

Book Review

Alexandra Mihai, *Institute for European Studies, Vrije Universiteit Brussel*

HANDBOOK ON TEACHING AND LEARNING IN POLITICAL SCIENCE AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Editors: John Ishiyama, William J. Miller and Eszter Simon

Abstract

An essential guide for Political Science educators at all stages in their career. This solid compendium offers a state of the discipline overview of teaching practices and challenges, providing a sound base for designing engaging active learning activities.

Key Words

Politics; International Relations; Teaching and learning; Active learning

In an academic environment where research often seems to be more valued than teaching, this volume seeks to bring back the balance by shifting the focus towards pedagogical practices in Political Science and International Relations (IR). Designed as a practical tool aimed at educators at all stages in their career, the *Handbook on Teaching and Learning in Political Science and International Relations* represents a useful addition to the existing literature and an essential guide to curriculum building and pedagogical methods in this discipline. The Handbook is a solid compendium of best practices and ideas for teaching innovation and it constitutes a valuable contribution to the scholarship of teaching and learning from a discipline that is often under-represented in terms of research on pedagogical aspects.

This comprehensive volume brings together 37 contributions grouped in three parts: curriculum and course design; teaching subject areas; and in-class teaching techniques. The chapters in the first section focus on overarching aspects of learning design, such as curriculum building, outlining the evolution of curricular models in the USA (chapter 1), distance and online learning (chapter 5), assessment - both at programme and at course level - as an integral part of the course design cycle (chapters 7, 8 and 9), building cross-disciplinary learning communities (chapter 10), as well as

promoting skills development and civic engagement as goals of Political Science education (chapters 6, 11 and 13). A recurrent theme in this part, revisited in the rest of the volume, is 'constructive alignment', the idea that all the pieces of the learning design puzzle, starting with building the curriculum, on to choosing the teaching methods and eventually the assessment types have to be carefully planned and executed to match, ultimately, the learning goals. Students' engagement with their own learning is seen as potentially leading to an active involvement in political and civic life and is thus a skill that needs to be nurtured by political science courses. Similarly, information literacy (chapter 11) is a vital component of Higher Education in general, with specific relevance for the disciplines under discussion due to the large amount of information available, requiring the students to develop advanced search and processing skills.

Moving towards a more practical dimension, the second part of the Handbook offers valuable teaching strategies for specific topics or subject areas. Active learning methods such as simulations, debates and the use of multimedia material as a starting point for discussion are recommended by Watson, Hamner, Oldmixon and King for engaging students in Introduction to Politics classes (chapter 14), by Agnieszka Paczynska for teaching conflict and conflict resolution (chapter 15) and by Fiona Buckley in the context of teaching gender politics (chapter 17). Mitchell Brown (chapter 18) and Christina Leston-Bandeira (chapter 19) focus on teaching research methods at graduate and undergraduate level respectively, emphasising the need for methods courses to be thoroughly integrated into the curriculum and for students to reflect on the research process and understand the direct link with their future careers. While experimenting with new pedagogical methods is very important in the endeavour to provide students with a positive learning experience, Rebecca Glazier (chapter 23) reminds educators that, in order to be effective, innovation should take place within the framework of their own teaching style.

The third part brings a series of in-class teaching techniques to the fore. The overall focus, similarly to the volume as a whole, is on active, student-centered learning. This can take various forms, such as: simulations, as illustrated by Asal, Raymond and Usherwood (chapter 26) and Boyer and Smith (chapter 27), group work (chapter 28), team-based learning as discussed by Andreas Broscheid (chapter 29), experiential learning (chapter 30) and Problem-Based Learning as Heidi Maurer explains in chapter 31. From their respective perspectives, the authors address the most important aspects of active learning: students playing an active role in their learning helps them better understand complex issues; the classroom seen as a collaborative rather than a competitive environment; and, finally, a constant reminder of key elements to be carefully tackled: debriefing, feedback and encouraging student self-reflection. Kas and Sheppard offer interesting tips on making the most of large class teaching (chapter 35), from how to make lecturing more appealing, to introducing interactive elements and the vital aspect of communication and classroom management; while Gabriela Pleschova assesses the use of three technology tools in the Political Science classroom (chapter 25). Ishiyama and Rodriguez make a very relevant point by bringing the reader 'back to the basics' of syllabus design (chapter 24). The syllabus, in their view, plays the role of a roadmap, outlining the most important aspects of the learning process; it serves as a guide to both students and educators and thus needs to be written in very clear language in order to manage course expectations.

While the book covers a wide range of topics touching upon the different levels of the teaching and learning process, in geographical terms the contributions are mainly written by scholars from the United States and the United Kingdom, with fewer than a quarter of all authors representing other countries. Considering the fact that some of the chapters are intrinsically linked to the respective national context regarding education policies and university organisation, the volume could have benefitted from a more geographically diverse pool of contributors, in order to offer a more comprehensive yet more nuanced account of teaching Politics and IR.

Each of the three parts constitutes a valuable source of reflections on various pedagogical practices in Political Science and IR, thus making the Handbook a very useful reference tool for every stage of the teaching and learning cycle, from curriculum design, to methods and approaches to specific topics. In order to showcase the rich content in a user-friendlier manner, the chapters could have been grouped in clearly divided sub-sections (i.e. sub-sections on assessment and skills acquisition in the first part, a sub-section on active learning in the third part), thus reinforcing the overall coherence of the volume. Moreover, as most of the contributions, especially in parts two and three, outline teaching strategies or methods in a specific area, the use of an in-chapter template, whereby all authors observe a certain structure and address similar issues, would have added to the clarity and consistency of the Handbook.

The overarching theme of active learning is addressed in detail in the third part of the Handbook, through seven different contributions, ranging from group work and team learning to simulations and Problem-Based Learning. Each chapter, reflecting the experience of the author(s), represents an insightful set of practical recommendations aimed to inspire and support Political Science educators. Grouping these parts into a specific sub-section and connecting them in order to avoid overlaps and enhance their message would have allowed the reader to place specific methods into a broader context and grasp potential synergies.

While the size and richness of content are commendable, a meticulously designed structure was required in order to strengthen the Handbook's potential for becoming a helpful reference tool in the process of course design. Although the general organisation in the three parts does offer a certain amount of guidance, the diversity of topics tackled within each part requires a reinforced narrative structure, with mini-summaries at the end of each part, outlining the core themes and connecting the chapters while steering the reader through the content of the volume. Jeffrey Bernstein's chapter on the Scholarship of Teaching could have served as an opening to the Handbook, framing the issues to be addressed. Moreover, a final conclusion, linking the substance of the book with general educational concepts, would have allowed the readers to look at their teaching practice from a broader, non-discipline related perspective.

Teaching excellence is increasingly becoming relevant in this ever-changing academic landscape. Continuous professional development, not least through networks providing a framework for best practice exchange, is an essential factor in designing a rewarding learning experience. In this context, the *Handbook on Teaching and Learning in Political Science and International Relations* offers a valuable overview of the pedagogical practices and challenges in this discipline while aiming to equip educators with a useful set of practical tools for and ideas on innovating their teaching and designing engaging courses and programmes.

BIBLIOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

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