning Grant that we were awarded for the purposes we have described above. We are confident that the work this grant supported fundamentally changes the way we teach one of our key courses in a way that broadens and enriches the student experience and that opens up an innovative and creative pathway for us to continue to transform this course to reflect new perspectives and scholarship. In addition, our work on this project has helped us initiate a conversation on International Relations pedagogy with other colleagues in our field, first at a forthcoming conference this January and then, hopefully, at other forums in the future.