Opening Global Politics:
A New Introduction?

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This paper details one attempt to construct an introductory course in international relations and comparative politics that does not rely upon one of the many textbooks in the field. This course description seeks to introduce students to global issues without reproducing and reifying a particular way of being in the world. It achieves this curatorial effect by exploring 11 concepts in the context of 11 books. There are both significant advantages and disadvantages to this approach. While the course is a lot more work for everyone, risks privileging breadth over depth, the results of this pedagogical method are opinioned to be remarkable and rewarding for both the student and the professor.

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How should students who are interested in what is happening in the world be introduced to global issues without reproducing and reifying a particular way of being in the world? How is it possible to open global politics instead of abstracting, reducing, and narrowing what can be explored? At the end of this term in which we undertook an experiment to meet this challenge we thought that other readers of this journal might have faced similar problems and/or might benefit in reading about how others engaged in solving them.

Most of those who have had to teach their department’s introduction to international relations (IR) or introduction to comparative politics (CP) have faced the problem of textbook selection. Of course, there are differences in textbook quality (an easy enough problem to solve); however, the problem of homogeneous textbook design is more difficult to avoid. IR textbooks are effectively the same (two basic schools of thought, maybe a critical school or two and then some dominant issues, e.g., nuclear proliferation and terrorism, and institutions, e.g., United Nations, that demonstrate the centrality of the two dominant schools of thought). The problem is, however, that it is not clear that students who are interested in what is happening in the world are or should be interested in the particular pathologies of the discipline of IR. Similar challenges arise for CP textbooks. These tend to follow a state-centric model, which introduces students to a series of structures, processes, and policies (e.g., electoral systems, political parties, and the welfare state), is organized according to a convenient dichotomy (developed vs. developing states) or typology (democratic, transitioning, or authoritarian), and limits students’ understanding of CP to a preordained set of “good” cases that imply that some states have gotten politics “right” and others, well, not so much. Simply put, textbooks tend to reproduce the discipline instead of exploring the complexities of the world they claim to describe.
Yet our hesitation about textbooks does not stem from a singular distaste for the disciplinary schools of IR, the state-centric approach of CP, or even a grand disgust for the Cheese Whiz to which the textbook industry has managed to reduce history and thought; instead, our hesitation stems from an empirical problem. It is becoming more difficult for upper level students to engage in contemporary global issues (human rights, global ethics, new technologies, global governance, economic globalization, identity politics, etc.) through the ideologies of IR/CP. Tackling the complexities of contemporary global politics requires that students have a new kind of intellectual readiness, that they are agents in the educational process who can splice, drop, or sample concepts and theoretical and methodological approaches to analyze the world. Instead, students are too often passive learners who regurgitate their (or their prof’s) favorite school of thought instead of engaging in the complexity of the global problems with as many different conceptual tools as possible. In other words, students who are trained to think in terms of a grand battle between realism and idealism or the dichotomy of developed versus developing fail to have the intellectual flexibility required to deal with what we now call today’s complex realities. The reverse is true as well; those students who were steeped in critical schools’ ability to undermine the dominant schools’ assumptions often lacked the lived context in which these debates and maneuvers had political importance and/or urgency. And to be sure, a failure to understand those key structures, processes, and policies within the state makes it challenging for students to engage fully with the complex links between global and domestic politics or to think beyond even these imaginaries.

Given the challenges of selecting a single textbook for an introductory IR or CP course, imagine the challenge of selecting an appropriate textbook for a global politics course intended to introduce students to both fields. Being in a creative and supportive department has allowed us the opportunity to conduct a kind of experiment that we would like to share with you in this paper. Instead of using one or two textbooks, we developed a shared syllabus for our respective sections and taught 11 books and 11 concepts in 14 weeks.

The reaction that most have to this experiment is certain skepticism, definite questions about rebellion, lynching, and panics about too much work (from students) and enrollment drips and drops (from administrators). In part, the reaction to this experiment is the problem that this experiment is seeking to challenge: low expectations, corporate education, fear of teaching, fear of reading, and protecting of the way things have been done before. But before addressing these problems, our pedagogical influences, the syllabus, and its rationale should be explained.

We are obviously not alone in our effort to create a less traditional classroom. Two pedagogical approaches have influenced the development of this course. First, active pedagogical techniques (see Krain and Shadle 2006; Belloni 2008; Youde 2008) that shift from passive learning, where students absorb knowledge through a lecture, to engaged learning techniques, such as simulations, role-playing, and writing, which were used throughout the course. Second, using alternative media, such as film and novels, to replace textbooks (all or in part) as pedagogical tools (Kuzma and Haney 2001; Boyer, Pollard, Kuzma, and Haney 2002; Salem and Freeman 2002; Webber 2005; Rowley 2007) has been shown to be effective in exploring IR/CP political narratives (e.g., idealism and realism) and concepts (e.g., state and hegemony). Moreover, we emphasize a cinematic approach to reading a text, whereby the text becomes more than what the

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1This course is offered at the first-year level in the Winter semester. It is required for political science majors but also has a large enrollment of non-political science majors.
author intended in and through the contextualizing (viewing) practices of its audience and medium. The use of conceptual lenses colors the way in which the text is perceived and current events shape the political relevance of the text. Not only do alternative media provide a fun point of departure (Webber 2005), but, with active learning approaches, they generate new ways of opening global politics. Our challenge was to create a more engaged classroom; the result was our 11 concept/11 book model.

The 11 concepts drive the 14-week syllabus. Instead of using the textbook industry to define and bold the concepts on our behalf, we draw from diverse thinkers from across the disciplines and lecture on the concept. If we cannot deliver a coherent and elucidating lecture about a core concept in the study of global politics to a bunch of 17- to 18-year-olds, then there might be other problems that we are not facing. Whereas we might not be experts on any of the topics covered by the books, we should be competent to cover the core concepts of our fields. This year, the concepts were presented in the following order: politics, method, power, sovereignty, identity, alienation, borders, security, progress, neoliberalism, and justice. As can be seen, the concepts are fairly normal (even disciplinary), but while applicable to most subfields of political science, these were treated in a global context. The great thing about organizing the course around concepts is that, as tools, they should be applicable to any of the books. These specific concepts were chosen because they simultaneously reflect and open traditional approaches to IR/CP. These concepts are all “essentially contested” (Gallie 1964; Connolly 1974) and, as such, enable a plurality of different political arguments. As long as we emphasized this plurality and treated these concepts as tools, not foundations, the tendency to reify disciplinary ways of being as “unquestionably valid” (Webber 2005:389) was lessened.

Although we have different areas of expertise (a critical theorist and a Latin Americanist, respectively) and did not collaborate on lecture writing, our method ended up being remarkably similar, which was to offer multiple takes on each concept (e.g., a traditional, contextual, and critical take) with the expectation that the students’ comprehension will diminish as the lecture proceeds. For instance, using Steven Krasner’s (1999) text as a structure, sovereignty can be defined as a thing, a practice, and an event. Or, using Barry Hindess (1996), power was defined as a capacity, a consent, and (fudging things) a vehicle. Concepts like neoliberalism and progress required a different tack and instead employed a more historical approach while still allowing for a critical examination of the concept. One of us stayed away from PowerPoint (although that was a common suggestion in student evaluations) with the objective that students (re)learn how to take notes from what they were experiencing. The other used PowerPoint and posted the slides online with the hope that students would spend less time trying to copy down every word of the lecture, shut off their laptops, and (re)learn to listen. Outcomes were mixed. It is likely that some gentle structure should be employed (i.e., using PowerPoint), while maintaining the development of these other nonmarketable skills (listening, comprehension, and focusing) by not posting the slides online. In effect, the lectures combine to make up a free textbook that the students write through their own notes (with or without the assistance of PowerPoint).

As stated the syllabus is organized around 11 books, and this structure is driven by lectures about 11 concepts. The books chosen are not what might be initially imagined; instead, they are contemporary bestsellers written by public intellectuals about current global issues. The choice of books is surprisingly difficult because we want to meet a number of criteria. The books are current publications (within the past 3–4 years) and restricted in size to make them
manageable (about 200 pages). Beyond that, we choose books that range in style (from historical, ideological, emotional, philosophical, narrative, testimonial, etc.) to give students a taste for different ways of knowing and speaking about the world. We also choose books that are regionally representative and explore issues that are not always front-page news in order to expose students to issues with which they might not be familiar (hence, Thomas Turner’s, 2007, *The Congo Wars*). We select books that represent different political ideologies (e.g., Benjamin Dangl’s, 2007, anti-neoliberal *The Price of Fire* about resource conflict in Bolivia and Margaret Somerville’s, 2006, socially conservative *The Ethical Imagination* about the dilemmas of biological technologies). We are attentive to the question of what counts as “global politics,” so we included Michael Pollan’s (2006) analysis of the food industry, *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*, as well as something more standard like Jimmy Carter’s (2007) *Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid*. These criteria follow from a shared view that politics are witnessed, documented, interpreted, engaged in, and created by diverse actors and that students benefit more from engaging with that diversity than from a single, paradigmatic voice.

We recognize that it is impossible to cover every region, issue, or voice in only 11 books, but the benefit of this pedagogical model is the flexibility with which different books can illustrate the core concepts we have identified. The books will influence the discussions of concepts and vice versa. Both will change over time. In this way, we never continuously neglect a particular region or issue, and we always have the flexibility to respond to a timely issue in global politics by assigning a new book or highlighting a core concept. By changing the books and changing the pairing of books and concepts, this becomes a “living” course. That said, 2 years’ experience teaching this course suggests that certain books should be used repeatedly: Stephen Lewis’s (2006) text *Race against Time* about the failures of national and international governmental attempts to deal with the global AIDS pandemic and David Batstone’s (2007) *Not for Sale* that tells about the re-emergence of the global slave trade through the efforts of individuals to stop it have reappeared as student favorites. One student favorite surprised us. *The Omnivore’s Dilemma* (Pollan 2006) recently topped the charts despite being 400 pages (it was scheduled for after the reading break—yes the reading break). In addition to those previously mentioned, other books have been chosen to deal with North Korea (McCormack 2004), the avian flu (Davis 2005), environmental destruction (Speth 2005), illegal immigration in the United States (Urrea 2004), women’s stories from Bosnia (Hunt 2005), indigenous politics (King 2003), and shifts in the global economy (Prestowitz 2005). Some of the texts have failed because they have either been too difficult (Mamdani 2004; Gilroy 2005) or detailed (Prunier 2005; Turner 2007), but they have often failed beautifully (some students loved them and most students aspired to be able to engage with them in their upper level courses). The main task is to enable students to overcome “book fear” and for them to begin gathering some rooted stories about the world(s) in which they live.

A week unfolds as follows. Using a Tuesday and Thursday class structure2 (85 minutes each), Tuesdays are dedicated to a lecture about the week’s concept and Thursday is dedicated to discussing the week’s book and applying that week’s concept. Discussions on Thursday are the most difficult and exciting. They range from explaining the text; developing core arguments; creating a context for the book; dueling “I like versus I dislike” factions; reflecting on

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2One of us taught on a Monday–Wednesday–Friday schedule but used the same basic formula, with Wednesday being split between lecture and discussion.
methodology; and criticizing core concepts of the book or of the lecture. We found that the discussions were easier if we also enjoyed reading the text. Each of us was lucky to have three teaching assistants (TAs), making possible to have small in-class group work. Small groups proved most effective when coupled with nonverbal exercises. For example, one exercise asked the students to draw a picture linking the concepts discussed so far to that week’s book. Another asked them to do the reverse, use the course concepts to create a comic strip that explains the week’s book. But even large group discussions could be effective in surprising ways. After reading Mary Anne Weaver’s (2002) *Pakistan*, which accompanied the lecture on power, the goal was to have students rank the key actors discussed in the book from the most powerful to most powerless. In the end, the exercise failed most effectively as the students came to a consensus that it was impossible to rank power holders in a state where key territories were beyond the control of the central government and in which outside actors had such profound influence. The discussion of Pakistan thus led to a critical examination of the state, sovereignty, and ultimately “power” itself.

Students developed various approaches to tackling the books, with some indicating that they begin reading the next week’s book after completing that week’s journal (see below) and therefore breaking it up into small and manageable parts (another good nonmarketable skill). Other students have said that they prefer to block off an entire day on the weekend (the rushed method we both follow). The important thing is that students have as much of the text read as possible before they hand in their journal on Tuesday (even if they do not get to discuss the book until Thursday, they can think about it during and after the lecture). Students only receive a journal grade if they hand in the journal in person on Tuesday, it receives a passing grade, and they are there to pick it up in person on Thursday (this takes care of attendance issues).

Our expectations of the students are measured. At a general level, we do not expect students to master the books and memorize all of the arguments or details. We do not even fool ourselves to think that they will read every text from cover to cover (or even at all). We do not expect them to understand all of the layers of a concept, although we do expect them to understand the first level of complexity, begin to see some of the limits explored in the second and be fruitfully disturbed, bewildered, and excited by the third. Simply put, our only expectation is that using the concepts as tools, they can learn to read with intent and therefore create political arguments.

At a specific level, this general expectation is fulfilled through specific assignments: The core of the course is a one page, single-spaced, fully cited, weekly journal that is graded on a pass-fail basis. In each week’s journal we expect the students to pull out the key arguments and evidence from the book and apply the concept that was lectured on during the week before. Because we teach layers of each concept, over time the students become more adept at using specific layers of a general concept to explore the arguments and evidence from the book in a more nuanced way. They hand in the journal on Tuesday, and we return them on Thursday with some general comments and opening questions. There is a short paper that is due during week 6 (after the TAs are finished with the out-of-class groups on citation and library skills, argument structure, and editing). The assignment requires the student to analyze a movie, song, or novel.

\[\text{In addition to running in-class discussion groups, TAs ran out-of-class groups on citation and library skills, argument structure, and editing in preparation for their writing assignments. In accordance with our department’s policy, TAs did not do any grading.}\]
that they think touches on the course content the best. They are required to use three course concepts and three course texts to create an argument. For example, the concepts of sovereignty, identity, and power could be used to analyze the film *Good Night and Good Luck* by making the argument that in contemporary global debates (like those surrounding the War on Terror, UN reform, and World Bank policies) freedom of speech and open dialogue are paramount. The pop culture reference was intended to make the assignment fun and allow them to build from their own strengths and interests; it also helps eliminate the potential for plagiarism (see below). The final exam is organized around three parts: (1) definitions of terms and phrases from the books or lectures (responsibility to protect or empiricism); (2) short answers that involve structures of the books or lectures (what are the three definitive principles of Kant’s argument for perpetual peace?); and (3) two essay questions that mimic the essay and the in-class assignments (use the concept of sovereignty to discuss the following four books). This year the highest mark was an A+ and the lower mark was an F and the average was a C+.

While our emphasis in designing this course was to provide students with better tools to engage in upper level courses, there are obvious benefits to us as well. Instead of being reduced to “experts” in introductory IR/CP, we approach the course as curators. We facilitate students’ exploration of the constantly changing world(s) of global politics. We also approach the course as learners: the 11-book model allows us to engage with nonacademic literature that, while interesting, might not otherwise be a high priority. The flexibility of our model (new books, new book-concept pairings, and new concepts) means that far from being a boring exercise, teaching “Intro” is a rejuvenating experience.

Of course, there are some problems that need to be worked out for this course to remain successful. First, students are simultaneously generous and distrustful of a new set of expectations. Some are willing to give it a try and others who are not confident in their abilities might be scared off. Last year’s enrollment was down by 11% from the start of class and that can have the undesirable effect of scaring administrators (especially in times of budget crisis). This will be solved by changing cultural expectations of students, building a reputation for the rewards of the course, and diversifying the student’s workload. In the future, for example, we will experiment with replacing one or two of the assigned academic books with more student-happy-mediums like films and/or novels. Second, the risks of plagiarism go up or the degrees to which plagiarism happen are revealed. The structure of the course makes catching students who take “liberties” much easier. Although we encourage students to discuss the texts with each other, some decide that this means that they can lift other’s summaries of the text and/or cobble together a journal without citations. Given that we use journals in all our classes (and have found plagiarism), however, we are not convinced that the structure of this course amplifies the problem significantly. Finally, a claim about “breadth not depth” is a stigma that will be applied by those who resist this pedagogy. However, the reverse can be applied to those other courses and will likely be balanced by other courses in IR and CP that are taught at upper levels. We think we are approaching a good balance; the depth is built into the lectures and the books, whereas the breadth is celebrated in the structure of the course.

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4Our short paper assignments differed. An alternative assignment asked the students to compare and contrast three different articles approaching the topic of one of the books from differing perspectives. The goal of this was to allow the students to explore a topic of interest in more detail and from more nuanced perspectives and to introduce them to some library search engines. As in the other short paper assignment, the requirements also helped eliminate plagiarism.
What is amazing to us, however, is the number of students who said that once they got into their routine the course was not difficult. Most found it remarkably rewarding. It was even more exciting that these comments were not restricted to political science majors but instead extended to students in the entire faculty of arts as well as faculties of pure and applied sciences and professional studies. In a notable case, early in the semester one student wrote an editorial in the student newspaper criticizing the course design for its “copious” reading load. The caption of the accompanying photo read that “books are better when they have pictures” (“Politically Incorrect” 2008). In the end, this student recanted, saying how much he enjoyed the class and asked about the possibility of publishing the best of this year’s journals in the student newspaper. We are happy to note that enrollment is almost full in both of our sections for next term.

When teaching a text like Thomas King’s (2003) *Truth about Stories*, you come to expect comments like “this book changed my life,” but it is more rewarding when students say that the course itself changed how they engage their world. It not only changed how they value their education, but it also gave them the concrete skills to engage in what most believed, at first, was impossible. It will be interesting to see how these students move through the current upper level courses.

References


