

**Engaging students and maintaining quality in the era of  
massification: strategies and approaches for teaching large first-  
year courses**

**Author**

Halvorson, Dan

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## **Teaching Large First Year Courses in International Relations: Challenges, Constraints and Strategies**

This article examines the nature of first year International Relations (IR) teaching in Australia. Cost pressures in the university sector have been met by economies of scale with foundational classes becoming very large, often with hundreds of students. The article critically reflects on current strategies for teaching these courses to meet the challenge of providing an engaging and high quality learning environment in large classes with widely fluctuating student entry scores, university preparedness, and educational capital and language competence. The paper argues that a successful approach to improving the quality of first year IR teaching and to accommodating the diverse learning needs of all students is to run these courses in multiple streams, with one dedicated to providing a richer, more active IR learning experience.

**Keywords:** teaching, pedagogy, active learning, learning styles

**Corresponding author:** Dan Halvorson, School of Government and International Relations, Griffith University, Kessels Rd, Nathan, QLD 4111, Australia. Email: [d.halvorson@griffith.edu.au](mailto:d.halvorson@griffith.edu.au)

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## **Teaching Large First Year Courses in International Relations: Challenges, Constraints and Strategies**

Dan Halvorson  
*Griffith University*

This article evaluates the challenges and constraints of convening and teaching large introductory International Relations (IR) classes in the contemporary Australian university. The vitality of an academic discipline depends as much on how it is transmitted to students as it does on the health of debates among professional scholars. First year introductory classes are the first contact most students have with Politics and International Relations (PaIR) disciplines and their first opportunity to reflect deeply and systematically on the world in which they live (Smith 2003: 421). The quality of the student experience in these courses is therefore crucial to the discipline's development, vitality and future success.

The introduction to the symposium has assessed a number of factors stemming from the 'massification' of the Australian university sector that make it increasingly difficult to provide engaging and quality first year learning environments in PaIR. Taken together, these factors reflect the 'neo-liberalisation' of the university sector in recent decades. At the level of practice, some of the challenges and constraints facing quality first year PaIR teaching under prevailing policy settings and university imperatives are: large student cohorts drawn from multiple degree programs including non-PaIR students; significant proportions of international and non-English speaking background (NESB) students; widely fluctuating student entry scores, university preparedness, learning styles and needs; institutional pressures to improve retention; and the integration of flexible, online modes of course delivery.

The challenge for PaIR will increasingly be how to attract the best prospective students and make first year courses intellectually stimulating and rewarding for them in a discipline that does not have clear and direct career pathways.

This article canvasses strategies and approaches to first year IR teaching within the context of present challenges facing the university sector and PaIR. It argues that in the current Australian university setting, a successful approach to quality IR teaching and to accommodating the diverse learning needs of all students in these large courses is to run them in streams, with one dedicated to providing a richer, more active learning experience. In doing so, the article builds on Biggs and Tang's (2011: 11) pedagogical theme of 'constructive alignment', defined as the systematic alignment of 'teaching/learning activities, as well as the assessment tasks, to the intended learning outcomes'. This is achieved 'by requiring the students to engage the *learning activities* required in the outcomes'. Or put another way, 'good teaching is getting most students to use the level of cognitive processes needed to achieve the intended outcomes that the more academic students use spontaneously' (Biggs and Tang, 2011: 7). But, rather than Biggs and Tang's (2011) focus on less academically gifted students, the argument developed here seeks to find avenues that will challenge PaIR students of high academic ability while improving standards, student engagement and retention across the entire cohort. Evidence for the claims in the article are drawn from the author's experience of teaching at Griffith University, a large multi-campus institution with 43,000 students in South East Queensland and Australia's ninth-largest education provider. The author convenes and teaches the first-year course, 1001GIR International Relations,

which has 450 enrolments across the two main campuses of Nathan (Brisbane) and Southport (Gold Coast).

The article first briefly develops the overarching theme of ‘massification’ from the symposium’s introduction to relate it to the realities of day-to-day teaching practice. It then critically reflects on current strategies for teaching large first year IR classes before exploring the challenges associated with maintaining educational quality in an institutional environment dominated by pressures for retention. The final section appraises alternative course designs and teaching strategies to improve the first year experience for IR students with a view to maintaining teaching quality and sustaining the vitality of the discipline.

### **‘Massification’ and the First Year Experience**

The movement to a mass higher education system has had a profound impact on first year foundational classes, which are now often very large. However, the expansion of student numbers since the late-1980s has not been met by a commensurate increase in teaching staff. Between 1989 and 2007, numbers of teaching staff increased by 28 per cent (Coates et. al., 2009: 5) compared with an increase in the student body of approximately 65 per cent between 1987 and 2011 (Parker 2011: 439; Norton 2013: 23). The staff-student ratio, including casual staff, has increased to 21.67 from 13.41 across the sector, although it is much higher in many institutions (Coates et. al., 2009: 5; see also Group of Eight 2014: 78-82). In addition to larger classes and increased staff-student ratios, cost pressures and resource constraints have led to longer hours for academic staff in order to balance research, teaching and the increasing administrative burden. In teaching, it has

produced less available contact time for students and design of assessment and course delivery that minimises marking and encourages independent study (Thomson 2013: 278-79).

With this 'massification' of the higher education system, and students investing more time and money in education at the opportunity cost of other activities, some have come to view themselves as 'consumers' of tertiary education services, rather than as traditional students (Newson 2004; Kent 2006: 6). Student expectations of who bears responsibility for their success or failure have been to some degree reoriented from themselves to the institutions. University management, education specialists and curriculum designers have internalised these changes in student expectations, which are in tension with traditional academic culture. Students are no longer expected to passively conform to academic practices, but pressures are brought to bear for university teaching to adapt to the perceived changing needs of a more diverse cohort of students as consumers (Kent 2006: 6).

There is a perception within the sector that courses have been 'dumbed-down' and standards have generally been dropping because of: the fast growth in admissions of students at lower ranges of the Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) and Overall Position (OP) distribution; students' paid work commitments; large numbers of international students; the poor English-language skills of many students; and the entry of other groups with low educational capital (Group of Eight 2014: 16-18; Norton 2013: 65; Murray 2010: 56; Walker et. al., 2010: 3). With the policy settings, market competition and cost pressures on the sector, the imperative for the future for most Australian institutions will not be to increase entry standards, but for universities to scale up pathway programs and support resources for under-

prepared first year students (Kemp and Norton 2014: 5). The following section examines some current strategies for teaching and managing large first year courses in IR.

### **Challenges and Strategies for Teaching First Year Classes in IR**

#### *The Cohort*

First year, foundational courses in IR are typically large and include students from a range of degree programs. At Griffith University, 1001GIR International Relations, is a core course for a number of degrees across different faculties (or academic groups as they are known at Griffith): Bachelor of Government and International Relations; Bachelor of International Business; a range of Griffith Business School double-degree programs; Bachelor of Laws/Government and International Relations; and is also taken by Communications/Journalism and other Bachelor of Arts students. The course has a consistent 250 students at the Nathan campus in Brisbane and 170 students at the Gold Coast campus in recent years for a total of 420 students. In 2014, this involved three lecture classes, 17 tutorial classes and seven tutors, with the author as Course Convenor and Lecturer at both locations. In addition to the teaching and travel time, the course is a substantial and time-consuming administrative and management task.

The large numbers, venue issues, timetabling inflexibility, the variety of disciplines students are engaged in and the great diversity in background and preparedness of the cohort, makes it difficult to move away from the traditional lecture and tutorial format. This is despite lowering attendance at lecture classes and other evidence that this 'passive' format is not suited to the learning needs of many

commencing students or to the educational goal of deeper critical enquiry (Damron and Mott 2005). Consequently, there are increasing pressures from faculty education experts, curriculum consultants and retention-focused managers to use more 'active' or 'problem-based' learning approaches and 'flipped classroom' tasks in all year levels (Crosling and Heagney 2009: 11-12; Lazrus and McKay 2013: 352; NMC 2014: 6).

In Semester 1, 2014, the course cohort had an OP range from 1 to 21 (ATAR 99.05 to <39.75), 15 per cent international students, 27 per cent NESB, and 13 per cent low SES (Griffith University 2014). The lowest OP for entry to these programs is currently 16 (ATAR 64) but 27 per cent of students in the course entered their degree programs from alternative pathways and the university also captures their OP data. It is well known that universities take many students below the advertised rank cut-offs (Norton 2013: 32). The course is thus extremely diverse, featuring highly prepared and motivated students at one end of the spectrum and substantial numbers with language difficulties, low educational capital, and/or lack of motivation at the other. Student feedback in 2015 suggested 30-40 per cent would prefer a different format from the traditional lecture/tutorial, and a more active learning approach through the use of simulations, structured debates or problem-based learning. This feedback aligns with much research in education, suggesting that student-centred active learning pedagogies are increasingly important for engaging sections of the contemporary student cohort (Crosling and Heagney 2009: 13-14).



### *Teaching Methods*

The diverse cohort, institutional pressures for retention and differences in student learning styles, give rise to a range of challenges in teaching and managing the course. One of the most difficult is how to create and maintain an engaging learning environment that can inspire interest in the subject matter and keep up attendance levels in large lecture theatres. My approach in recent years has increasingly been to treat the first year lecture as a 'performance'. The large screens, and volume and lighting controls in major campus lecture theatres can be used effectively when dynamic presentations are integrated with dramatic visual materials. While this may be criticised for straying towards 'infotainment' (Newson 2004: 228), students' attention and interest must be stimulated and captured if critical capacities are to be engaged and developed. I regularly stream international news, usually Al-Jazeera English, on the screen before lectures begin and during breaks. This creates atmosphere, gives the impression that the course is up-to-date and provides examples that can be referred to in the lecture. Preparation involves a lot of time sourcing, curating and editing video material to embed in lectures. My aim with video material in class is that it is relatively brief, striking, and directly illustrates a particular point or concept.

A number of studies have shown 'that multimedia lectures clearly organized and clarified course material and, most important, stimulated interest'. They were found to pique the interest of a wide range of students and sustain it throughout the lecture (Cunningham 2010: 299). I draw material from a range of content, including news reports, documentaries and movie dramatisations. This is always followed by a 'debrief' with targeted questions. Despite a number of requests, text publishers

currently do not include sophisticated multi-media content with their ancillary materials, meaning that academics are forced to experiment with multimedia (NMC 2014: 3, 19), which can be both frustrating and time-consuming.

The use of brief, edited media content is crucial to the 'chunking' of course content into more targeted portions for easier 'digestion' by students as teaching and learning pedagogy recommends. Formative tasks and feedback are also crucially important in the first year for successful transitions to higher education (Crosling and Heagney 2009: 14-15; Yorke 2001: 116). Twice during lectures, usually before breaks, there are brief multiple-choice quizzes so students can test their immediate understanding of material. This is directly linked to the course assessment. For Semester 1, 2015, via the emerging pedagogical practice of 'Bring Your Own Device' (BYOD) (NMC 2014: 5), students respond to the quiz on their phone, tablet or laptop with the answers collated and displayed on the screen in real time. These activities provide for a change of pace and focus in the classroom while obviating the need for verbal responses or a show of hands, which may discourage participation. It also shows areas in which students may be having problems, which then can be revised.

The other strategy used in approaching lectures as a performance is to be as dynamic and enthusiastic as possible as a presenter. An academic's enthusiasm for their teaching is essential to student engagement, the successful dissemination of knowledge and improving learning outcomes. A range of studies show that the enthusiasm of teaching staff is infectious and sparks greater attendance, interest and motivation in students (see Freudenberg and Samarkovski 2014: 28-29). In engaging the contemporary first year cohort, as described above, demonstrating enthusiasm, or passion for teaching the material, is not optional, but absolutely

essential for a meaningful learning experience (Freudenberg and Samarkovski 2014: 29).

### *Learning Styles*

In moving away from traditional lecturing and tutorials, it is important to consider what might be lost with these different approaches. The present focus on blending 'multi-media' lecturing with 'active' learning, whether in class or on-line, is designed to appeal to students across different learning styles: for example, the visual (images, observation), aural (hearing and listening), reading/writing, and kinaesthetic (physical activity, learning by doing) (Fleming 2006; see Waring and Evans 2015 for a recent comprehensive survey of the many learning style categorisations and pedagogical approaches). This literature finds that traditional university teaching has not accommodated kinaesthetic learning styles in particular, and these are dominant among much of the expanded university cohort entering with less educational capital. The research suggests 'that students with lower levels of ability will find it more difficult if the learning situation does not match their learning preferences' (Waring and Evans 2015: 102).

In recent years there has also been a focus in the education literature and in the media on younger generations as 'digital natives', 'net generation' and 'millennials' or 'neo-millennials' (Doiron and Asselin 2010; Calvani et. al. 2011; Thomson 2015). This refers to the observation that people born during and since the 1990s have grown up in a world where digital technologies and social media are all pervasive and constitutive of their everyday lives and experience of the world. Doiron and Asselin (2010: 224) argue that students 'growing up during the past few years have had unique experiences and cultural influences such that they may have

developed methods of learning out of step with how we traditionally structure and provide education'. The dominant focus on active learning 'in many fields of higher education are explained by the transition from a teacher-based to a student-based model ... in which methodologies must be customised to students' needs and study style' (Castillo-Merino and Serradell-López 2014: 477). Digital media and the ubiquity of personal devices have socialised greater numbers of students to self-paced visual, aural and active modes of learning (Kennedy et. al. 2008: 109; Doiron and Asselin 2010: 225; Baird and Fisher 2005; Thompson 2015: 467). This is reflected in the demand for video and podcast audio material rather than traditional reading assignments (Gray, Davis and Liu 2012).

Critics of these approaches might observe that traditional university lecturing was in fact more effective in encouraging students to be genuinely intellectually 'active' and to take responsibility for their learning and success at university. Students were required to attend and take their own notes, making decisions as to what aspects of the content were most important, and then to follow up with substantive self-directed reading to reinforce the material. They were also required to practice the discipline of being still, quiet, and concentrating deeply for extended periods of time—all fundamental to typical university graduate outcomes such as personal development, creativity and innovation and employability.

Indeed, a number of studies critical of student-centred, active learning pedagogies find little or no empirical evidence in direct support of 'adaptive learning'—the assumption that delivery modes must align with students' preferred learning styles to achieve optimal academic results (e.g., Kirschner and Van Merriënboer 2013; Rogowsky, Calhoun and Tallal 2015; Murray and Pérez 2015).

Kirschner and Van Merriënboer (2013: 175) make the point that ‘the preferred way of learning’ is not necessarily ‘the most productive way of learning’. But it is important to remember that academic results are only one aspect of educational quality. What does emerge from a number of studies is that adaptive learning increases student satisfaction, persistence and engagement, all key areas of teaching quality (see Murray and Pérez 2015: 113, 123; Sammel, Weir and Klopper 2014: 104). Quality teaching also produces increased motivation in students, ‘an intermediary variable in the relation between instruction and achievement’ (Jansen 2004: 416). Taking the various perspectives and evidence into account, in a first year context, students should have some autonomy in choosing a learning preference to foster engagement and motivation, but that this choice needs to be appropriately guided considering their development level (Kirschner and Van Merriënboer 2013: 178).

### **The Challenge of Maintaining Quality and Increasing Retention**

Institutional pressures to adopt active and student-centred learning pedagogies are a direct result of the ‘neo-liberalisation’ and ‘massification’ of the university sector outlined in the introduction to this symposium, where the primary focus, certainly in large recruiting institutions, is on retaining the broad middle of the student cohort. At present, the priority across the sector is to increase retention (Munro 2011: 127; Nelson et. al., 2012: 185), so a major focus has been on those students perceived to be at the lower end of the entry spectrum and at risk of dropping out during first year. While entry scores do not predict what grades students achieve at university, they are an indicator of prospective degree completion rates, which have been

found to decline by ATAR decile (Norton 2013: 31). At Griffith University, the previous Student Success Advisors were redesignated in 2014 as Student Success and Retention Advisors (SSRAs), with an expanded role. Each school or department has also appointed a Director for Learning and Teaching, with one of their primary roles being the coordination, implementation and management of the retention strategy.

Prior to the semester, SSRAs identify commencing students whose backgrounds suggest they may be at risk of failing or non-submission of assessment items and dropping out. These students are contacted, interviewed and referred to extra support services, as well as having their progress tracked throughout the semester. SSRAs also monitor early attendance and assessment and directly intervene to help those students perceived to be struggling on these early indicators. They also provide ongoing skills support and mentoring throughout the semester.

Similar to other institutions, Griffith University has also introduced a range of compulsory measures in assessment structure that apply to all first year courses. These are: an early assessment task to be conducted by week four of the semester and worth less than 20 per cent of the overall grade; the opportunity for academic recovery on an assessment piece (those that fail or do not submit on time are invited to resubmit for a maximum grade of 50 per cent); and supplementary assessment for students finishing with a final grade of 3 (45-49 per cent). In addition, course conveners are encouraged to 'scaffold' the early weeks of courses more effectively to introduce students more slowly and progressively to unfamiliar material, and provide skills training and formative feedback on assessment items.

1001GIR International Relations was substantially redesigned for the 2014 Retention Strategy. Content was restructured and streamlined for a less steep learning curve in the early weeks of the semester. In 2013, the University produced a report on *Commencing Students' Perceptions of Challenging Courses* from student survey data. This identified 1001GIR as 'high interest' and 'high challenge' and indicated that many students were overwhelmed by the volume and density of unfamiliar conceptual, theoretical and historical material over the first four weeks (Griffith University 2013). Consistent with most IR textbooks (see review in Lee-Koo 2015), the course commenced in week 1 with key concepts in IR, an overview of IR theory (week 2) followed by international history (week 3) and then an in-class invigilated multiple-choice test in week 4 as the early assessment item. The restructuring saw an introductory video, short lecture and housekeeping in week 1, key concepts in week 2, and modern history and political geography spread over weeks 3 and 4. IR theory was moved to the end of the course in week 13.

The early assessment task was changed to a non-invigilated online quiz with two attempts possible, due in week 5. Class time in week 5 was dedicated to workshops focused on research and information retrieval skills and academic writing. Students were encouraged to seek formative feedback on their research essays as the major assessment piece. Across both campuses, ten students were invited to resubmit essays under the academic recovery policy and six re-submitted to pass. The final exam consisted of six short answer (200-250 word) responses to a list of concepts, organisations and events in IR covered after week 5 of the semester. A pool of ten terms from which the six were drawn was provided to students in advance.

In comparison with 2013, this combination of formative and summative assessment and academic recovery resulted in a much lower failure rate in 2014 for students that attempted all assessment items. This is consistent with research suggesting 'that the incorporation of both formative and summative assessment helps to build confidence, a positive attitude towards learning and successful engagement with the cognitive demands of the programme' (Crosley and Heagney 2009: 15; see also Yorke 2001). At the Nathan campus in Brisbane, the failure rate (49 per cent or less) was 3.7 per cent compared with 14.4 per cent in 2013. At the Gold Coast, it was 2.7 per cent compared with 4.8 per cent for 2013. Most of these students were eligible for supplementary exams leaving an actual failure rate of 1.2 per cent across both campuses. This was a substantial improvement and seems attributable to the changes made for the 2014 Retention Strategy.

But with these changes, the overall grade distribution moved upward on the spectrum as might be expected, which illustrates a countervailing problem with the institutional demand for retention: how to maintain challenging enough content and critical engagement to stimulate the high ability students while also improving standards at the middle to lower end. For example at Nathan campus, in 2014 10.2 per cent of students achieved a High Distinction, compared with 3.6 per cent in 2013. At the Gold Coast campus, the corresponding figures were 12.8 per cent in 2014 and 7.9 per cent in 2013. The consequences of the retention strategy were a lower failure rate but an upward move in the grade distribution. Streaming the course in the manner described below would go some way to addressing the nexus between increasing retention and maintaining teaching quality and student engagement for the entire cohort.



The nature of the cohort, and the imperative for good student evaluations and degree retention rates, require teaching staff to be friendly, approachable and readily available in person or by e-mail. The quality of individual teachers is crucial to student success in the first year (Taylor 2013a: 43). Putting together a good teaching team with quality sessional staff generally requires a high-level of mentoring to bring on new postgraduate students in these roles, as others leave. A related important element is to foster a personal, mentoring approach as course convenor. This is time-consuming with large numbers but critically important, especially for high achieving students, who are most likely to go on to postgraduate studies in IR. For the health of IR as a discipline, undergraduate teaching is crucial to the identification and mentoring of potential postgraduate and higher-degree research students (Norton 2013: 15). Being noticed by staff and personally congratulated on outstanding work is one of the 'pay-offs' for high achievers in large classes where the institutional focus is on the middle to lower end of the grade spectrum.

### **Where to From Here?**

The question remains of how to better accommodate the diverse learning needs and styles of contemporary students with university imperatives for retention, while also providing a quality and ideally, inspiring, experience for PaIR students. In early 2015, 64 first year subject descriptions (or full course outlines where available) in PaIR across all Australian universities were reviewed. While acknowledging the limitations in the information that universities make publicly available, the survey suggested that there is a range of blended learning practices being used inside and outside of

the classroom, but in particular, significant innovation and variation in formative and summative assessment design.

Yet what was striking was that there was almost complete uniformity in class structures. Nearly all subjects identified as first year according to their course code featured the traditional two hour lecture, one hour tutorial format (or two one hour lectures and one hour tutorial per week in a number of instances). There were only a few exceptions to this: University of South Australia (POLI1010 Intro to International Relations; POLI1018 International Relations Theory), Swinburne (POL10002 International Politics) and Southern Cross University (POL10023 Peace, War and International Politics) provide a one hour lecture and a two hour tutorial/workshop. Deakin (AIR108 International Relations; AIR120 Australia and the World) and Murdoch (POL133 Intro to Politics) courses have only two contact hours per week (one lecture; one tutorial/workshop), with other content delivered online; and La Trobe's POL1EEH International Relations and the Global Economy is run as a three hour seminar. Longer workshops or seminars, depending on student numbers, do allow significantly greater opportunity for more applied active and problem-based learning tasks.

What this uniformity suggests is a distinct lack of scope in the Australian university sector to 'create a pedagogically and intellectually fruitful mix' of students (Newson 2004: 233-34), with varied classroom and assessment tasks based on different student learning needs and styles. One way to do this is to challenge the inevitable bureaucratic and timetabling constraints to incorporate an active or problem-based learning stream within a course. This is fraught with challenges in a first year, first semester context with large numbers. Successful active learning

requires a reasonable level of prior knowledge or preparation to meaningfully deploy simulations, structured debates or similar tasks (Shaw 2004: 1; Taylor 2009: 129).

The method preferred, and increasingly encouraged by curriculum designers, would be to move the course content fully online with video or audio podcast modules integrated with multimedia and text materials (NMC 2014: 8). Class time could then be spent fully on active learning tasks, skills development and assessment preparation (Taylor 2009: 120). As with all strategies for teaching innovation, this is likely to be successful with responsible, motivated and committed students, but near impossible for a significant minority of the cohort, who now struggle with strongly guided lecture material and text readings.

Research from the United States has found that average undergraduate compliance with reading assignments is in the 20 to 30 per cent range, with 40 per cent of first year students also admitting to never or rarely participating in class discussion (Slagter and Scribner 2014: 81-82). Another study has found that podcasting course materials was not welcomed by around 50 per cent of students who reported that the podcasts created more work than reading and were hard to focus on, or to retrieve information from (Taylor 2009: 125). This type of course design also overestimates the digital literacy of students. A number of recent studies demonstrate clearly that the 'digital native' assumption is overstated and oversimplified in educational contexts (e.g., Kirschner and Van Merriënboer 2013; Calvani et. al. 2012; Jones et. al. 2010; Margaryan, Littlejohn and Vojt 2011). Research findings suggest that while 'the vast majority of students' are 'able to perform very technical and procedural activities using computers and the Internet', this 'should not lead us to the conclusion that the new generation of students has

developed sophisticated technological abilities' (Calvani et. al. 2012: 805). Particularly lacking is critical digital literacy, as opposed to what Calvani et. al. (2012: 805) term 'a "copy and paste" literacy'. It is likely that a sizeable number of students would attend classes under the scenario sketched above having done little or inadequate online preparation to allow for a meaningful active learning workshop. This will frustrate prepared and motivated students, who will either have their time wasted or be forced to carry 'free riders' through in-class tasks.

My favoured approach is to continue with a shorter 1.5-hour lecture as the primary mode of delivery for course content, with recording for those unable to attend, and to stream longer tutorial classes into workshop groups and recalibrate assessment tasks to suit each stream. Three streams are envisaged under this approach to provide a level of guided autonomy for first year students in aligning their learning preferences and objective needs with teaching methods. There would be: (1) a 'capacity-building' stream; (2) active learning stream; and (3) traditional reading and discussion-based stream. Not all students want a student-centred, active learning approach, for a number of reasons including perceived lack of structure, concerns about inadequate prior knowledge or experience, the extra work that may be involved (Taylor 2013a: 42-43) and aversion to group work (Wheeler 2006: 336). Stream 3 would thus be the default enrolment, with 1 and 2 requiring students to opt in. Guidance as to which stream might be most suitable would be provided in the enrolment process, orientation and in week 1 of the semester. A diagnostic quiz could be used to gain an indication of students' learning styles. SSRAs would also have a role in assessing and recommending a particular stream to students.

The default stream 3 would continue in the traditional reading, question and discussion-based tutorial format. The terms 'default' and 'traditional' does not imply that this stream would receive less attention from staff or be a shallower learning environment. Students with a preference for reading and writing and a more reflective disposition would continue to thrive in this stream. Stream 1 would be recommended for the majority of international students, those concerned about their English-language skills or academic preparedness and others that prefer a highly structured and supported approach. Workshop classes for the capacity-building stream would be more slowly paced, and directly reinforce the course content and prepare students for assessment with formative tasks. Stream 2 would be opt-in and recommended for students who want to be challenged with a deeper immersion in real-world IR dilemmas and policy contexts. It might involve a simulation or other structured role-play activity, such as a UN Security Council debate over a humanitarian intervention, for example, as the main semester activity supported by preparatory and reflective assessment tasks (Taylor 2013b: 140).

Simulations of this nature would be particularly effective in IR. Many first year students have an interest in global politics and international security issues but often do not recognise the complex factors and power relations influencing the formulation and implementation of policies. In other words, students do not feel what it is like to be a decision-maker, carrying the burden of responsibility within a context of limited opportunities and highly constrained choices. Students would learn how governments define national interests and values and manage the competing pressures of domestic political constituencies and international partners, rivals and adversaries, in addition to campaigning and lobbying from international

NGOs. Such experiential learning would immerse students in a real world crisis situation in order to develop a deeper understanding of the dynamics of IR.

There is a dearth of published research on the use of simulations or other active learning tasks in the Australian political science classroom, but there is a range of overseas studies, mostly from North America (e.g., Kille 2002; Shaw 2004; Shellman and Turan 2006; Wheeler 2006; Simpson and Kausler 2009; Taylor 2013b; Giovanello et.al. 2013). Taylor (2013b: 134) notes that the 'literature on IR pedagogy finds that active learning activities have great potential when well designed to produce deeper learning of international affairs and IR theories and thereby improve students' ability to apply, analyse, and evaluate information and approaches'. More broadly, they help to retain knowledge more effectively and also develop generic practical skills in communication and negotiation and greater awareness of the complexities of moral dilemmas and political reasoning (Taylor 2013b: 137). Another overlooked objective for active learning tasks is simply that of having fun. An engaging, enjoyable and positive experience in first year is likely to engender continued enthusiasm for PaIR (Kille 2002: 273; Shaw 2004: 4).

There is also very little published literature on streaming of classes by ability or learning style in a university context. This seems attributable to the assumption that for students to have met tertiary-level entry requirements, they must have similar academic abilities and ought to be taught in the same way. With the massification of the tertiary sector and the increasingly diverse nature of the student body, this is no longer the case. Although it is often used, streaming of classes in schools by ability has tended to be discredited in the education literature because of the effects on teaching motivation and expectations, student self-esteem and equity

concerns (Johnston and Wildy 2016; Stevens and Vermeersch 2010). Mixed ability grouping is the norm in most school contexts comparable to Australia. Research from vocational education suggests that the ‘capacity building’ stream identified above for academically weaker students need not attract negative stigma, provided learning outcomes remain the same as in other streams and high expectations are maintained by staff for all students (Tanggaard, Nielsen and Jørgensen 2015).

Database searches revealed only one study of streaming in a university context, involving first year accounting and physics students at the University of Auckland, New Zealand (Jones, Harris and Putt 1990). Accountancy students were streamed based on prior experience with accounting, rather than on general academic ability. Physics students were streamed based on prior academic performance in physics. The study concluded that both students and teachers held more positive attitudes to the streamed courses and that pass rates improved relative to previous offerings. The implications of this were that students were ‘persuaded to continue with the particular subject’ and that it was effective for students to ‘approach learning tasks in that subject in the most intellectually valuable manner’ (Jones, Harris and Putt 1990: 28). While this evidence is very limited, it affords—in conjunction with the other factors examined above—qualified support for a trial streaming of classes in a first year IR context.

Streaming the course in the way described would go some way to providing a higher quality experience by better meeting the disparate learning needs, expectations and preferences of the entire cohort. It would offer a special, high performance and engaged task, for those really interested in IR and keen to be more actively involved in their studies. A simulation would, at the same time,

accommodate students with a kinaesthetic learning style, who might present as weaker learners in a traditional academic setting. A well-designed and structured simulation, with different roles and responsibilities for the players, will provide a stimulating and challenging environment for the higher-ability students while improving standards across the board. These strategies have application across many tertiary study areas, but the subject matter of PaIR features an almost infinite variety of scenarios that are particularly germane to these approaches.

This course structure would, however, add to academic workload. In the first instance, there would be enrolment, timetabling and venue problems and constraints under current processes. A proposal such as this would also run up against bureaucratic requirements for standardisation, equity and 'quality assurance'. The literature on active learning in IR does point out that such approaches incur a large cost on teaching staff; and that 'the time commitment for the professor tends to be much greater than that for a primarily lecture-based course' (Taylor 2013b: 136; also Wheeler 2006: 335). The idea of permanent academic staff taking up more of the teaching delivery runs counter to individual and often departmental academic priorities for research as discussed in the introduction to this symposium. For most Australian academics on a balanced profile, there may be little practical incentive to develop and undertake such changes as envisaged here, as 'research active' definitions become more stringent at all levels of academic career progression and pressure to perform in research seems to be intensifying.

As a counter to this trend, it is important to emphasise to university management obsessed with research 'impact' and industry 'linkages' that for many academics in the humanities and social sciences, our main community or industry



'impact' is via the inspiring and quality learning experience we provide for our students. For those committed to teaching for intrinsic reasons, or employed on a teaching-focused profile, there are also beneficial opportunities and experience in scholarship of learning and teaching associated with such innovations.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has examined the nature of first year IR teaching in Australia and canvassed current strategies and approaches within the context of challenges many of which derive from massification and neoliberalism. The 'neo-liberalisation' of the tertiary education sector, which has produced cost pressures and market competition, has been met by economies of scale in degree programs and courses taught. First year foundational classes in IR have become very large, often with hundreds of students, including non-PaIR students fulfilling a compulsory requirement. In order to retain students, universities have become very focused on the first year experience, with ancillary staff, support services and assessment policy dedicated specifically to this end. Pressures to broaden and intensify the use of ICTs or move to further online delivery are constant. In order to address teaching quality within this context, Biggs and Tang's (2011) pedagogical framework of 'constructive alignment' has been developed to establish a teaching approach and delivery mode to stimulate and challenge high-ability students, while at the same time improving standards, student engagement and retention across the entire cohort.

In the current Australian university setting, with Griffith as an example of a large non-elite, recruiting institution, the most successful approach to improve the quality of first year IR teaching and to accommodate the preferred learning styles

and objective learning needs of all students in these courses, is to run in multiple streams, with one dedicated to providing a richer, more active learning experience. Allowing students a level of guided autonomy in aligning their learning preferences with teaching methods is likely to increase satisfaction, engagement and motivation, as the literature suggests, thereby improving retention and degree progression beyond the first year. Motivation may also indirectly improve academic results. It is envisaged that the active learning component would involve a simulation or similar role-playing game for a deeper immersion in an IR or foreign policy issue. This will provide a richer, more enjoyable learning experience for students receptive to this approach. An inspiring learning experience in first year will ensure that greater levels of knowledge are retained for higher year courses, but just as importantly, will spark greater student enthusiasm for PaIR.

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