

Book Review

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TEACHING POLITICS AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Editors: Cathy Gormley-Heenan and Simon Lightfoot

In the context of an academic landscape focused mainly on research output, this volume puts teaching excellence in Politics and International Relations in the spotlight. By showcasing various approaches and methodologies used in teaching political science, the book constitutes a valuable guide for educators at all stages in their careers and aims to contribute to enriching Politics curriculum design and to encourage the adoption of innovative pedagogical techniques. The body of literature dealing with teaching and learning design in political science is still considerably less extensive compared to similar output in other disciplines. This volume thus represents a welcome addition to the research on pedagogical aspects in Politics and IR, providing an insight into various discipline-specific teaching tools and methods.

Starting from a broader perspective, whereby Penny Welch (chapter 1) looks at the changing context for teaching Politics and IR and John Craig (chapter 2) outlines the specific features of this discipline that need to be reflected in pedagogical approaches, the volume then moves towards a more down-to-earth analysis of various tools and techniques, with an emphasis on active learning and alternatives to the traditional lecture/seminar format, such as using simulations, blogs, e-learning or social media. Closely linked to the teaching methods, assessment practices are tackled by Alasdair Blair and Sam McGinty (chapter 8), on the basis that they need to be synchronised with the learning goals and the design of the curriculum and the course activities.

The chapters that follow address specific aspects of the Politics and IR curriculum that present deeper pedagogical challenges, such as gender issues in 'Contemporary Politics: Using the 'F' Word and Teaching Gender in International Relations' by Christina Rowley and Laura J. Shepherd (chapter 11), terrorism in 'Contemporary Politics: Teaching the 'Contested Concepts' - International Terrorism Taught To Undergraduate Students in a Multicultural Environment' by Knut Roder (chapter 12) and race in 'Teaching Race and Ethnicity: Towards an Engaged, Anti-Racist Pedagogy' by Steve Spencer (chapter 13). Grounding contemporary politics in a deeper understanding of political theory is, as Lee Marsden and Heather Savigny point out (chapter 9), one of the challenges educators are facing, as they need to emphasise constantly the need for a thorough theoretical background when analysing 'real world' events.

In the final chapters of the volume, the focus shifts from content towards skills (research, thesis supervision) and, more importantly, to what a Politics degree curriculum should include in order to satisfy an increasingly demanding student population and a dynamic job market, a topic addressed in the concluding chapter 'From Politics Past to Politics Future: Addressing the Employability Agenda Through a Professional Politics Curriculum' by Matthew Wyman, Jennifer Lees-Marshment and Jon Herbert (chapter 17).

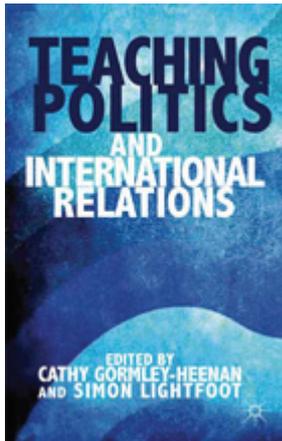
The book offers a review of the state of the art in teaching and learning Politics and IR and, thus, constitutes a comprehensive compendium of best practice in a wide variety of pedagogically related

topics. While the content flows naturally from a general overview of the discipline and the challenges educators are currently facing towards more specific considerations linked to building the curriculum and choosing suitable teaching methods, the volume would have benefited from a more rigorous organisation, grouping the chapters under several overarching themes. Formally dividing the book into three sections (setting the scene - what makes Politics different; teaching tools and methods; designing and refining the curriculum: knowledge and skills) would have improved the overall coherence, providing the reader with a quick insight into the internal logic of the volume and the essentials of its content.

While topic-wise the book remains generously wide in scope, as far as its geographical coverage is concerned it is mainly limited to contributions from scholars within the United Kingdom, one of the main reasons being that a large amount of research on the topic is currently being undertaken in the UK. Notwithstanding the specificities of the British education system, the insights provided are applicable to a certain extent to academic environments elsewhere in Europe and beyond. However, in order to offer a more comprehensive yet more nuanced account of teaching Politics and IR, contributions from further afield would have been a valuable addition to the volume.

'Teaching Politics and IR' can be read as a handbook on pedagogical practices in political science, a useful resource for both early career lecturers and more experienced academics aiming to redesign their curricula and refresh their teaching methods. Bearing in mind that, compared to similar literature in the natural sciences, there is still relatively little written on pedagogical approaches in Politics, this book definitely constitutes a notable step towards a hopefully more elaborate body of research on the educational aspects of the discipline. Beyond the undoubtable practical value, the various chapters and the volume itself are not framed within broader learning theories, remaining a collection of context-dependent, albeit rich, best practices. A stronger link to educational research, as well as a more coherent research design throughout the various chapters, yielding comparable results, would have enhanced the contribution the book brings to the overall body of literature on the topic. Moreover, in order to establish a connection with the general research on pedagogical practices, independent of disciplines, a further level of abstraction would need to be added, whereby the essentials of teaching Politics and IR are showcased as an illustration of more general pedagogical principles.

In an ever-changing Higher Education landscape, with various challenges ahead, focusing on teaching excellence becomes increasingly relevant. Reflecting on one's pedagogical practices and curriculum design, as well as sharing and collaborating with peers are essential elements in developing and maintaining a professional network providing both academic and practical outputs. In this context, 'Teaching Politics and International Relations' offers a very useful state-of-the-discipline overview with a practical added value and is thus recommended reading for anyone interested in innovating their teaching methods, bringing a fresh approach to the curriculum or developing new courses and programmes.



BIBLIOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

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