

Creative and Curatorial Pedagogy: Teaching the International Innovatively and Intimately

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2023 recipient of the British International Studies Association (BISA)

Award for Distinguished Excellence in Teaching International Studies

This year I was honoured by the British International Studies Association (BISA) as the winner of the Award for Distinguished Excellence in Teaching International Studies. In June, I travelled to Glasgow to the BISA Annual Conference, invited to present my pedagogical practice at the inaugural Teaching and Learning Café alongside the other Learning and Teaching award (Early Career and Postgraduate Excellence) winners before receiving the award at the annual Prize Giving the following day. This invitation made for a rather full conference schedule (as I had already been invited to present two different research projects in a further two panels) but also provided an additional joyous element to my first in-person international conference since 2019 – for it is joyous to not only celebrate but also share, learn from, and embrace such diverse and enlivening innovative teaching of the international.



Dr Laura Mills, School of International Relations, receiving the BISA Award for Distinguished Excellence in Teaching International Studies at the 2023 BISA Annual Conference in Glasgow.

The award was bestowed in recognition of two modules – one senior honours (SH – fourth year undergraduate) and one MLitt (postgraduate taught) – that I have had the pleasure to design and deliver over the past six years within the University of St Andrews School of International Relations. These modules – IR4570 Everyday Life and Global Politics and IR5066 The Global Politics of Everyday Life – incorporate ‘creative methodologies’ as integral elements to innovatively and intimately explore the international. I must extend my thanks to my dear friends and colleagues Shine Choi and Saara Särämä who generously shared their creative pedagogical practices with me and had trailblazed some of these elements with their students in Finland, New Zealand, and the US. And, of course, to all those scholars within the discipline who are engaging in these creative practices and opening these possibilities for us in our teaching, learning, knowing of the international. For creative IR pedagogy is also a caring

pedagogy. As educators, we do not have ownership of these approaches but rather we must acknowledge our indebtedness to those who enable us as a caring and care-ful community to continue to carve out and foster pedagogies and spaces of curiosity, criticality, creativity, and care.

As Sara C. Motta & Anna Bennett explain, “Here, ‘care’ pedagogically expresses itself as recognition of the complex creative energies, desires and experiences of students as a place of knowing-possibility. Such a place of possibility manifests in pedagogical encounters and collaborations” (2018: 637) which, Motta and Bennett delineate, “foster dialogical co-creation of knowledges” and engender mutual teaching-learning spaces (where we all teach and learn from one another in these sites) “in which shame and competition are eschewed in favour of vulnerability and openness to alterity, difference and the unknown” (ibid. 636). Creative IR pedagogy therefore relies on an innovative but also intimate politics of teaching and learning the international by bringing students and educators together collectively, collaboratively, care-fully. Such pedagogical work embodies bell hooks’ “engaged pedagogy” (1994), the belief that “our work is not merely to share information but to share in the intellectual and spiritual growth of our students.” As hooks furthers, “To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin” (ibid.: 13).

hooks reminds us that “The classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy.” Teaching the international innovatively and intimately through creative practices enables us “not only to imagine that the classroom could be exciting but that this excitement could co-exist with and even stimulate serious intellectual and/or academic engagement” (ibid.: 7). Far from ‘easy’ or ‘trivial’, creative IR practice enables complex, messy entanglements of everyday life and global politics to be vividly and vigorously interrogated. But such excitement is only possible through the creation of community that is open and safe for vulnerability and experimentation. hooks underscores how “As a classroom community, our capacity to generate excitement is deeply affected by our interest in one another, in hearing one another’s voices, in recognizing one another’s presence” (ibid.). At the beginning of these modules, we therefore speak about giving space for, listening to, hearing, and learning from each other’s diverse lived experiences of the everyday, the global, the political. Teaching the international innovatively and intimately therefore entails “careful pedagogical attention and attentiveness to the kinds of spaces we create as well as time to enable students to speak, even if that speaking...does not fit into hegemonic renditions of the speaking-knowing-subject” (Motta and Bennett 2018: 642-3). This extends to the discipline itself and how the international has traditionally been taught.

The study of international relations has predominantly focused on (or has often been positioned as predominantly focusing on) supposedly ‘official’ actors, sites, and practices. But what about ‘ordinary’ individuals? What about their ‘mundane’ practices and quotidian behaviours? How do their everyday lives fit into IR? Through these modules, students creatively explore these questions to reveal how everyday life and global politics are co-constitutive.

Whether sounds/silences or emotions, food, fashion, or travel, students creatively explore how these everyday objects, structures, and practices mutually constitute global power relations that are messy and complex and interrogate how they often bolster and (re)produce problematic logics of gender, race, class, militarism, and beyond. To do so, the modules introduce students to, and encourage them to engage in, alternative and creative ways of thinking, and also alternative and creative sites and forms of scholarship, learning, and assessment. Students therefore develop their critical thinking at the cutting edge of innovative and creative practice in IR by both exploring how scholars 'do' IR through a range of creative forms – film, narrative, (auto)ethnography, poetry, art, collage, photography, visuality, video remix, and/or performance – and then getting the opportunity to do so themselves in their own explorations of how everyday life mutually constitutes global politics. Students are therefore not doing anything that IR scholars across the world aren't already doing – as I emphasise to them at the beginning of the course, it would be a real shame for them to get to the end of their IR degree without exposure to/engagement with these ever-increasing facets of IR.

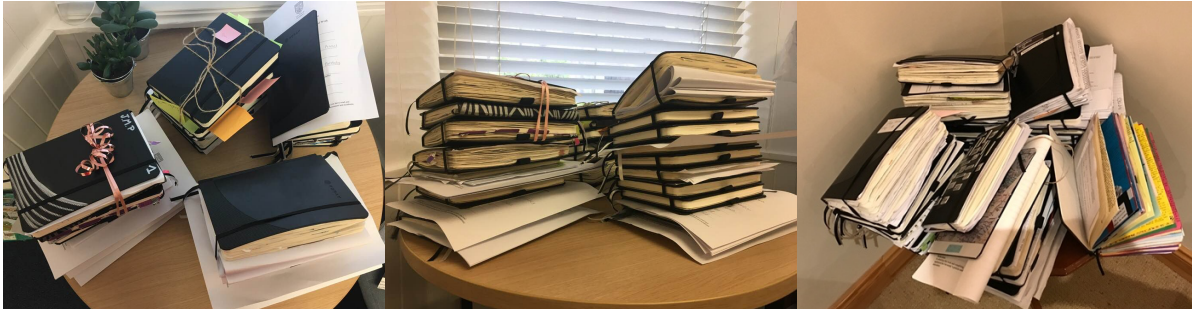
How is this creative and alternative way of thinking/knowing/doing IR enabled?

The following sections – Composing, Creating, Curating – delineate three devices deployed in the modules (which are also forms of assessment): the first two are in both modules – composition notebooks and creative pieces – and the third in the MLitt module (although optional participation by SH students is encouraged) – a curation.

Composing

Throughout the module, students use and produce a composition notebook (or, indeed, most often, notebooks). Based on award-winning cartoonist and academic Lynda Barry's *Syllabus*, the composition notebook is what Barry terms a "catch-all" to collect samples from all elements of daily life (2014: 62). This includes students' reading and seminar notes, ephemera of everyday life (tickets, leaflets, receipts), and five-minute daily diaries which, Barry argues, "teach you to hear, see and remember the world all around you" (ibid.: 61), thereby encouraging students to identify and consider how the everyday is co-constituted by/in the global. The more students buy-in to this process and space of possibility, the more enriching the composition notebook; they are therefore encouraged to take time and care in how they *compose* it – in their writing, structuring, visualising – to develop their critical thinking about the theoretical and conceptual engagements surrounding everyday life and global politics.

The books are small and light enough to be taken everywhere (in a bag, large pocket) so that these elements and observations of everyday life can be easily collected. Barry argues that through unexpected juxtapositions of these elements, "patterns start to emerge that can be very helpful in trying to understand what this thing" she calls "'the back of the mind' is up to" (ibid.: 62). She regards the composition notebook as "a place for the back of the mind to come forward", and if students buy into the composition notebook throughout the semester, when it comes time to decide on the topic and design of their final essay, the composition notebook should "already contain the answer" (ibid.). As an educator who also buys into the innovative and intimate politics of this practice, it is incredible to see how a seemingly banal observation made in week two in the composition notebook becomes the seed of the whole topic of the research essay due at the end of the semester and/or indeed influences their creative pieces.



Composition notebooks produced by St Andrews students from IR4570 *Everyday Life and Global Politics* and IR5066 *The Global Politics of Everyday Life*.

A student concern which arose in the early iterations of the module was that the notebook was a 'diary', that this was too intimate in terms of me as an educator reviewing and, ultimately, assessing it. This led me to emphasise how the daily diary element is a very small part of the composition notebook and students may decide this element does not work as well for them (and also reflect on why in the composition notebook!). With the pandemic and online delivery, students then selected a sample of the different elements composing the notebook so they had full ownership of the book and what they chose to disclose or not. Above all, however, students are encouraged to see the composition notebook "as a place. The practice of developing a place not a thing" (Barry 2014: 194).

Within the modules, emphasis is placed on how composition notebooks work for students as:

- a mobile site of experimentation
- an on-hand source of/for creativity
- an active workspace for problem-solving
- and a tailored research tool

Above all, they are aimed at developing *alternative ways to think* – this is about *observing, seeing, hearing, noticing* and how all of this helps us *critically reflect* on how everyday life and global politics are intertwined.

Earlier this year, I received an email from a former student now living in New York. She had come across a piece in the New York Times on Lynda Barry and wanted to share it with me, but also that she was still using her composition notebook. Three years later. She particularly wanted to emphasise how she still gleans so much from it as a practice, how it encourages her to be an engaged citizen in/of the world. I shared this story at the BISA Teaching and Learning Café and it was such a wonderful surprise and an additional joyous element to have one of the students from the very first cohort now a PhD candidate in Vienna attending in the audience. At the end, she approached me to share that her composition notebook was also there with her in Glasgow, how she likewise continues to use it to shape her thinking/knowing/being (in) the international to this day. That is what pedagogy is for me – far from remaining confined to the classroom, it enables students to be critically minded and to go into the world thinking, feeling, knowing, doing in much more attuned ways. After all, for the classroom to be, as hooks attests, "the most radical space of possibility," it does not, must not be confined to that space (see hooks 1994: 205; Motta and Bennett 2018: 636).

Creating

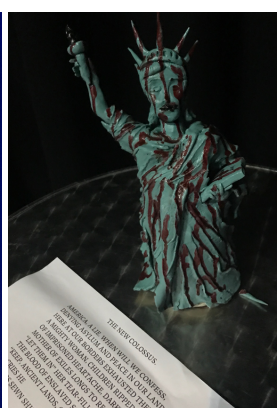
Creative pieces – practicums – enable students to play with and materialise such spaces of possibility. This US term – borrowed from Shine Choi’s creative pedagogical practice at the University of Mississippi – denotes a form of study involving activities that enable the practical application of theoretical and conceptual knowledges. Practicums therefore enable students to apply the course material in multiple creative forms. Selecting a different aspect of everyday life and a different creative ‘methodology’, students produce two practicums, small creative pieces that critically explore the co-constitution of everyday life and global politics, e.g. a rap written and performed critiquing the alt-right and dark web.

Students are not assessed on their drawing/singing ability, their camera shooting/collage-making skills, etc. Rather, this is about the *understanding* demonstrated of this manifestation of the co-constitution of everyday life and global politics; the *critical reflection* and *originality* exhibited through these creative outputs and the methodologies that create them; and the *critical insights* of *political logics* at operation inspired by the *theoretical and conceptual work* that constitutes the course.

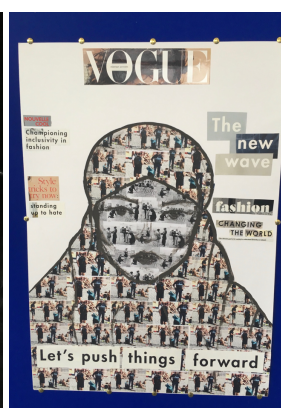
Students also are given freedom and possibility to truly experiment, be bold and daring in their critical and creative explorations as these pieces are first submitted for formative feedback. Provided to students first in written form, we then meet individually to discuss; from the outset this is highlighted as a genuinely open space for them to take this feedback on board – or not, due to the creative critical choices they have made – with the opportunity to incorporate it before final submission. I have been overwhelmed by the work they produce – the effort, creativity, criticality, care – for what is only a small percentage. I have been moved to tears by their work. I have helped several of them publish that work. But above all, students are crying out for this work as evidenced every year. In our conversations. In anonymous student feedback. In full module capacity (and the many more students emailing and doorstepping to express their desire to join the course than is possible).



“Refugees Without Refuge”
Paula Pérez



“The New Colossus”
Anna Goodwin



“Alternative Vogue”
Rebecca Hyslova

We have a diverse international student body. One student from Japan shared how for those with English as a second language, these methods had ‘levelled the playing field’. Students play to their strengths, choosing the aspects of everyday life they wish to critique, choosing the creative methods through which they believe they can best showcase that critical exploration, choosing the essay topic/questions that enables them to provide the most

engaging/engaged response. Students, I remind them, are researchers, critical scholars in their own right. This encouragement promotes a real sense of ownership, a real sense of self in their creative work and, also, then in the final way they exhibit this.

Curating

Given the innovative and intimate pedagogy that we have experienced together – mutually, relationally, in respect of each other’s different lived experiences – the course culminates in an event – an exhibition – which is very much a celebration of the creative work and practice that students have both created and committed themselves to. Selecting a methodology not featured in their practicums, MLitt students produce an ‘alternative intervention’, a larger, deeper critical commentary on a further aspect of everyday life that, for example, unsettles everyday militarisation, global capitalist consumption, or racialised inequalities. In the final week of Candlemas (spring) semester, these interventions are exhibited in a ‘*Candlemas Curation*’, e.g. a narrative on militarisation at a polo match printed, displayed, recorded, and played on loop. The overall curation entails decisions around display, flow, thematic direction, with SH students invited to optionally exhibit some of their practicums coming under MLitt students’ guidance. MLitt students *are the curators* and are assessed on the curatorial choices of how to exhibit this work.



Alternative Interventions and ‘Candlemas Curation’

In some ways, this presents a pedagogical dilemma – for while it is so rewarding to engage I this pedagogical practice, it is also *difficult* to *assess* creative work. Again, the intimate and innovative teaching-learning spaces of possibility that nurture vulnerability and openness enable such difficulties to be navigated. This involves an extensive but invaluable process, dedicating the early weeks of the module to our mutual exploration and engagement with and in creative practice where we are vulnerable, open together – collectively collaging, narrating, and experimenting. We also devote a large amount of time to probing and understanding the criteria that I developed to provide bounds (word counts, length, etc.) for each form of creative intervention. Of course, such bounds cannot be so great that they would inhibit creativity and in fact go against the very aim of this practice. It is vital to leave enough openness, freedom for students to do their best critical creative work.

Some of this incredible work is available to explore online. In 2021, I was honoured to be one of the inaugural winners of the University of St Andrews’ Entrepreneurial Education Fund. This enabled a website around [Everyday Life and Global Politics](#) to be produced, with the grateful support of Research Associate Matt Warren, as a lasting resource on innovative IR teaching

and research, an ongoing showcase of students' creative and curatorial skill, and an online 'Candlemas Curation' to occur during lockdown in the pandemic.

What I hope all this does is highlight how creative and curatorial pedagogy around everyday life and global politics can provide more affective, immediate, and potent ways of understanding the world. I have been awed by students' extraordinary work and I hope you enjoy it also when you visit this space.

Acknowledgements

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