


# Inquiry-based learning as an adaptive signature pedagogy in international relations

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**Abstract:** Several scholars have described our current political milieu as a time of crisis, disruption, and rapid change that presents various practical and theoretical challenges to the discipline of international relations (IR) and its pedagogical practice. The concept of signature pedagogies is one response that has emerged to respond to the changing needs of the discipline and the increasingly vocational approach to tertiary education. Many approaches identified as signature pedagogies in IR require preparation and lead-up time that make them difficult to apply rapidly to changing events in world politics as they occur. This article identifies inquiry-based learning as a strong model of adaptive and metacognitive learning that provides students with skills that can be readily applied to new problems and contexts. This enables instructors to draw directly on current events in world politics in a meaningful way that assists in providing students with the skills to address unfamiliar challenges in a rapidly changing world.

**Resumen:** Varios académicos han descrito nuestro entorno político actual como un tiempo de crisis, disrupción y cambio rápido que presenta varios desafíos prácticos y teóricos para la disciplina de las Relaciones Internacionales (RRII) y para su práctica pedagógica. El concepto de pedagogías características es una respuesta que ha surgido con el fin de responder a las necesidades cambiantes de la disciplina y al enfoque, cada vez más vocacional, de la educación terciaria. Muchos enfoques, que han sido identificados como pedagogías características en las RRII, requieren preparación y tiempo previo lo cual provoca que resulten difíciles de aplicar rápidamente a los eventos cambiantes dentro de la política mundial a medida que estos ocurren. Este artículo identifica la enseñanza reflexiva (IBL, por sus siglas en inglés) como un modelo sólido de aprendizaje adaptativo y metacognitivo que proporciona a los estudiantes habilidades que se pueden aplicar fácilmente a nuevos problemas y contextos. Esto permite a los formadores aprovechar directamente los eventos actuales en la política mundial de una manera significativa de forma que ayuda a proporcionar a los estudiantes las habilidades necesarias para abordar desafíos desconocidos en un mundo que cambia rápidamente.

**Résumé:** Plusieurs chercheurs ont décrit notre contexte politique actuel comme une époque de crise, de bouleversement et de changements rapides qui présente différents défis pratiques et théoriques à la discipline des relations internationales (RI) et sa pratique pédagogique. Le concept de pédagogies signature est apparu pour répondre à l'évolution des besoins de la discipline et l'approche de l'enseignement tertiaire de plus en plus professionnalisante. De nombreuses approches identifiées comme des pédagogies signature en RI nécessitent une préparation et un temps préalable qui compliquent leur application rapide au fur et à mesure de l'évolution des événements en politique internationale. Cet article assimile l'apprentissage fondé sur l'enquête (AFE) à un robuste modèle

d'apprentissage d'adaptation et de métacognition qui apporte aux étudiants des compétences prêtes à l'emploi face à de nouveaux problèmes ou contextes. Il permet aux enseignants de s'appuyer directement sur des événements actuels de politique mondiale, d'une façon qui a du sens et permet de transmettre aux étudiants les compétences nécessaires pour répondre aux défis inconnus dans un monde qui évolue rapidement.

**Keywords:** pedagogy, inquiry-based learning, signature pedagogies, active learning, pedagogy

**Palabras clave:** pedagogía, enseñanza reflexiva, pedagogías características, aprendizaje activo

**Mots clés:** pédagogie, apprentissage fondé sur l'enquête, pédagogies signature, apprentissage actif

## Introduction

In recent years, the vocational training dimensions of university degrees have been increasingly emphasized in public discourse, higher education policy, reaccreditation processes, and institutional priorities. Rather than the conferral of the degree itself being a passport to employability for graduates, their “job ready” attributes need to be made more explicit to both the students and the industries they will go on to work in. For some areas of study, this has had little impact. For others, including many study areas in the humanities, arts, and social sciences (HASS), such as international relations (IR), this has necessitated an ideological and pedagogical shift from an implicit to explicit delivery of career skills and training, while acknowledging the sheer diversity of careers such graduates may undertake in their futures.

One pedagogically rigorous response that has emerged to meet the challenge of training future professionals is that of signature pedagogies (Shulman 2005). This article explores how the signature pedagogies we employ as IR instructors at a regional Australian university function to prepare our students for the challenges they face as future professionals and as current global citizens. Specifically, we identify inquiry-based learning (IBL) as a strong model of adaptive and metacognitive learning that meets student, institutional, and industry needs. We compare the effectiveness of traditional classroom activities deployed in a first-year foundation course with embedded IBL design in two third-year courses, arguing that explicit and transparent embedding of IBL principles in the latter results in successful learning outcomes, discipline knowledge, and job readiness. By focusing on the process of learning and enquiry, IBL provides students with skills that can be readily applied to new problems and contexts, and through this prepares them for a variety of career possibilities by equipping them with metacognitive skills that facilitate and encourage lifelong learning.

## Our Context: the Australian Job Ready Graduate Policy

While we arguably work in a global careers marketplace—and, indeed, this is one of the challenges we face in preparing our graduates—we also work within specific domestic policy and institutional contexts. We locate our own approach within recent changes to Australian higher education policy that has made job readiness a core expectation of university providers, while also resting on a fairly narrow understanding of skills, education, and the future employment market. Brought into effect in January 2021, Australia's revision of its tertiary funding structure, the Job Ready Graduate (JRG) package, sought to “[invest] in higher education in areas of

national priority” and to “deliver more job-ready graduates the in disciplines and regions where they are needed most” (Australian Government 2022). While this promised increased investment in regional universities, such as our own institution, it also involved significant changes to the student fee structure in an attempt to direct students toward particular areas of study deemed to address national priorities. To incentivize students, fees for priority areas, such as agriculture and allied health, were lowered, while fees for deprioritized areas, such as HASS disciplines, were increased by up to 115 percent. Fundamental to these changes was the persistent notion that HASS graduates are less employable and that their skills do not explicitly address priority areas. Evidence indicates to the contrary: Australian HASS graduates enjoy an 89.6 percent employment rate (the national average across all disciplines is 91.5; QILT 2022) and their skills and knowledge are crucial to innovation and productivity (Bisley 2022). Although foreign relations and security are national priorities, IR as a subject area is deprioritized—and its cost therefore increased—by virtue of its categorization within the humanities and social sciences.

The JRG package was criticized by various institutions, professional bodies, and academics. Holocaust scholars Lanicek et al. (2020, 99) articulated a concern shared by many HASS fields that the fee increase would mean that some areas of study—and by extension, some of the most pressing questions (or wicked problems) of our time—would “become accessible only to those from affluent families, or those who are willing to take on an increased burden of student loans,” while Larsen and Emmett (2021, 193) suggest that such changes in themselves constitute a wicked problem for social equity in Australian higher education. The International Australian Studies Association framed the changes with explicit reference to Australian national security, suggesting that the “destabilization of Australia’s world-class university sector through hasty legislative changes poses a major risk” (InASA 2020). President of the Australasian Council of Deans of Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities Bisley (2022)—also an IR scholar—highlighted that the package underestimated the employability of HASS graduates, disregarded all evidence indicating the importance of soft skills for innovation and productivity, and accurately foretold that an attempt to control student preferences through price points would fail (Hare 2023).

The OECD (2019, 89) has indicated that metacognition, lifelong learning, and intercultural understanding are essential skills for future workers within a changing job market and a changing world. These skills are not the sole domain of a liberal arts education, but humanities graduates nevertheless constitute large cohorts of workers equipped with both a strong set of transferable “soft skills,” in addition to their specialized, discipline-based knowledge. Within this context, we understand that not all IR graduates will work in careers that are recognizably “international relations,” but they will progress to a variety of roles that require skills in research, analysis, communication, and decision-making, and that will draw upon their understanding of global systems and society, including academic research and teaching roles. Although the evidence for the role of soft skills is compelling, the persistence of such reforms as the JRG demonstrates that it is no longer sufficient to rely upon this discourse to fight for the importance of HASS disciplines within this particular political, institutional, and economic context for higher education. Such changes are not just a matter of student preferences, enrolment, and government funding; they also impact pedagogical practice. At our institution—a medium-sized regional university—these sector changes have placed careers and employability at the center of its learning and teaching policies across all disciplines. With learning activities and assessment now required to indicate explicitly how they contribute to employability outcomes, a practitioner-centric pedagogical philosophy is an efficient and effective way to address the requirements of our institution and the expectations of the JRG approach to higher education, while still maintaining the integrity of our discipline.

### **Challenges for Teaching IR: content, Deep Learning and Theory—and Context**

Debates about what we teach in IR and how it relates to critical and professional context, are far from new. Writing in the early 1990s, [Kacowicz \(1993, 76\)](#) already expressed concern for how the teaching of IR can frequently lag behind its own context, identifying an increasingly rapid pace in IR teaching since the late 1980s. Kacowicz exposed the underlying tension in IR teaching of ensuring that students have a broad knowledge and understanding of international history and geography, a clear understanding of important theoretical concepts and methodological approaches, and the capacity to draw together these various knowledges meaningfully in sometimes unfamiliar contexts. He argues, “In general, the subject of change in IR has been neglected because of an underlying tendency in the discipline to overemphasize stability and the status quo” ([Kacowicz 1993, 80](#)). However, IR instructors have a responsibility to prepare students to respond to a *changing* rather than fixed world, and to empower them to be agents of change within this ([Davies 2021, 37](#)). As [Reus-Smit and Snidal \(2008, 4\)](#) observe, the discipline of IR is “simultaneously about what the world is like and what it ought to be like.” As such, IR is not simply the pragmatic assessment of past and present issues on a global scale, but also a vision of the ideals of the age and the projection of such desires upon the as-yet unrealized future.

We identify three particular challenges for teaching IR that need to be addressed in a practitioner-centric pedagogical approach, characterized here as the content challenge, the deep learning challenge, and the theoretical challenge, which are each deeply intertwined with each other. The content challenge refers to the management of the interplay between past and present, ensuring that students are provided with both the foundations of the discipline and the confidence to operate in unfamiliar territory. This question of what we teach is inextricable from how we teach it, which is the concern of the deep learning challenge. The theoretical binds all three challenges together as it provides the epistemological and ethical frameworks of the discipline, underpinning the what, how, and why of IR teaching. Although we have framed these elements as challenges, it is also important to recognize them as opportunities to reevaluate our teaching practice, and the discipline as a whole ([Smith and Hornsby 2021, 2](#)).

It is possible to also identify a fourth challenge comprised of the contextual variables that further impact the pedagogical decisions we make, such as higher education policy, the casualization of tertiary teaching and resulting precarity for many academics, increased workload and expectations, increased managerialism in universities, and student cohort characteristics. For example, the key factors shaping our own strategies are the higher education policy discussed in the opening, our own employment status, and our student cohort’s characteristics. The team of authors comprises two tenured academics and one sessional (casual or adjunct) academic; there is only one other tenured academic working in our discipline to deliver a full eight-unit major across a trimester academic calendar, while also addressing research and service expectations. Many of our students are local, first-in-family, or of lower socio-economic status, balancing their studies with significant caring commitments, or prioritizing paid work over study preparation due to the pressures of the rising cost of living. Furthermore, many are “non-traditional”; that is, they are not entering university directly out of secondary education and may be undertaking their studies while continuing some form of full-time professional employment. We have elected to consider these factors alongside the other challenges to highlight the role they play in shaping our teaching strategies.

As an area of content, IR teaching necessarily darts between the contemporary, the historical, and the future. In addition to introducing students to core theories and concepts, many introductory IR courses, including our own discussed in this article, function as de facto modern world history courses that use the historical

narrative to help impart the new conceptual and theoretical foundations that distinguishes the IR approach to history from the tradition of that discipline itself. Yet, ultimately, the concern for IR is more contemporary or future-oriented than historical; we are training our students to contribute to future policy directions and decision-making, and they are often drawn to the discipline by a desire to better understand the world they are living in currently, and to shape its future (Glazier 2015, 271). As such, they may be prone to presentism in their examples and contributions to discussions (Ettinger 2022, 10). Instructors are challenged to maintain—and broaden—students' curiosity about their world, provide them with the historical and theoretical knowledge for contextualizing and understanding that world, and equip them with the necessary skills to help them perform well upon entering industry, which, as we have highlighted, is increasingly emphasized in institutional policy, priorities, and key performance indicators. Including material that is recent provides students with a sense of familiarity and currency that can be important in attracting and engaging students. Ettinger (2022, 4) cautions that the impulse to do so “must be acted upon with care” because of the important role that the instructor plays in providing students with a sense of stability. This stability should not be confused with the maintenance of the status quo critiqued by Kacowicz above; rather it is a stability in the relationship between instructor and student that enables them to encounter the changing environment together. Ettinger's (2022, 11) concept of “pedagogical presentism” is a strategic use of the present, and students' presentist tendencies, to address wider pedagogical goals. It focuses more on the process of learning and on transparency about this process and encourages a students-as-partners approach to active learning, which aligns well with IBL principles. A pedagogically presentist approach removes pressure for the instructor to claim specialist knowledge of specific current events and more of an expert in the process of discovery and understanding itself, which may be particularly important when students are keen to delve into the latest global issue that is outside the instructor's specific expertise. This may also be useful to alleviate the burden of expectation placed on casual teaching staff struggling to get on top of new teaching areas on limited contracted hours. Most importantly, it prepares students to grapple with unfamiliar contexts and problems in their future careers.

The content challenge is intertwined with the deep learning challenge, as it is not simply about what material we present but how to present it in a way that ensures it is addressing desired learning outcomes, or skill development. According to Anderson and Krathwohl (2001), deep learning comprises four levels of knowledge: factual, conceptual, procedural, and metacognitive; deep learning occurs when all four levels of knowledge are activated. In IR, activities such as model UNs and simulations are often cited as opportunities for deep learning (Engel, Pallas, and Lambert 2017; West and Halvorson 2021; Pettenger, West, and Young 2014). However, such activities require high levels of planning that might make it difficult to shape a simulation around specific current events while they are still in motion. Established scenarios may resonate with current events thematically or precipitate them historically, but it is challenging to construct entirely new and up-to-date scenarios focusing on them specifically. Other activities, such as policy memorandums, might be more manageable in this context as they require less prior preparation, and may be developed collaboratively in class, or individually as a piece of assessment, such as a time-limited take-home examination.

Finally, the theoretical challenge not only calls for us to question the very foundations of the discipline itself but perhaps even requires us to do so; it is, in sum, a challenge of values. Smith and Hornsby (2021, 2) view our current “age of disruption,” which they frame primarily through a post-pandemic lens as an opportunity to disrupt the “traditional orthodoxy” of the discipline. To do so is not just an ideological imperative, but to ensure we address the “attributes and proficiencies students require in order to keep abreast of the ever-changing content of the

discipline” (Smith and Hornsby 2021, 2). Hornsby and Grant (2021, 12–13) agree that it is important to advance the discipline itself by embracing the notion of the classroom as a politicized space. As noted above, providing a sense of stability to our students can be achieved through rethinking or strengthening that pedagogical relationship via trust and transparency. Such a relational pedagogy re-establishes the classroom as a space of radical possibility (Hooks 1994, 12), enabling instructors and students alike to interrogate the discipline itself and to open new spaces for marginalized voices (Smith and Hornsby 2021, 6). Feminist and postcolonial interventions have already assisted in expanding what is considered foundational knowledge but, as Andrews (2020, 269) observes, this content often “remain[s] firmly situated in Western historicity.” The push toward a more Global IR (Acharya 2014) further illustrates that this Western lens is not just a problem with its historicity but also its approach and attention to contemporary global affairs. A move toward Global IR is not just a question of content and politics but of developing students’ skills to operate as professionals in a globalized context. Beyond its epistemological challenge, Global IR is a “curiosity-driven and pluralistic approach to inquiry that eschews strict paradigm-bound or methodologically-bound engagement with the world” (Ettinger 2022, 14). While the content knowledge that we impart is important, the transferable skills of critical enquiry and problem-solving are perhaps the most important (Macleod 2021, 17; Biswas and Haufler 2020, 68–70) because, when combined with this challenge to the “traditional orthodoxy” (Smith and Hornsby 2021, 2) or “status quo” (Kacowicz 1993, 80; Andrews 2020, 267), it encourages an ethos of global citizenship. The “global citizenship skills” (Lüdert 2021, 4) taught in IR respond to discipline, industry, institutional, and student demand (Glazier 2015, 265) regarding what is needed in the contemporary world and its future challenges. “Global intelligence,” Glazier (2015, 265) observes, “is seen as increasingly important in terms of career and life preparedness.” This global intelligence comprises diverse content knowledge and cross-cultural competence but also the capacity to look beyond obvious benchmark events (Ribar 2017, 305) or superpowers and, most importantly, the curiosity to do so.

### **Signature Pedagogies in IR: a Way Forward**

In the introduction to *Signature Pedagogies in International Relations*, Lüdert specifically highlights Shulman’s characterisation of signature pedagogies as “pedagogies of uncertainty” (Shulman 2005, 57; Lüdert 2021, 5). This “ability to make judgments under uncertainty,” Shulman (2005, 57) argues, is “one of the most crucial aspects of professionalism.” Several scholars have characterized our current era as one of uncertainty, crisis (Ettinger 2022, 4) and disruption (Smith and Hornsby 2021, 3). This applies to both the content of global politics we seek to impart to our students and the uncertainty of what their future careers may hold. In addressing both these contexts, it is therefore important to teach students “to navigate complexities that defy simple solutions” (Lüdert 2021, 5). These so-called “wicked problems” have arguably proliferated in this age of crisis and disruption, therefore will be integral to what our students will grapple with in their future careers and as global citizens. A core characteristic of wicked problems is the slipperiness of their definitions, boundaries, and endpoint (Peters 2017, 388). Consequently, we cannot teach students to solve problems with concrete techniques, but through the adoption of signature pedagogies, we can teach them professional habits and mindset that will best equip them with the necessary resilience and adaptability to grapple with complexity and uncertainty.

Originally conceptualized by Shulman (2005) with reference to fields such as medicine and law, the concept of signature pedagogies has permeated the scholarship of teaching and learning in other disciplines, such as IR. Shulman (2005, 52) defined signature pedagogies as “the fundamental ways in which future

practitioners are educated for their new professions” and identified its three structural dimensions (Shulman 2005, 54–55); the surface structure addresses the operational aspects of teaching, the deep structure refers to the assumptions we hold about how to best impart knowledge, and the implicit structure is the moral dimension. These elements provide students with “habits of the mind, habits of the heart, and habits of the hand” (Shulman 2005, 59) that, Shulman argues, address the “three fundamental dimensions of professional work—to *think*, to *perform*, and to act with *integrity*” (Shulman 2005, 52, original emphasis). These three dimensions of signature pedagogies align with the challenges of content (mind/think), deep learning (hand/perform), and theory (heart/integrity) discussed in the previous section. Such principles align with Reus-Smit and Snidal’s (2008, 2) contention that IR are ultimately concerned with a normative ethical question of “how should we act?.” Macleod (2021, 23) places this normative function within a teleological imperative; the purpose or goal of IR is to equip students to solve wicked problems.

Macleod suggests that IR does not currently have a signature pedagogy, observing instead a persistent tradition of “expedient pedagogy” (2021, 18) or “pedagogies of convenience” (2021, 20) that focus on teaching as transmission of ideas and canon. Importantly, she attributes this as much to broader trends in the higher education sector, such as the expansion of the casualized or contracted teaching force and institutional metrics that prioritize research outputs over teaching innovation, as to individual inclination. Macleod acknowledges the increasing prevalence of active-learning strategies, such as simulations, and their usefulness for equipping students with the skills to grapple with wicked problems but sees these as evidence of an emerging signature pedagogy in IR rather than constituting a signature pedagogy in themselves. Furthermore, despite their initial innovation or creativity, a well-prepared simulation that has been refined over delivery to several cohorts, while still pedagogically effective might become a type of convenience in itself.

It is important to emphasize that frequency or commonness of an activity is not what designates it as a signature pedagogy. Simulations frequently appear as the primary example of a signature pedagogies in IR (Andersen-Rodgers 2021; Borelli et al. 2021; She 2021; Sula 2021), but student mobility (Barter 2021) and policy memorandums (Chagas-Bastos and Burges 2019) are other examples that perhaps receive less attention within the signature pedagogy framework. These student-centred, active learning activities are fundamental to IR pedagogical practice because they replicate the kind of professional roles and activities that our students will undertake in their careers (Borelli et al. 2021, 134). They require them to demonstrate their understanding of the content, practice skills in collaboration, problem-solving, and communication, and to demonstrate professionalism and global citizenship. However, as noted previously, simulations are difficult to model around current events because of the level of preparation required. Furthermore, many simulations are still designed around the synchronous classroom so require adaptation to the asynchronous learning environments adopted by many institutions following Covid-19, or may no longer fit institutionally mandated learning methods and assessment requirements adopted to deploy more flexible approaches to learning. Student mobility, perhaps the most exemplary of experiential learning approaches, is only just now beginning to again be a viable option as global travel increases again after the peak of the Covid-19 pandemic, but increased cost of travel and ongoing concern about the pandemic’s fluctuations mean that this is still prohibitive for many.

We do not suggest abandoning simulations and other activities as part of IR’s signature pedagogies. Rather, we wish to explore other possibilities for aligning head, heart, and integrity in the classroom while engaged also in pedagogical presentism. Signature pedagogies may afford a particular way through the challenges of aligning content, deep learning, and theory to achieve the pedagogical and job readiness goals of the discipline.

### **Inquiry-Based Learning as a Pedagogically Presentist Signature Pedagogy**

As established, the particular challenge we are grappling with is how to meet the specific needs and expectations of our discipline, while ensuring our students are job ready without any certainty of what shape those careers may take. As [Biswas and Haufler \(2020, 67\)](#) highlight, current IR classroom practice often does prepare students for industry, but we may need to do more to frame skills and activities more explicitly. We suggest that a more transparent engagement with the IBL model that already underpins many of the strategies and mechanisms deployed in IR instruction, such as simulations, may provide a solution. As such, this suggestion is not a fundamental shift, but rather a matter of taking the scaffold of the activity without relying on its cladding, and *deliberately teaching* the inquiry cycle as an authentic method of real-world problem solving in the humanities. Furthermore, it enables a students-as-partners approach and can be implemented with little preparation for new scenarios. Once the model is clearly established with the students—perhaps even using prepared simulations in the early foundations of a course—the class should be well-equipped to encounter new scenarios, as they would in a professional environment.

IBL is a pedagogical approach focused on the learning process itself rather than a particular activity or outcome. Influenced by social constructivism ([Vygotsky 1978](#)) and experiential learning ([Dewey 1998](#)), which posit that students construct meaning from lived experiences, often collaboratively and in authentic contexts ([Myburgh and Tammaro 2013](#); [Eun 2019](#); [Rannikmäe et al. 2020](#)), IBL engages “students around curricular goals and authentic yet meaningful tasks so that connections can be made to essential questions” ([Coffman 2017, 2](#)). It encourages deep learning by teaching through questioning and presenting problems that elicit active responses ([Biggs and Tang 2011, 26–27, 29](#)), focusing on cognitively-rich activities and higher-order thinking skills ([Coffman 2017, 3](#)) and, most importantly, encouraging students to actively explore the decision-making processes behind big, messy, and ill-defined problems ([Blessinger et al. 2014](#))—the bread and butter of contemporary IR. IBL is also notable as an authentic practice, with strong links to real-world dimensions and future employment ([Race 2014, 84](#)).

The traditional goal of IBL has been to provide students with a sequential series of learning tasks that help students move through inquiry phases, with assessment seamlessly integrated with activities ([Herrington et al. 2009, 142](#)). Students work collaboratively to develop their own “big” questions, obtain evidence through their own research, develop hypotheses or solutions, discuss and debate these solutions, and then finally—and perhaps most crucially—reflect upon the process and its outcomes. This aligns with [Pahomov’s \(2014, 11\)](#) five core values of learning and teaching—inquiry, research, collaboration, presentation, and reflection.

These sequential phases are prevalent across much of the IBL literature, with some key models emerging in recent years that reflect both the sequenced and cyclical nature of IBL ([Pedaste et al. 2015, 48](#)). The 5Es approach, a mainstay in contemporary science education, follows such a trajectory ([Orgill and Thomas 2007](#); [Bybee 2009](#); [Gilbert and Hoesper 2013](#); [Schallert et al. 2020](#)). Similarly, Kolb’s 4-stage experiential learning cycle, where students move through phases of concrete experience, reflective observation of the experience, abstract conceptualisation, and then active experimentation, notes learning as a never-ending process that requires student navigation of all stages for successful learning to occur ([Kolb 2015](#)). Significantly, such models include review and reflection as necessary phases in IBL, which incorporates student metacognition as part of the learning process.

IBL is not necessarily a new concept in the teaching of IR and, interestingly, such a cyclical investigative practice is commonly used in the teaching of models of decision-making, such as rational actor model ([Mintz and DeRouen Jr 2010, 57](#)). Classroom simulations of real-world scenarios are also often employed to help IR



students explore “messy problems” and collaboratively seek solutions, while engaging in active, social-constructivist learning by following a similar structured learning trajectory (Onuf 2012; Rannikmäe et al. 2020). One of the most popular IBL simulations used in IR are model United Nations summits (Crossley-Frolick 2010, 187), which provide students with greater opportunities to not only apply IR theories in authentic contexts, but to also enhance metacognitive and deep learning capacities, as well as professional skills development (Crossley-Frolick 2010, 198; Engel, Pallas, and Lambert 2017, 172). IBL can also be used at the course level, by designing a course to systematically work through long-term projects across multiple weeks, or for shorter one-off activities or case studies.

The positive benefits of IBL are well documented, provided students are adequately supported in their learning (Lazonder and Harmsen 2016, 689; Levy et al. 2013, 391). Specifically, IBL promotes student-led learning, with the teacher moving to become “the *guide on the side* instead of the *sage on the stage* by helping to clarify concepts and aid in solving problems particular to individual and group needs” (Schreiber and Valle 2013, 397). This shift in instructor role might be particularly useful for better supporting casual or adjunct instructors as the focus on skill over content expertise may work to minimize their preparation time and increase their work opportunities by equipping them to work in a broader range of content areas. Such activities are empowering for students as they seek greater independence, with the choice of topics, roles and potential solutions being significant sites for democratization of the learning process (Pahomov 2014, 6). Furthermore, IBL is seen to help students apply abstract theoretical concepts to a specific problem or complex question, which also helps them to take control of their learning in active and collaborative ways. In terms of assessment, IBL’s sequential tasks also allow for multiple indicators of learning, utilizing sufficient scaffolding, and direction to achieve validity and reliability with appropriate weighted criteria for scoring varied products (Herrington et al. 2009, 142). Importantly, the inquiry cycle, as a complex and integrated task, balances the assessment of content knowledge with the skills required to collaborate, investigate, conclude, discuss, and reflect (Pahomov 2014, 4).

As established, traditional IR classroom activities do address some IBL principles and practices but may not fulfill all elements. How can we better implement IBL principles to help transform current “pedagogies of convenience” into effective signature pedagogies for training future IR professionals?

### **Embedded versus Ad hoc: a Comparison of IBL Approaches**

In this section, we contrast the experience of teaching a first-year course where IBL techniques were implemented on an ad hoc basis alongside other common IR teaching activities, such as simulations, with two third-year courses where IBL principles are embedded explicitly into the course design and assessment. The first-year course is a foundation subject that introduces students to the discipline, its core theories, and its main topics of concern, perhaps exemplifying Macleod’s (2021, 18) “expedient pedagogy” focused on the transmission of canon. The third-year courses are focused on specific global issues and seek to assess specific discipline skills prior to graduation.

#### *First Year Course: Traditional Activities and Ad Hoc IBL*

Taught to all first-year students within the IR major and often undertaken in a student’s first semester of study, the foundation IR subject is the first taste many students have of the discipline. It is crucial in generating student interest in the field, serves to retain students in the major, and helps establish the key concepts and understandings of IR for use in later subjects in their degrees (Frueh et al. 2021, 127).

The subject focuses on the evolution of the international system with an emphasis on major IR theories of realism, liberalism, constructivism, Marxism, and feminism, and covers a range of pertinent topics such as international decision-making, international law, non-state actors, intergovernmental organisations, war and conflict, global political economy, environment, social justice, and human rights. It is content-heavy, relying on lectures, textbooks, and readings, as well as weekly class discussions. Course learning outcomes focus on students being able to develop critical knowledge and understanding of the nature and evolution of the international system, the practice of diplomacy and other forms of interaction at various levels of the system, and to “justify the currency and relevance of the study of IR to their career interests and the broader community within which they will function as informed citizens” (*Course specification for INR1000 2022*).

For the first few weeks, the course sets about introducing the key theories of IR to new students, such as realism, liberalism, constructivism, Marxism, and feminism. A variety of active learning pedagogical strategies are used to examine the theories, such as small group discussions, team writing and jigsaw research activities, simulations, war games, and reflective writing, which have all been stated to help produce better learning outcomes for students (Kingsbury 2021, 614). Out of these activities, the simulations and war games are those most aligned with the principles of IBL.

The course assessment comprises several online quizzes to assess students’ content knowledge at several points throughout the semester, a research essay, and a final examination. Notably, our institutional policy discourages the assessment of participation in non-clinical classroom settings. Attendance and participation are thus not mandatory, which can make some classroom activities difficult to deliver if the number of students in attendance is less than expected. Furthermore, these activities are difficult to deliver effectively in an asynchronous online classroom; as such, the online delivery of this course focuses on activities and discussions that can be executed in a standard discussion forum.

One of the most significant tensions inherent in teaching this course was the gap between the course design and desired teaching practice. The course content strongly aligned to a school of IR approach, teaching fundamental concepts necessary for later studies through comparison, case studies, and significant amounts of foundational content, but the teaching team was often attempting to integrate IBL practices within this in the form of weekly activities, simulations, and games. For IBL to be an effective pedagogy in this situation, the course could have been restructured around consistent IBL principles that better introduce and link metacognitive practice to the students’ sense of agency (Chiappetta Swanson, Ahmad, and Radisevic 2014, 55). This includes the explicit teaching of the model of enquiry at the beginning of the course, which could be linked to IR decision-making frameworks to engage with real-world employability skills. This would enable the course to still fulfil its crucial function of providing a foundational understanding of the discipline, while also treating the skills of IBL as part of that foundational knowledge. Structuring the course around a general “big idea” or “messy problem” would enable students to work on long-term projects and systematically through the stages of inquiry as they work to complete and reflect on assessment that authentically responds to their future career goals, without getting stuck on a specific case study. For example, Chu et al. (2017, 136–138) note an eight-step design process for guided project-based inquiry that moves through opening, immersion, exploration, identification, searching, creating and evaluating, sharing and evaluation. Throughout the process, students must be encouraged to identify what they know and what they do not, recognize gaps in conceptual understandings, and self-regulate their learning through personal reflection (Chiappetta Swanson, Ahmad, and Radisevic 2014, 56). Moving forward, to progress to a point where IR students are able “to think, to perform, and to act with integrity” (Shulman 2005, 52), greater work mastering

skills of critical enquiry across a broader range of content, contexts, temporality, and complexity, is needed.

*Third-Year Courses: Embedded IBL Practice*

Unlike the first-year foundation course, the two third-year courses under discussion here are conducted entirely online, without an in-person offering; this reflects a shift in our program toward flexible delivery of third year courses to better accommodate students whose availability for regular synchronous classes may be limited by internships or work-integrated learning in their final year. Both these courses involve online content delivered using Voicethread. Not only is it more dynamic than traditional text-based forums, but encouraging students to use its voice-based format and to engage with content as it is delivered is particularly useful for replicating advanced seminar discussions in an asynchronous format (Ching and Hsu 2013, 311; Negash and Powell 2015). The courses' and tool's asynchronicity is important to cater to a group of students who may be juggling their final semesters of study alongside internships and work-integrated learning. The content delivered in these seminars is designed to provide context and background for the topics students will explore more deeply through the assessment activities described below. Both courses are designed around IBL principles but implement them in different ways, as one course focuses on collaboration and the other in independent research to prepare them for professional (or postgraduate study) experiences that will require these skillsets.

The collaboration-focused course involves two workshop assessment activities that each span two weeks. In these workshops, students are provided with a basic task prompt focused on a particular activity that asks them to apply to concepts explored in the preceding seminar discussions. For example, in one offering, students were asked to design an intergovernmental organization to address a particular global issue, providing a clear rationale for their design based upon comparative research and evaluation of contemporary governance structures and multilateral cooperation around the issue. The student groups are provided with an MS Teams space to collaborate asynchronously on their approach before presenting a design proposal to the teaching team in a synchronous Zoom session. Use of both Teams and Zoom works to familiarize students with a basic collaborative technology deployed in contemporary workplaces, while Teams also provides a means to document their collaboration process to submit as part of the assessment task. In delivering verbal feedback to the students, staff engage the teams in reflection about their processes of decision-making and design rationale. This feedback and reflective process enables students to evaluate their task response and, if necessary, revise it for their written submission the following week. It is also worth noting that this approach of asking students to present a draft via presentation, used in both examples here, is a recommended practice for combatting concerns about the use of AI technologies, such as ChatGPT, in assessment submissions (Bridgeman et al 2023; Wilson and Havery 2023).

In the course focused on independent research, students select a broad topic for the basis of their semester-long research project. They are then guided through a set of weekly research tasks that assist them in following their own line of enquiry, while evaluating the topic literature and data, and that ask them to reflect upon the evolution of their understanding and ideas through the research process, and to articulate the decisions they are making about their project design. As each task is completed, they receive guidance and feedback from the instructor, and are encouraged to engage with this feedback as an ongoing conversation (McArthur and Huxham 2013, 92). This culminates first in the oral presentation of a research proposal, for which further feedback is provided, and then in their final research essay. Students also complete a final course reflection.

Although each of these assessment items results in a final output, such as a report or essay, equal weight is given to the learning process itself, which is fundamental to IBL. It is also structured in a way that course participation as a collaborative learning process can be assessed without running afoul of institutional policies that disadvantage non-clinical disciplines. Nurturing students' sense of agency, the topics and prompts are kept deliberately broad to enable the students to follow their own lines of enquiry in a supportive, supervised environment. To address the principle of metacognition, dialogic reflection with the instructors is embedded into each of the tasks to assist the students in the process of evaluating both the information they are collecting and their own application of this within their projects. Although the independent research course seems to elide the principle of collaboration, students are encouraged to engage with each other's work and to view the dialogic reflection as a supervisory collaboration.

### **Discussion**

There are two characteristics that we consider most important to building an effectively adaptive and metacognitive signature pedagogy for IR: transparency and reflection, which is the crucial final stage in IBL. When these principles are combined, they present an effective counter to many of the effects of the content, deep learning, and theoretical challenges identified above to help both students and instructors to align head, hand, and heart. A key distinction to be made between the examples from the outset is that the purpose and learning outcomes of a first-year course are different to those of a third-year course to reflect the needs of their cohort. First-year courses need to provide students with the foundational knowledge of the discipline, while third-year courses need to evidence students' ability to apply that knowledge in the kind of complex and unfamiliar contexts they will encounter in the professions they are about to enter. This is not to suggest that such capacity should not begin to be developed in that first year of study; indeed, activities such as simulations remain an ideal way to introduce students to this process in a safe and controlled environment, while also exciting their continued interest in the discipline. However, more transparent engagement with IBL principles in such activities may assist students to better recognize the professional skills being developed through the process beyond the application of content knowledge.

Most of the cohort in the foundation course is in their first year and first semester of tertiary study. They are already grappling with the hidden curriculum of university life, let alone their specific chosen discipline. It is for this reason that transparency is crucial. This transparency can take several forms, but we highlight two interrelated dimensions here: transparency of knowledge and transparency of process. The relationship between these can be best articulated as, "I don't know, but let's find out together." This enables the instructor to build a relationship of trust with the students and to role model the lifelong process of learning as a desirable professional skill. It has the further advantage of highlighting knowledge-seeking and problem-solving as inherently collaborative. Transparency of process is further enacted by ensuring that the steps of IBL are clear to the students from the outset. A pedagogically presentist IBL thus requires some foundational work at the outset to be successful, but this further underscores the importance and effect of transparency. This foundational work involves introducing students to the IBL process in the first lesson, working with them through a guided application of the process. Our statement can thus be further extended as "I don't know, but let's find out together—and here is how we'll do it."

By focusing on this collaborative learning process, IBL can also be utilized to plan entire units of study around "big, messy questions," as well as structuring open-ended assessment topics that encourage students to move through the IBL sequence while exploring, researching, answering, and reflecting on course content.

Framing each week's theme around one such problem and asking students to contribute their own research, perspectives, and potential solutions or interpretations, before working together to come to a consensus on the issue, is another way to scaffold not only the IBL learning process but also progress soft transferable and career-ready skills such as communication, teamwork, analytical capabilities, and decision-making. Furthermore, this approach can mitigate the challenges of low attendance or online delivery.

As mentioned, we are not advocating to entirely discount other frequently used active learning approaches to IR teaching. Rather, an integrated approach to these is best. Studies—and our own experiences—have shown that simulations are useful active learning and problem-based learning approaches that are effective tools for integrating theory with practice. Like IBL, simulations derive from a constructivist learning theory that centres the student, but IBL derives from a particular subset of this theory, social constructivism, that acknowledges and foregrounds the influence of social context (Asal and Kratoville 2013, 133–4). With their emphasis on applied knowledge, simulations are particularly useful deepening student understanding of theoretical models by enabling them to see their effects in practice. However, what many simulation learning plans can lack is an explicit critical reflection, and one that goes deeply into unpacking the influences on individual and group decision-making processes. As a result, students might emerge from a simulation with a strong understanding of the content and a refinement of practical skills, such as research and communication, but without deeper reflection on the experience may not have attained deep learning goals. Workshops in the third-year collaborative course are, in effect, simulations. The activities they complete in the first two years of study are thus not foundational simply for content knowledge, but for building the very skills they will need to apply in a more independent and advanced level in their third-year assessment. However, we emphasize again the role that transparency plays throughout this process in making these connections more explicit.

IBL's emphasis on reflection is an important metacognitive step and perhaps the most crucial step in facilitating deep learning. The reflective stage encourages students to examine their choices more thoroughly and—particularly if integrated with a learning journal activity—to identify patterns in their thinking. This in turn can become a useful tool for instructors to reflect more deeply on their own practice in response to the feedback implicitly embedded in these student reflections; indeed, we have often found that such reflections provide greater insight and impetus for course revision and development than the course evaluation data gathered by the university. For example, if students find that they are relying on realism because they find it easy to understand, this might indicate that the instructor needs to further develop their understanding of other theories and approaches to give them more options to consider, so their choice of realism becomes a more informed one. Once this knowledge is refined, activities can be made more challenging by asking groups to focus on applying specific theoretical frameworks to the problem at hand, to the exclusion of others, or to apply them sequentially to reflect critically on the different outcomes. In this way, IBL can be leveraged effectively to also counter the theoretical challenge by facilitating exposure to and engagement with a greater diversity of approaches and perspectives. The application of the reflective process to the research stage of IBL can also be useful for building students' skills in critical literacy. As with the theoretical perspectives discussed above, the reflective stage enables both students and instructors to identify if and when their decision-making processes are being influenced by expediency, and the impact this has on their understanding and contributions. Such skill development is particularly crucial in the foundational year of studies, but can be refined for application at an advanced level of study.

### Conclusion

The underpinning philosophy of signature pedagogies as a means of teaching future professionals “to think, to perform, and to act with integrity” (Shulman 2005, 52) provides a strong foundation for addressing the challenges of addressing increased expectations around careers and employability for graduates while maintaining the integrity of the discipline. However, a more robust discussion of what this means in practice is needed in many disciplines, including IR. This signature pedagogy needs to be flexible and adaptable rather than to inculcate disciplinary traditions into a new generation of scholars and practitioners. Students of IR are drawn to the discipline because they want to understand the world they are in and shape it for the future. By combining the ethos of pedagogical presentism with the process of IBL, IR can engage in an adaptive, flexible signature pedagogy that enables nimble engagement with contemporary events and issues.

Our students will be responsible for facing the various political, social, and environmental challenges as both professionals and as global citizens. Teaching at this time necessitates a deep reflection and conversation within the discipline itself about what, how, and why we teach IR. This article has aimed to be a contribution to that conversation. And, in the spirit of both signature pedagogies and IBL, the conversation must necessarily be open and ongoing.

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