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Bringing the Outside World In:  
Ways to Include International Perspectives in Classroom Discussions

*Abstract*

Those of us teaching Political Science courses from practically all subfields of the discipline in US Universities/Colleges are currently being challenged to include in our classroom discussions the ways in which those outside the USA view US policies and political practices, including both those taking place at home and abroad. More and more we rely on study abroad students and exchange students to interject a differing point of view or interpretation in the classroom, but increasingly there is a need for educators to purposefully introduce international perspectives/interpretations of key concepts and notions from political science. There seems no doubt that we need to get our students to understand the world in terms other than their own. The question remains, however, how to get them to see and understand these differing perspectives and equip them with a “global literacy” that now has become prerequisite for living in today’s world.

This paper will attempt to address this issue by suggesting practical techniques that educators can utilize in the classroom to improve students’ abilities to see from more than one cultural outlook. One does not need to change their entire curriculum or teaching materials to include additional international perspectives, but rather enhance original material or supplement what one has already tried out with other materials. Suggestions include the use of DVDs (not necessarily in their entirety), consulting web sites such as “Watching America” and the American Council on Education, each suggesting ways to include multiple perspectives. Simple exercises can likewise be adopted within one’s own particular classroom setting, depending on the course and its content.

**I. Introduction**

A quick look at the current literature on internationalizing the curriculum reveals a basic consensus as to the need to improve our students’ ability to comprehend and

understand the world from multiple perspectives.<sup>1</sup> Since 9/11 various institutions of higher learning in the United States have introduced programs of study that include an international component so as to facilitate the matriculation of students with a level of global literacy that will allow them to operate in a global environment. Whether one is focusing on business, education, medicine or politics (and most other fields in between), the necessity to be able to comprehend multiple voices and perspectives is vital for the future generation as they grope their way through the bewildering international environment that is unfolding before us now. What is less agreed upon in the profession is what these skills need to be, and how to get our students to acquire them. An agreed upon definition of “global competence” articulated by the National Association of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges (NASULGC) report entitled “A Call to Leadership: The Presidential Role in Internationalizing the University” reads as follows:

Global competence is the ability of faculty, staff and students not only to contribute to knowledge, but also to comprehend, analyze, and evaluate its meaning in the context of an increasingly globalized world.<sup>2</sup>

Beyond this however, there are differing and various methods being used to transmit this global competency, and likewise there is a great deal of divergence as to how high this ranks as a priority in various institutions of higher learning (and particularly political science departments) throughout the country.<sup>3</sup>

The modest attempt of this paper is to bring together in one place some of the practical ways that those of us teaching political science have used to *bring the outside world into* our classrooms so as to force our students to traverse and

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<sup>1</sup>See Christine Inglebritsen, Mark Cassell, Steven Lamy, Pamela Burke Martin, and David Mason, “Internationalizing APSA: A Report from the Working Group to ACE,” April 2, 2006 found at <http://www.apsanet.org/imgtest/Internationalizing%20APSA%20Report4-2-06.pdf>. See also “Toward an International Education Policy for the United States,” NAFSA: Association of International Educators, February 22, 2000 at <http://www.temple.edu/nafsa/intleducpolicy.htm>.

<sup>2</sup>“A Call to Leadership: The Presidential Role in Internationalizing the University,” A Report of the NASULGC Task Force on International Education, October 2004, p. 2, found at: [http://www.nasulgc.org/comm\\_intprogs.htm](http://www.nasulgc.org/comm_intprogs.htm).

<sup>3</sup>For instance, one outstanding example is the University of Pittsburgh that established a certificate in Global Studies in 2001, and in 2005 a Bachelor of Philosophy (B-Phil) degree in international and area studies. See William I. Brustein, “Paths to Global Competence: Preparing American College Students to Meet the World,” *IIE Networker*, Spring 2006, pp. 23-25. See also the strategy being developed for internationalizing the curriculum at Cleveland State University at “Global Learning for All: Cleveland State University,” at <http://www.acenet.edu>.

*meet the other*. Upon investigating the multiple techniques that educators have created for including international perspectives in the classroom, one acquires a sizeable number of methods and alternatives to apply in a variety of classroom environments. What follows is a summary of some of the methods that I found political scientists have used in teaching courses in practically every subfield of the discipline, and a brief description of what I tried out last semester in a Post-Soviet Russia course. A brief conclusion and summing up concludes the paper.

## II. Techniques Utilized to Include International Perspectives in the Political Science Classroom

For purposes of explanation it seems helpful to divide up into two major categories the various tools and techniques that political science colleagues have utilized in the classroom to help find connections between the microcosm of the classroom and that of the macrocosm beyond. On the one hand, there are various technological tools that can be incorporated into a course such as web-based simulations including that of the ICONs (International Communication and Negotiation Simulations) project from the University of Maryland.<sup>4</sup> This project is “an experiential learning program that uses customized Web-based tools to support educational simulations and simulation-based training.”<sup>5</sup> The program requires students to play the role of decision-maker, and students are challenged to try to resolve difficult contemporary political dilemmas. On a simpler level, one can use the internet to view web sites in the classroom from a newspaper site such as the *BBC News* (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/>), or from a more controversial and thought-provoking site such as that of *Watching America* (<http://www.watchingamerica.com/index.shtml>). This involves teaching in a classroom that has an internet connection for the instructor, and a projector and screen for class viewing (these classrooms are sometimes called *hybrid* or *proxima* rooms). Other techniques that involve technology in the classroom and

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<sup>4</sup>See Denise DeGarmo, Southern Illinois University, “ICONS and ‘Resistant Populations,’” Paper prepared for the Conference on Teaching and Learning in Political Science, February 18-20, 2006. Dr. DeGarmo describes in detail in the paper how she used the ICONs simulation as part of her course.

<sup>5</sup> See the web site of the ICONs Project from the University of Maryland at: <http://www.icons.umd.edu/>.

are more sophisticated include international videoconferencing and distance learning.<sup>6</sup> The latter requires certain electronic devices and a bit of know-how to operate initially, but like anything else, once these are mastered, the transformation that occurs on the part of the students that take part in these “conversations” and “exchanges” with their peers overseas is indeed remarkable. The use of videos, movies and DVDs are also an option, and often these do not need to be viewed in their entirety, but instead “clips” can be shown and then a discussion session led by the instructor can follow. When discussing my own experiences of teaching a Post-Soviet Russia political science course, I will explain in more detail the use of some of these aforementioned resources which were employed to both explain and enrich class discussions, and likewise also helped make the interconnection between key concepts on an analytical level, and their importance and relationship to contemporary issues on a practical level.

A second major category of tools and techniques that can be employed in the classroom setting involves active learning activities. These activities may include breaking the class up into groups for pair work, or role playing, or simply assigning the students something to comment on briefly in written form. One example is the “Teaching Toolkit” employed by Henrike Lehnguth and Jenny Wüstenberg, who utilize group work techniques in an American Politics course to get students to become more aware of diversity in the United States on the one hand, and nation-state identity on the other.<sup>7</sup> In this way students become more attuned to their own political culture and that of others as well. Hans Schattle, from the University of Massachusetts, Boston, assigns students in his American Political Science course to follow two daily newspapers outside the US in the English language on the Internet. They are to follow and monitor on a daily basis two newspapers for at least a month and focus on “the content and tone of news

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<sup>6</sup>See Pamela Martin, “Teaching, Learning and Assessing International Relations in Tele-Collaborative Environments,” APSA Teaching and Learning Conference February 19-21, 2004.

<sup>7</sup>See Henrike Lehnguth and Jenny Wüstenberg, “Developing Global Citizenship: Introducing a Teaching Toolkit,” *The Political Science Educator*, Vol. 11, Issue 2, December 2006, pp. 6-9.

coverage regarding the role of the United States in the world.”<sup>8</sup> He then has the students focus on a set of questions and provide both a written and oral report to the class. As he himself states:

Endeavoring to view the United States through the lenses of other countries amounts to a logical extension of the quintessentially American tradition of free and open exchange of ideas. It is increasingly important for introductory political science courses to explore how the United States and its global influences are perceived from afar. Incorporating the study of international news sources into undergraduate survey courses is one helpful strategy in furthering this end.<sup>9</sup>

Henrik Schatzinger from the University of Georgia, introduces international comparisons in an American government course by making such comparisons as representative democracy and direct democracy, presidential versus parliamentary systems, and unitary and federal systems.<sup>10</sup> These types of comparisons allow for increased global awareness on the part of students who are then more adept at viewing the American political system in comparative terms and hence are likewise better able to perceive how others view the American political system. When explaining the main structures and processes of the American system in a comparative framework, one is placing the American experience within an international context and making connections for students. In the end, students emerge from this course with more fine-tuned self-reflective skills that assist them in understanding how others outside the United States view American policy from another perspective.

Other colleagues from outside the United States have likewise experimented with innovative “learning architecture” to combine the traditional class lecture and tutorials with role play-based learning and web-based communication.<sup>11</sup> Using a World Politics course as their forum, R. Linser, D.

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<sup>8</sup>Hans Schattle, “Bringing Perceptions from the ‘Global Village’ into American Political Science Courses,” *PS*, July 2003, pp. 433-436.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid*, p. 435.

<sup>10</sup>Henrik Schatzinger, “The Foundations of American Government: How to Introduce International Comparisons,” Paper prepared for the Conference on Teaching and Learning in Political Science, Washington, DC., February 18-20, 2006.

<sup>11</sup>R. Linser, S. Naidum, and A. Ipa, “Pedagogical Foundations of Web-based Simulations in Political Science,” at <http://www.ascilite.org.au/conferences/brisbane99/papers/linsernaidum.pdf>.

Naidum, and A. Ipa from the University of Melbourne, have constructed a four-part learning and teaching architecture that combines the aforementioned and utilizes goal-based learning.<sup>12</sup> As a result of utilizing these various methods in this course, those instructors involved have found that the learning and teaching process was transformed, as it brought students into the learning process as central actors while at the same time allowed for a flexibility in how material was delivered and explained to students and kept them as attentive participants. The course necessitated that everyone involved acquire new skills and competencies, and it fine-tuned communication and collaborative practices among the participants.

Beyond these examples there are many other ways in which educators are attempting to place the teaching of political science in an international framework including those who venture out of the classroom and participate in study abroad opportunities, or internship programs. These experiences allow students direct contact with other students and their cultures and have a profound effect on the learning process for all who participate. Those students who are likewise in our classes here in the United States from abroad can assist in the process of bridging the distance between the US and the international environment as they are called upon to voice their perceptions and opinions in class. Indeed, there are multiple ways in which those of us teaching can utilize techniques and resources for the classroom, and once we become aware of what they are and how to use them, we can adopt these to fit into the teaching environment that one feels most comfortable with. None of these resources or techniques is intended to replace the importance of face-to-face explanation and communication, but rather these can supply innovative and engaging ways to spur thought and curiosity, and connect the classroom with the political environment under examination.

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<sup>12</sup>View their web site for the World Politics course they developed at <http://polsim.politics.unimelb.edu.au/wpt>.

### **III Teaching Post-Soviet Russia**

In a political science course on Post-Soviet Russia that I taught this past semester, I attempted to utilize some of the methods and strategies mentioned above to get my students to gain a better understanding of Russian politics and society. Since I could not bring them to Russia, I tried to bring Russia *to them* by utilizing a variety of resources in the classroom, including three Russian born students who took the class, and who were fluent in the Russian language. Likewise I utilized contemporary political current events that occurred during the time the course was taking place (of which there was no short supply) and related those to the key political concepts, structures, and explanations of political processes. In effect, what I tried to do was to get them engaged in and aware of political issues that were taking place in Russia and then tie them in with an explanation of Russian politics.

To take a particular example for purposes of explanation, I taught in a hybrid room that allowed me to access the Internet during class time from a teaching podium and an LCD projector for class viewing. I was able to use DVDs and videos as well. During the weeks that I was teaching the course, several front-line newspaper headlines from Russia dominated the news, and I tried to use these contemporary political issues as a way to relate theory with practice. One issue concerned the poisoning of a former Russian KGB agent Alexander Litvinenko. The story broke out when we were discussing Russian political culture, and we had already examined several factors that had influenced Russian political culture in the Soviet era and the difficulties facing Russia in the post-Soviet era in trying to develop a political culture to support a democratic system. We mentioned in class the difficulties of establishing freedom of the press and free expression of thought and ideas in a post-communist state such as that of Russia. We explained the role of the patrimonial state and state driven modernization as a lingering legacy of Russia's past. Likewise, we got into an extended discussion of the role of the leader, and related this to the Putin presidency. I had showed them parts of a DVD entitled "Russian Revolutions:

The Heavy Hand of Corruption,” and they got to see and hear from Russian citizens and other experts about the lingering problem of corruption in Russian society as well. This discussion complimented an explanation of rule of law and its importance for the legitimacy of a political system, and how Russia was wrangling with this problem. Students were stunned and awe-struck by the degree and extent to which corruption had become embedded in Russian society, and when hearing and seeing ordinary Russian citizens speak about its day-to-day occurrences as they heard them in the film, they began to empathize with these citizens. On several occasions, I would pose questions to the class to force them to put themselves in a vicarious position and ask: “If *you* were a Russian citizen, how would *you* feel, what would *you* do, how would *you* react?”

When the Litvinenko poisoning dominated the news headlines after it was revealed that he died from an ingested dose of polonium 210, I tried to get students to make connections between what we had discussed about Russian political culture and corruption to the information and descriptions they were reading about in the news. Several times in class I connected via Internet to the BBC World News story of the day, and together we read parts of the news story and I posed questions to them from the readings we had done from our texts to elucidate descriptions in the news. At first with some difficulty, and then with more ease, they began to make connections and relate political concepts and theories to inform the descriptions they were reading in the news. I used my three native Russian speakers in the class to keep us informed of what the Russian press was airing about Litvinenko, and we made comparisons between the presses. We returned back to the story two weeks before the term ended when we discussed Russia and foreign affairs and Russia’s role in the international community. We linked the Litvinenko investigation being conducted by the British with questions of diplomatic relations and foreign policy.

Similarly, before the course ended in late November, Russia won its twelve-year bid to join the World Trade Organization (WTO). Again in the headlines, Russia’s successful joining of the WTO afforded us the opportunity to

connect previous discussions about adhering to global rules of trade and Russia trying to prove that she had finally thrown off the last vestiges of state communism and was now part of the world economy in a new way. We tied in discussions of Russia's relationship with the west in the past, difficulties in developing a capitalist economy, Russia's relationship now with the west, and questions of domestic strategic interests and the role of the state. This conversation concluded the course, and at this point students had developed more mature and sophisticated ways in making their own associations between what we had read in the texts and the way policy and decisions were being played out in the international arena.<sup>13</sup> Equipped with a new level of insightfulness and appreciation of the complexity of Russia, students could more accurately wade through news headlines and try to culturally contextualize what they were reading.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

International and cross cultural awareness are two vital tools that we as educators need to impart on our students to equip them with the necessary competence they will need to communicate and operate in today's world. Vital to any nation for its competitiveness, leadership, prosperity and security in the twenty-first century is that it educates its citizens internationally. Hence part of our objectives as educators is that we assist our students in acquiring a level of international competence allowing them to see the world through others' eyes. Connecting the issues the United States faces as a nation domestically with the international dimension of how they are understood internationally is imperative.

Active learning *in* the classroom lays the groundwork for active learning *outside* the classroom as well. By developing critical thinking skills and by promoting self-reflection, students are able to position their ideas and understand these better in relation to others. It is vital that students understand and accept

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<sup>13</sup>A few of the more loquacious students brought up in class news headlines from Russia on their own, and several students by this time developed the habit of bringing the *New York Times* to class, which is found on campus at Hofstra University.

that there are other views and opinions of the world other than their own, and this is prerequisite for intercultural communication. We need to get our students out of the “box” and to acquire peripheral vision of issues. This paper has suggested some ways to facilitate this kind of awareness in the classroom by adopting various techniques and methods. Although certainly not an exhaustive list of suggestions, there are several ways that political science instructors can engage their students as demonstrated here. Little or nothing is ever one-sided in politics, and this lays the groundwork for a multiplicity of perspectives to be examined, and for a global view to be attainable.

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