Enquiring and reflecting on teaching and learning IR theory

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Research Tutored: Using a storyline approach to help students understand the difference between structure and fluidity in research knowledge.

Latest research in International Relations (IR) highlights a tension between structure and fluidity at the heart of the discipline. This presents an important challenge to those who attempt to teach the discipline. On the one hand, the structure of the discipline offers a useful map that holds the discipline together and prevents it from disintegration. Therefore, when students learn IR theories, they learn about realism, liberalism, Marxism, feminism, etc., and these 'isms' present the structure that holds the discipline together. On the other hand, this same structure is problematised in the research for reifying disciplinary history, overlooking overlaps between the theories, and legitimising colonial practices. In teaching the second year IR theory module at Birmingham I therefore asked myself: how can IR be taught today in a manner that maintains this tension between structure and fluidity at the heart of the discipline?

To maintain this tension, to offer the students a structured discipline but also engaging them with latest scholarship that problematises such structures, I employed a twofold method that combines the storyline approach with the discussion-based exercises. The storyline approach enhances the students' grasp of the theories that build the structure of the discipline. Specifically, it familiarises the students with the 'story' of IR as a dialogue between theorists that developed over time. For example, the module begins with classical realism and its argument on the struggle for power in the international being rooted in human nature. The following week the teaching moves to neo-realism and starts with its engagement with and critique of the classical realist assumptions about human nature, before it then explains the neo-realist argument on the struggle for power in the international being rooted in anarchy. This way the students do not simply learn the concept of anarchy in neo-realism but also where it is situated in the story of IR (i.e. in relation to previous arguments on human nature in classical realism).

The exercises on the other hand include activities such as video analysis, group exercises and speech analysis.

Students engage in these activities to apply the theories to a video or speech but to also use the latter to problematise the assumptions within these theories and therefore the 'story' they previously learned about IR. In tandem, these two approaches counterbalanced structure and fluidity at the heart of latest research in the discipline by neither allowing the former dominate and gloss over the latter, nor letting the latter take over to the extent that there is no more discipline left to teach.