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2007

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POSTGRADUATE CERTIFICATE IN TEACHING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Cylch Dysgu 1 | Teaching Cycle 1

Teaching International History in an International Politics Department

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Teaching Cycle One: Teaching International History in an International Politics Department

This paper explores some of the opportunities and challenges presented by offering courses in international history in a department of international politics. I was very aware of some of the challenges when I was first appointed at Aberystwyth and I was very grateful for the comments from my peers when I went on the THE induction course that made me focus on this area more (see appendix A). Therefore I intend to show here the opportunities as well as the problems of offering courses in international history to students who study international politics. In particular, I will show how the literature on the nature of 'international history' and related subjects in recent years can be connected to the development of student learning, particularly in relation to reflective learning.

Many of my colleagues research and teach on the fields of international relations theory, or certainly incorporate elements of it in their work. This was quite intimidating when I began my work. It meant that I had to start to incorporate a new language and engage with new ideas. It also made me think that there may have been limitations to my approaches to teaching. Yet I was unclear when I was so new to the discipline how I could incorporate these approaches into my own teaching. Over the last three and a half years, however, I have engaged with some of this material in a limited way, but, from the perspective of this cycle, I have used elements of a more theoretical or at least methodologically driven literature on international history to inform my teaching and demonstrate to students the importance of such debates, whether it is in history, politics or another discipline.

Studying international history

The subject of 'international history' is one that has aroused much contention in recent years. Its study began in the nineteenth century, when it was more commonly
known as 'Diplomatic History', with a focus on relations between states (mostly European) at the highest level and usually in relation to diplomatic negotiations prior to, during and after wars. The study of this discipline flourished in the twentieth century with the onset of the two world wars and the rise of the United States to global hegemony after 1945. More recently, international history underwent a period of deep introspection in the face of charges from those who argued that it was deeply conservative and lacking in innovation. In 1980, Charles S. Maier, an American historian at Duke University, wrote a scathing attack on the 'Historiography of International Relations' as he called it. In this chapter, Maier argued that the fields of international and diplomatic history were very far from being 'at the cutting edge of scholarship'. Instead, he suggested, the narrowness of some subjects, the limited perspectives of many historians and their lack of foreign language ability had impeded the development of the discipline. Moreover, he claimed that their inability or refusal to incorporate new historiographical approaches, primarily the advances in the study of domestic history, into their field had led to a period of stasis.

Maier's chapter caused a huge reaction. It led many scholars to examine their own work and others to launch their own counter attacks. In another influential article, Gordon Craig followed up Maier's call-to-arms with his own demand for historians to embrace new ideas in their writing. Yet whether or not scholars agreed with Maier, Craig and others, the debates which they at least in part helped to spark have undoubtedly helped to enrich the field of international history. Since the early 1980s, there has been an explosion of new studies tackling important periods and events in recent history and applying new approaches to them. This has been particularly important in relation to the study of the Cold War and some of the best work has

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6 As it is still is in the United States, as evidenced by the influence of the journal Diplomatic History.
8 For a recent overview of the debates, see Patrick Finney, 'Introduction: What is International History?' in Palgrave Advances in International History (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 1-35.
10 Maier, 'Marking Time', p. 355.
attempted to marry different approaches from different disciplines. The need for incorporation of different approaches is essential when, as Alexander deConde suggests, international historians and those who study international relations are very similar creatures, studying some of the same topics and reading many of the same books. While deConde’s assessment may be overly idealistic, and perhaps even slightly naïve, possibly because he is focusing on more traditional aspects of political science within the United States, he is right in the sense that this is something we as teachers should aspire to in and between our respective fields. And while these innovations have been of most immediate benefit to other scholars in the field, my argument in this cycle is that it is also of huge help to the students they teach.

Teaching international history

The new, often interdisciplinary approaches to the study of discipline of ‘international history’ produced over the last 25 years have helped to influence my own approaches to teaching. In effect, part of my job in facilitating understanding among students is to get them to question why things are done in a certain way. Opening them up to differing approaches and encouraging them to bring their own areas of expertise to particular areas is essential. John Cowan, for example, poses a highly pertinent question raising concerns about problems within the British system that tie staff into certain disciplinary areas. He asks: ‘In your own self-directed development as a university teacher, do you make sufficient efforts to establish working contacts with academics in disciplines other than your own? [Emphasis in original]’ Cowan then goes to suggest that contact with other disciplines has been most profitable for him and also that teaching approaches can be adapted and translated into suitable forms for our own students. This supports a broader idea suggested by Jennifer Moon that it is essential for students to think much more broadly and connect their learning to other experiences they have in all areas of their lives.

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13 See, for example, Odd Anne Westad (ed.), Reviewing the Cold War: Approaches, Interpretations, Theory (London and Portland: Frank Cass, 2000).
15 Cowan, On Becoming an Innovative University Teacher, p. 121.
Greg Light and Roy Cox suggest that the need to form an appropriate language in what they term 'the storm' of modern academic life is essential. This language must be produced within the broader changes taking place within academia today:

Such a language must be suitable open and elastic to accommodate a diversity of personal circumstances within rapidly shifting curriculum expansion and development; over a wide range of disciplines (and their escalating disciplinary and interdisciplinary 'contours'); set within a diverse cluster of higher education departments and institutions. ¹⁷

This sentiment captures some of my own aims regarding the incorporation of these continually developing approaches. While many of my colleagues research and teach in a certain 'language' and I can adopt and adapt some of that in my own teaching and research, it is also important for me and my students to reflect on the kind of language we use to discuss certain topics in our study.

Building on Cowan's model (Figure 3), an important part of the process for the student is the prior knowledge and experience. All of the students I teach have training in a related field, even if it is not the field of the history of American foreign policy. Indeed, sometimes it can be better if their experience lies outside of this field because they will bring alternative approaches to the subject. For example, if a student has a background in economics, they will bring markedly different prior knowledge and language than someone who has a background in British politics. Yet this can be illuminating and through the reflective process students can incorporate and discard approaches as and when they see fit (loop B on Cowan’s model).

As discussed above, although I had some considerable teaching experience while undertaking my PhD, my teaching had almost all been on courses convened by other, more senior members of staff. This meant that the structure of the course was in essence already decided and that although I could develop certain themes and ideas within this framework, the material and approaches used were not mine. The one exception to this was the First Year course ‘Research Seminar’. At Aberystwyth, I was given much more scope to develop my own courses and approaches to teaching

them. Although I inherited one undergraduate course (America in the World) and ‘team taught’ another with my colleagues (The Vietnam War), I have also been encouraged to develop my own courses on the US-UK ‘Special Relationship’ and the Evolution of American Foreign Policy, as well as a Masters course on the legacies of the Vietnam War (The Vietnam Syndrome and American Foreign Policy). For the purposes of this paper, I shall concentrate on my experiences at undergraduate level, especially America in the World, The Evolution of American Foreign Policy and US-UK ‘Special Relationship’. Over the last 3 years, I have developed these three courses with the developments in the historiography of international history and American foreign relations very much in mind.

During my first year (2003-4), I focused on establishing the course in a way that students would find engaging, pointing out developments in the literature and guiding them in terms of their reading. In this way, I was ‘finding my feet’ and my approach to lectures and seminars reflected this. When I received feedback from the students at the end of the course, I was particularly struck by a few comments about the nature and focus of the course, particularly one student who said that they expected the course to be about contemporary events and ‘not just a history’ (see appendix PQ). Most of the negative comments, however, related primarily to the availability of reading material in the library, which in effect meant that they were not able to engage with the kind of approaches that I thought they would benefit from. These issues made me more determined to integrate more varied approaches in particular to demonstrate the crucial importance of historical approaches and innovations to gaining an understanding of American power.

By the academic year 2005-6, I was much surer of the areas that worked and did not work. I found that students responded particularly well to debates between particular scholars on a particular topic or issue. In this way, one could argue that this related more closely to students’ expectation of a course in an international politics department, where much of the focus tends to be on contending theories or approaches to the study of a particular area. \[8\] In particular, I emphasised the new and

\[8\] For a good introduction to these debates, see Holsti in Explaining the History.
exciting approaches, how these could be related to theoretical aspects and what these implied for our understanding of the particular topic and the subject more generally.

I was given further opportunity to develop these approaches through new courses. In 2004-5, I put on a new undergraduate course and I chose US-UK relations. This field is one that I have been interested in for some time and I have been particularly keen to develop it as it relates very closely to my own research. Yet despite the obvious implications of relations between two allies for theories of alliances and the need to understand culture, broadly conceived, relatively little has been written on the possible theoretical basis for the strength of the relationship between Britain and the United States. Yet in one way this seemed to offer opportunities to make the students engage with a relatively limited body of literature in the first lecture that could then be referred to in subsequent sessions and developed by the students themselves in an independent way (see appendix L). To this end, I discuss the broad theories about alliances, specific theories about Britain and the United States, especially on the concept of ‘specialness’ in relations, and the importance of understanding about disagreements and crises in their relations. Most of the literature is written by political scientists or scholars of international relations and therefore borrows from other disciplines, but not in areas that the student would normally be familiar with. This is then used as the basis for the first discussion, but also influences the way that the students develop their thinking and language in subsequent sessions as I then encourage them to do their subsequent reading, normally much more ‘traditional’ in its approach, while thinking about these ideas.

Most recently, I have developed another course, the Evolution of American Foreign Policy. This examines pre-twentieth century events and ideas, with the intention of showing some of the longer-term influences on contemporary US international relations. Again, this has been very much informed by the academic debates on the state of the discipline, specifically those that have focused on the paucity of recent

studies on the earlier period of American foreign relations and the need to bring new approaches and focuses to it. It helps in no small part that my enthusiasm for this area has been fired in large part by my desire to research in this field in the near future and it was my hope that in formulating this course I could stimulate students to think of American foreign policy as a continuum rather than seeing clear 'breaks' in 1914, 1945 or 1990. In this way, I would make the topics seem relevant as well as intrinsically interesting.

One of the methods I used once again involves the application of some of these new approaches, which have tentatively tried to apply some of the developing concepts to the field. In appendix L I have provided the approach I adopted in a lecture on the Spanish-American war of 1898. This is one of the final lectures of the course and immediately follows a lecture on the changing nature of American ideology and the domestic influences on international politics at the time. Building upon this, I make clear that not only would I develop the key themes of this period (most notably American 'imperialism' and the laying of the foundations for American power in the Twentieth Century) but that I would provide a historical and analytical framework for analysis, which would include some of these new approaches. These included issues relating to race and how this may have affected American approaches to their subjugation of peoples in the Philippines, how gender, notably notions of 'manhood' and 'chivalry', influenced actions and finally new ideas about the place of economics and power in the war. Crucially, it was necessary to give students time at the end of this session to reflect, ask questions and develop their thoughts. I specifically highlighted that these issues would be developed in more detail in the two-hour seminar.

In both of these cases, changes to the way I developed essential and suggested readings allowed me to do this more effectively. For US-UK relations, I always

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20 See, for example, Michael H. Hunt, 'Introduction' in Paths to Power: The Historiography of American Foreign Relations to 1941 (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000); Maier, 'Marking Time', pp. 376-7; Iriye, 'Internationalizing International History', pp. 59-60

wanted to produce a list of essential reading for each week’s class. Complaints about
the difficulty of finding books in the library initially led me to think about how I could
improve student interaction with texts in order to allow them to reflect, and this has
been reinforced by my thinking about the developing nature of the discipline and the
need to engage with different bodies of literature. In recent years, one of the
innovations has been the availability of academic journals on the web (e-journals). By
carefully sifting through material and making sure it was available, I could place
articles down as ‘essential reading’ knowing that as long as students had access to a
computer, which I assumed they had, they would be able to ready with this literature,
reflect upon it and come to class ready to engage. Although it is not exactly what he
discusses, I hope that John Biggs would approve of this use of ‘Educational
Technology’.22 For the Evolution of American Foreign Policy course, my life was
made easier by the publication of a new edition of a textbook that matched many of
my expectations of how to incorporate these new ideas.23 This book offers both
primary documents, so that students can engage directly with what people wrote and
said at the time, and several essays per topic offering differing interpretations of
events. I ordered copies for the library and encouraged students to buy a copy each or
between two people, to encourage further interaction out of the class. Both of these
approaches have proved to be very successful in engaging students and encouraging
them to reflect upon broader debates.

Yet in providing them with this direction, I try to demonstrate to students their
freedom to explore different avenues of enquiry and adopt their own approaches in
the courses. I have increasingly made it clear, for example, that the topics for
discussion in seminars are indicative only and if they are interested in another aspect,
either from one of my lectures or a book or article they read, they should develop it,
perhaps in a seminar presentation or through questions to the peers within the groups.
In particular, I try to emphasise that the different approaches are not necessarily
limiting in the sense that they close off other avenues. Christopher Thome notes in his
excellent book Border Crossings that the very notion of ‘contending approaches’ has

22 John Biggs, Teaching for Quality at University (2nd ed. Buckingham, SRHE and Open University
23 Dennis Merrill and Thomas G. Paterson, Major Problems in the History of American Foreign
negative connotations, as if one approach has to take precedence over another.\textsuperscript{24} If
there is one aspect that unites the social sciences and arts subjects, it is that there is no
'right answer' and this is something I try to demonstrate to my students in lectures, by
focusing on these differing approaches, and in seminars through discussion and
debate. This also, I hope, means that students will have the courage to explore these
different avenues of enquiry because they will not feel restricted about what is 'right'
or 'wrong'. Indeed, many of the best conclusions about these different approaches is
that we need to consider several or many in order to understand how a change came
about, although certain ones may be more important.

Reflections and Limitations

So far I have discussed the importance of bringing new approaches to the study of the
discipline by introducing students to new ideas and bodies of literature but also
encouraging them to bring their own experiences and allow them the freedom to
explore their own ideas. In this way I have tried to incorporate elements of the models
produced by Kolb and Cowan. I certainly try to bring elements of Cowan's extended
Kolb loop in bringing ideas from other disciplines (the prior knowledge) into the
discussion, allowing students to reflect. Yet Cowan's model is quite specific in terms
of its timeframe and although conducting this over weeks gives students more time to
reflect, the nature of the subject matter means that it can be problematic. Yet as
Cowan himself states, when he designed courses using the model, it was 'as guidance
rather than prescription'.\textsuperscript{25} Variations can work successfully when I extend it across
an entire course (particularly America in the World, as I explain below), getting
students to develop their knowledge, thus in effect taking them back to the beginning
of the Cowan diagram and bringing new knowledge to a situation.

In America in the World, understanding key concepts is crucial. One of these is the
idea of 'Wilsonianism' (the ideas and policies of American President Woodrow
Wilson). In both lectures and seminars I encourage students to think about the

\textsuperscript{24} Christopher Thome, \textit{Border Crossings: Studies in International History} (Oxford and New York:
\textsuperscript{25} Cowan, \textit{On Becoming an Innovative University Teacher}, p. 42
implications of the concepts (democracy, free trade, etc.) at the time they were devised (the First World War and after) and the challenges this presents us with (does democracy automatically mean American democracy? Is free trade really free?). This has obvious benefits as it sets it in its context. When doing this, students can bring their prior knowledge to bear as well as what they have already learned on the course to help bring them to an understanding of the concepts themselves and American aims and objectives in attempting to implement them. After this, however, the idea of Wilsonianism becomes embedded in the course (students explore and consolidate their knowledge of the concept - loops B, C and D) and I encourage them to bring this into discussion at whatever time they wish. It is particular rewarding when they can then relate it to other concepts and periods, perhaps recent and contemporary policy in Kosovo, Afghanistan or Iraq, and particularly to other concepts that they have learned, not just in this course, but in others. This might bring us back to the beginning, but I think not when it can be shown that progress has been made ('further'), something Cowan's model captures well. This approach is particularly important for America in the World because there is conceptual element to the exam (see 'Short Answer Questions', appendix N). Students are challenged briefly to explore the concepts, but I've generally found that the best answers to these tend to demonstrate an understanding of them in a broad context. So therefore it is useful to have some key words to define the concepts ('what are the best words to help us understand the term "Wilsonianism"?'), but also to be able to interrogate them to understand them more deeply and essay exam essay questions (appendix N).

Yet there are still limits to the extent to which I will go in emphasising the importance of theories, concepts and schools. Firstly, 'traditional' 'narrative' history retains its importance and, as the historian Zara Steiner notes, 'We [international historians] still need texts, storylines, a narrative core'. 26 I continue to argue the case for narrative history in my teaching. Yet within this narrative core students need to see the bigger picture; one that encompasses cross-boarder approaches. So while my lectures tend to focus on the unfolding of events over time and some of the interpretations that historians have suggested in order to explain them, seminars are directed more

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towards concepts and themes that develop these ideas in their broadest possible context.

Secondly, I continue to teach students to understanding 'traditional' approaches, based on the assumptions of power politics and the use of force by Great Powers. I have emphasised how important it is to incorporate new approaches into their studies, but try to encourage them to think about whether these are the most important factors. So even if gender or race does not become the primary focus, it is important for students to be given the opportunity to understand how these new approaches have helped to influence and nuance other ones. Writing less than a decade after Maier, historian Alexander deConde could already state, for example, that the "'new" international historians' (his phrase) have explored many of the important domestic roots of foreign policy, but do not give them exclusivity. 'Instead, there is a need for the probing of simultaneous relationships, often on a comparative basis'.27 Therefore, ideology, culture, gender, race and language to name a few all become crucial to our (teacher and student) understanding of the development of American foreign relations within the context of other approaches.

Finally, there still needs to be direction given to students in order that they can achieve the learning outcomes. Perhaps the one key area on which I urge them to maintain a focus is the topic of American international history, in other words American interactions with the world. The 'internationalisation' of history has been an important development of the discipline in recent years as scholars have developed studies dealing with different groups in what Akira Iriye has called 'transnational affairs'.28 Yet as Iriye recognises, movements across borders still mean that the nation state continues to be of importance for historians of the discipline, so once again any move towards this has still to be seen within the context of more traditional approaches, and many of the ideas and concepts that historians have adopted to examine these phenomena borrow directly from other disciplines. As I have already said, this can mean that students bring their own educational experiences so far to the

28 Akira Iriye, 'Internationalizing International History' in Thomas Bender, Rethinking American History in a Global Age, pp. 50-1.
lecture or seminar room and add to the discussion in new, exciting ways for their fellow students and their tutors.

Despite my initial fears about teaching in a Department of International Politics, I believe it has given my teaching much more breadth, which, I hope has been of benefit to students. There are of course many limits and barriers, but working in a department that does not actively attempt to 'separate scholars in adjoining disciplines'; historians, political scientists, theorists and philosophers work together and, hopefully, offer students a more rounded approach to the study and teaching of the international history and international politics.²⁵