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Re-visualising international relations: audio-visual projects and direct encounters with the political in security studies

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Abstract

In this paper we discuss how an innovative audio-visual project was adopted to foster active, rather than declarative learning, in critical international relations. Firstly, we explore the aesthetic turn in IR, to contrast this with forms of representation that have dominated International Relations scholarship. Representation is the 'very location of politics' (Bleiker, 2001: 510). Therefore, to confront this and also to provide students with the opportunity to explore their own insights through aesthetic and non-written formats, we describe secondly, how student groups were asked to record short audio or video projects. Thirdly, we explain how these projects are understood to be deeply embedded in social science methodologies, citing inspiration from The Sociological

Imagination (C Wright Mills, 1959) as a way to counterbalance a ‘marketised’ slant in HE, in a global economy where students are often encouraged to consume, rather than produce knowledge. Finally, we draw conclusions in terms of deeper forms of student engagement leading to new ways of thinking and presenting new skills and new connections between theory and practice.

Keywords teaching; critical security studies; audio-visual assessments; sociological imagination

Introduction

This paper explores ideas of how to foster active learning and a sociological imagination in the context of teaching critical International Relations (IR) debates. We reflect on how this was carried out on a postgraduate module, International Security, taught at Aston University, which adopted new forms of assessment - audio podcasts and videos – in order to encourage active learning and engagement with critical IR debates. The International Security module is taught as an optional (rather than a core module) on several Aston University politics and IR Masters programmes on EU and International Relations; International Relations and Global Governance; and Governance and International Politics, including those with Aston’s partner universities. The classes consist of a mix of international, EU, UK and West Midlands students, of varying cultural, linguistic and educational backgrounds, and experiences of higher education.

As a response to student feedback requesting fewer essay assignments at programme level, the teaching practice on this course was examined by the teaching

staff, to explore alternatives to the written assessment as a means of meeting module outcomes (c.f. Race 2006). The overall aim was to foster active, as opposed to declarative learning (i.e. repetition of lecture material in essays), and a more hands-on engagement with the subject (Biggs and Tang 2007). Active learning is a learning style which requires students to engage in ‘higher-order thinking tasks’ such as ‘analysis, synthesis and evaluation’ (Bonwell and Eison 1991:1). Following Bonwell and Eison, ‘strategies promoting active learning’ are ‘defined as instructional activities involving students in doing things and thinking about what they are doing’ (1991:1).

The course convenor examined several existing alternative options to the traditional written assignment, including presentations, posters and debates, before finally settling on audio-visual projects (completed by students in a group) as one assessment component. These would form 30% of the overall module grade, with a short, explanatory, individually completed, essay making up the other 70%. This weighting was chosen as the convenor understood the riskiness of the projects – they would run as a pilot scheme in the first instance, and as there was no way of telling how it would go and how students would respond to it, the convenor thought it prudent to minimise risk in the first instance by keeping the weighting of the innovative component lower.

The aim of this assessment was also to expand the breadth of assignments available at programme level. The programmes on which the students were enrolled included the EU and International Relations (IR) and IR and Global Governance. Most students were enrolled onto the ‘double MA’ programmes with our Partner Universities in France and Germany. Many of the students coming to our University have commented on how different our teaching provision is, as compared to the large lecture formats they are used to. Thus the programme itself is innovative in terms of the students’ experience to date.

The programme as a whole introduces students to key policies and politics of the EU and its external dimension; this is complemented with advanced studies in (international) politics (with core modules such as Globalisation, Regionalism and Global Governance and IR Theories). The students then choose optional modules which include International Security, Asia-Europe Relations, Leaders and Leadership, International Political Communication, Comparative and International Political Economy, Transatlantic Relations and others. Class sizes range between 4 to 25. The majority of assignments are still traditional essays but more diversity has recently been built into the programme with students completing research proposals, portfolios, presentations, briefing papers and simulated negotiations. When the audio-visual assessment was introduced, it was one of the first years in which we introduced innovative assessment methods, and as such was completely new to our students, staff and external examiner. Furthermore, these assessments are innovative since the majority of UK undergraduate and postgraduate assessments in Politics and IR, and Social Sciences generally, still consist of traditional essays, exams and presentations.

The audio-visual assessments were not introduced however, purely for the sake of innovation. Rather, the aim was to challenge students into using new and different skills, compared to what they had been used to. The aim was also to engage students in critical debates in IR, by allowing them to undertake critical IR and visual methodologies, as discussed below.

Audio-visual assessments were chosen as they have already gained currency in communications subjects (Brotzen 2010), the sciences (Buddle 2013), as an adjustment for disabled students (Black 2002), and as a feedback tool (e.g. Savin-Baden 2010). The potential of podcasting technology to complement Politics teaching has also been explored and shown to have been positively received by students (Ralph,

Head and Lightfoot 2010). Other audio-visual mechanisms, including videogames, are becoming parts of university politics curricula, such as the 'Videogames: Politics, Society and Culture' module at University of Leeds. Thus, the podcast projects are a part of an emerging trend for the use of audio-visual technology in learning and teaching. In terms of institutional context, the audio-visual project fits well with Aston University's tradition of innovation, especially in technology and engineering. Its School of Languages and Social Sciences similarly has a strong track record of innovation and incorporation of technology into student learning: for instance, the School has its own Learning Technologists and labs, with recording and editing equipment available for students' use. The School's staff have already employed the use of video and audio projects for language learning, and since the International Security module piloted the use of audiovisual assessments in Politics, the method has been adopted in an undergraduate and an additional postgraduate module (both optional).

The audio-visual assessments were also chosen in order to meet the module objectives (primarily, gaining an appreciation of critical approaches to security studies and international relations), and in order to reflect the module content. The content introduces students to debates in security studies but leans towards the more critical approaches including constructivism, the Copenhagen School, critical theory and post-structuralism. The project would allow students to explore 'the production of danger' (Fierke 2007) hands on, and later to write a critical treatise of the ways in which images and discourses contribute to security themes raised in their projects. All lectures used audio-visual material (news, military recruitment videos, Soviet propaganda posters etc), supplemented with a study trip to the Imperial War Museum. This created continuity between students' podcasts and the module content. The audio-visual projects were designed to remove linear and structural constraints and allow

presentational experimentation and active learning. The non-written nature of the projects allowed the students to examine questions of representation, construction of security, narrative and critical use of images.

Whilst the ‘declarative’ knowledge that students discuss in essays enables them to tell us (in their own words), about what they have learned, this is usually a form of ‘second-hand knowledge’ and students need to understand it selectively (Biggs, 2003). Biggs suggests students need to put knowledge to work in active forms of understanding that make them see the world differently, and in turn behave differently themselves, towards that part of the world (Biggs, 2003).

In this paper, we draw on the contribution of aesthetic insight to the study of IR and discuss how student production of short audio and video projects can help them to experience direct encounters with the political to reorient their understanding of critical debates (Bleiker, 2001: 511).

This links to what Dall’Alba refers to as a ‘process of becoming’ (Dall’Alba, 2009). She places emphasis on enabling students to integrate their ways of knowing, acting and being professionals and how this approach in turn has both potential to provide a clearer direction for the design of education programmes and support the students who proceed through them (Dall’Alba, 2009). Whilst some students will turn their declarative knowledge into functioning knowledge in time, most will not, unless they are required to (Biggs, 2003). By encouraging students to present IR research in non-traditional means we invite them to do more than ‘just’ read about innovative approaches to IR. We invite them to engage a ‘sociological imagination’ (Mills, 1959) and produce a means of both doing and communicating their research, as they participate in critical debate. This counterbalances a more recent marketised slant in Higher Education (HE), in a global economy, where students are often encouraged to ‘con-

sume', rather than 'produce' knowledge (Molesworth, Scullion and Nixon, 2010). This compromises intellectual development and can give students the impression that they simply receive rather than co-create knowledge. Instrumental forms of learning can also serve to reinforce ideology, and foster conformity to 'mimetic' forms of representation in international relations, which in turn can impede development of people's responsibility and agency. Neoliberal strategies and indeed counter strategies are discussed by Levidow who suggests it is inadequate simply to oppose marketization in higher education, instead it is necessary to stimulate debate over how to define our collective problems and aspirations (Levidow, 2002). Therefore 'resistance would be strengthened by developing alternative pedagogies which enhance critical citizenship, cultural enrichment and social enjoyment through learning' (Levidow, 2002: 13). An 'aesthetic' approach is one way to develop such a counter strategy to the marketised context that threatens to distort pedagogical relations. The 'aesthetic turn' offers an alternative pedagogy that rather than simply opposing current trends, instead tests the discipline and boundaries of International Relations itself within a marketised higher education system and wider society.

BACKGROUND: THE 'AESTHETIC TURN' IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

The following section outlines the key premises of the 'aesthetic turn' in International Relations: the debates in this field form a major part of the module and its learning outcomes. The module's content, focused on Critical IR and security studies debates, counterbalances the programmes' more traditional approaches to international politicsⁱ. Further, the main points raised by these debates informed directly the module

leader's choice of audio-visual assessments. A short outline of these debates also contextualises the student's assessments and their engagement with the module, which is discussed in the subsequent section.

The wealth of emergent research testifies to the continued broadening and deepening of International Relations and Security Studies, and the ongoing challenge to their positivist roots (e.g. Hansen 2015, Aradau and Hill 2013, Särnä 2012, Hansen 2011, Williams 2003, Sylvester 2001, Bleiker 2001). A key logic underlining much of this scholarship can be located in Bleiker's (2001:510) landmark paper, where he differentiates between an 'aesthetic' and a 'mimetic' form of representation in international relations. In Bleiker's formulation, the dominant mimetic representation 'seeks to portray politics as realistically and authentically as possible, aiming to capture world politics as-it-really-is', whilst the aesthetic approach 'assumes that there is always a gap between a form of representation and what is represented therewith'. Further, Bleiker (2001:510) notes an 'aesthetic turn' in IR, which coincided with the rise of Postmodernism and its critique; scholars working in this tradition used insights from across the arts and popular culture as a way of understanding world politics. As Williams (Williams 2003:524) notes, another contributing factor in IR's focus on images, has been the role of contemporary news media and their coverage of conflicts in Bosnia, Kosovo, and elsewhere, and events such as September 11. Such coverage has been criticised by Der Derian (2001) as a 'new military-industrial-media-entertainment network', where media spectacles converge with 'do-good ideologies'.

Aesthetic approaches to IR are not necessarily oppositional or 'against' the traditional approaches; Bleiker (2001:510), for instance, notes that there is still a place for conventional methods, even though aesthetic approaches have initiated a broadening of 'our understanding of world politics 'beyond a relatively narrow academic dis-

cipline that has come to entrench many of the political problems it seemingly seeks to address.’ This has yielded a wide scope of inquiry, with scholars addressing a range of research questions that can best be answered through aesthetic or visual approaches. Despite the broad range, most aesthetic approaches to IR are concerned with how images (re)shape world politics and our knowledge and engagement with them (Hansen 2011). For instance, Hansen (2015:263) explores the notion of ‘international icons’ in world politics; the ‘freestanding images that are widely circulated, recognised, and emotionally responded to’, such as the hooded prisoner of Abu Ghraib, which can embody foreign policy discourses. Elsewhere, Aradau and Hill (2012:368) explore the role that children’s drawings ‘play in the visualisation of conflict and violence’, arguing that ‘visuality needs to be understood as both an aesthetic and social object, whose production, circulation and reception transform its political effects.’

This opening up of the discipline is also seen in different *forms* through which recent research has been presented. Recent works by Dauphinee (2013) and Jackson (2014), for instance, have pushed the boundaries of IR even further. Both Dauphinee (2013) and Jackson (2014), engage with ‘traditional’ themes of IR – war, refugees, exile, terrorism – through non-traditional means. Dauphinee’s (2013) work reads like a novel, whilst Jackson’s is a novel, told through an interrogation by a British intelligence official. Of course, world literature has dealt with themes of politics for centuries, so the subject matter itself does not make these works unique. What makes both Dauphinee and Jackson’s work unique is that they present academic research through forms not common to academic publishing. Similarly, Särmä’s research into everyday ‘Western’ representations of nuclear politics, included a set of collages, presented together with a PhD thesis during the author’s PhD defence. This provides a ‘unique

intervention’, which ‘challenges the priority of text over images in conventional academic modes of presenting research’ (Särmä 2014: no page number).

One of the most significant outcomes of these challenges to positivist IR and traditional modes of inquiry and communication has been an ongoing inquiry into the discipline itself, its boundaries, possibilities and inequalities. IR students are now familiar with these debates, since most courses contain an element of critical perspectives, and most major textbooks dedicate a significant number of chapters to various critical schools (e.g. Collins 2013). The subsequent challenge, then, is how to translate this broad appreciation of critical debates into active learning, and, indeed, ‘*doing*’ IR? If, as scholars, we are now more attuned to the ways in which IR research can be presented in non-traditional means, how can we then invite our students to (1) participate in these debates by doing more than ‘just’ reading about innovative approaches to IR, (2) produce non-traditional means of doing and communicating research (3) engage with visual methodologies and critique, a core component of the critical debates and (4) recognise the role of their own ‘sociological imagination’ (Mills, 1959) in everyday life as a means to resist and challenge what is otherwise taken for granted in mimetic representations of politics? The following section outlines how these challenges were met by the International Security course and the use of audio-visual assessments.

PROJECT PRACTICALITIES

Students, working in elective groups, were required to record a 10-15 minute audio podcast or a video, using equipment and editing software already available at the School. Preparation for this work included a practical workshop by the School’s Learning Technologist, who also provided ongoing technical support throughout the

term. Group work allowed students to engage in dialogue to negotiate themes, and to have more hands for practical tasks of acting, editing and recording. The projects were presented in the final week of the module, accompanied with a class discussion. Marking criteria focused on research, content, message and idea development. The podcasts were accompanied by essays in which students, working individually, reflected further on the key issues. Students used the essay as an opportunity to theorise or reflect more traditionally, and to push their research to new directions. Students were advised to reflect on recent podcasts and broadcast programmesⁱⁱ (such as *This American Life*, *Radio Lab*, *File on Four*) for inspiration. In the subsequent academic year (2015-2016), the group also watched a documentary by academic James Der Derian, *Human Terrain*ⁱⁱⁱ, and explored videos and the ‘Reading Images of Atrocity, Conflict, War’ archive by IR scholar, David Campbell^{iv}. Students also read Jackson’s *Confessions of a Terrorist* novel. In this way, we engaged with critical debates by exploring scholars’ non-traditional research outputs, and discussing how they contribute to IR in general, and inform our understanding of politics.

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

Student responses have been consistently positive in both years that this module has run so far, as feedback in Table One demonstrates. The students were certainly surprised on hearing of the audio-visual assignment, but if some were initially daunted, many nevertheless decided to stick with the module. Overall, the class consisted of 26 students in the first year the module ran, which is about twice the size of most other postgraduate modules in the School. In the second year the number fell to just four, but this also coincided with the expansion of our programmes and the addition of a number of other optional modules. Students chose their own topics, and the range

covered was much broader than with a traditional essay. In the first year, the eight groups^v produced: (1) an investigative report on security arrangements of the Somali community in the Small Heath neighbourhood of Birmingham, (2) a televised debate on the US security pivot towards Asia-Pacific, (3) a TV news parody featuring Western ‘experts’ discussing Boko Haram, (4) an investigative report on knife crime in Ladywood neighbourhood of Birmingham (5) a TV news report and discussion of maritime piracy, (6) a UN sub-committee discussion of the security situation in Columbia, (7) parody of the French ‘It’s not rocket science!’ programme featuring EU attempts to securitise drugs and (8) a report examining how images of migrants and refugees are used by the media to construct fear. In the second year, the two groups produced (1) ‘The Security Show’ which used internet memes and ‘country balls’ to illustrate energy security relationships between states and (2) a video consisting of narratives by female students discussing perceptions of security, and how they think gender shapes our experiences.

What was particularly striking is that, in contrast to the help that students often seek when completing essays, very little help – virtually none at all – was sought from the module leader in both years, though assistance was offered in the form of office hour appointments, discussions and reviews of work completed. The general pattern that all the groups followed included an initial group meeting, then a meeting with the module leader to see if the topic was appropriate or would work, and then two or three follow up emails with minor, usually practical, queries such as, ‘can we use interviews?’ or ‘should we use subtitles?’ In other words, from a lecturer’s point of view, students were much more confident in their own work, asked far fewer questions and requested less meetings than they did when completing essays – even though they were given fewer instructions for completing the audio–visual assignment than they

normally have for essays, and despite the fact that no one in the group had completed anything similar before. They simply got on with these assignments, sought technical help when required, and showcased their work in Week 11 of the course.

According to student feedback, the project's lack of restrictions and linearity allowed for an engagement with their selected topics in a more creative way that still complemented essay writing. For instance, students working on the Boko Haram project used their project to collate existing news images and produce a comment on the Western-centrism of security narratives and the 'white saviour complex'. The assignment thus creates a platform to articulate academic insight, using discourses – such as satire and humour - outside traditional academic jargon. The students later expanded this theme in their essays with one work on postcolonial security literature and another examining silent security subjects (Hansen 2000).

The projects encouraged students to act like researchers, enabling them to employ social science methodologies (taught on the MA programme) and, in several cases, literally get out into the field, carry out primary research, take photographs and interview respondents. Many also re-thought the location of security, finding field-work sites in their own neighbourhoods. For instance, the group working on an audio podcast about the Somali community in Birmingham began with a project on maritime piracy. The students then met in a café in Small Heath (near the home of one of the students), and the discussions and observations they made during this meeting prompted them to re-think not only their project, but also to reflect on why they would choose a security situation 'over there', instead of discussing something related to their local community.

This connected to the course's theoretical investigations on what constitutes security and security subjects (e.g. Bilgin 2010). This course has been taught at our

University since 2011, but it is only with the introduction of audio-visual assignments that many students devised projects which dealt directly with our city and immediate surroundings. Many of the groups found their fieldwork sites and respondents in their immediate communities and neighbourhoods. The projects on the Somali community, knife crime, migration and women's narratives about security conducted primary research, with the students getting out into the field, interviewing respondents, filming their surroundings and recording soundscapes (some ethical challenges relating to this are discussed below). Whilst this kind of primary research is certainly encouraged in essays and dissertations, surprisingly few students actually do this in traditional assignments, especially in modules related to conflict or security, often preferring to research topics located in 'distant' fields and using secondary literature.

The group investigating knife crime interviewed Aston University students about their perceptions of security and also documented their own research journey in the video, featuring themselves discussing their methodology, findings and interviewing of participants, and were thus reflexive of the research process itself. The group was inspired to research this topic having seen an image of a 'knife amnesty bin' from the Ladywood neighbourhood, which I had included in one lecture. The students were also inspired by a vandalised poster near their accommodation, in a neighbourhood perceived to have a high knife crime rate. On the poster, the words 'Be a Star', had been altered to read, 'Be a Stab Victim'. The project engaged with constructivist ideas, and reflected on security 'theatre': the use of objects such as the knife bins, to construct feelings of (in)security in high-crime neighbourhoods.

In the second year that the module ran, the written part of the assessment was adjusted to a 'reflective' piece, which allowed students the opportunity to engage directly with their audiovisual project and suggest how it relates to critical IR debates.

One of the most striking assignments to emerge from this module was a students' paper that started with a short story, written by the student, which then gave way to a reflection on the project dealing with women's stories of (in)security. The paper as a whole allowed the student to explore ideas about security narratives, and to engage with feminist IR debates.

These student projects provide examples of 'direct encounters with the political' (Bleiker, 2001:511); Bleiker describes how this can lead to 'productive interactions across different faculties, including sensibility, imagination and reason, without any of them annihilating the unique position and insight of the other' (Bleiker, 2001:511). The question then is why such work – which features a deep engagement with the subject, reflects on subject positions and the creation of knowledge, relies on primary research and contains unexpected findings and sophisticated, original arguments, whilst also demonstrating student engagement with their city, its politics and its citizens – is so often absent from more traditional written work. That is not to say that all written work is lacking in these elements, and there is certainly a great deal of sophisticated essay writing at undergraduate and postgraduate levels, but as the student feedback demonstrates, the lack of an essay structure gave students more freedom to experiment. The flipside of this is that essays are *perceived* to be formats which do not allow creativity and experimentation and require students to conform to specific rules and elements.

As such, these active learning experiences, through diverse digital media, freedom and lack of rules and constraints, enable students to make their own original contributions to IR, linked with their diverse life experiences. This approach is deeply embedded in social science methodologies and might be said both to enact the very principles expounded by C Wright Mills in his seminal work, *The Sociological Imag-*

ination (1959), as well as to counterbalance a more recent marketised slant in Higher Education (HE), in a global economy, where students are often encouraged to ‘consume’, rather than ‘produce’ knowledge. For example a ‘consumer’ approach was apparent in the UK Government White Paper: *Higher Education: Students at the heart of the system* (BIS, 2011). Universities can either respond to this agenda by accepting the notion of students as customers of higher education or they can challenge the purely instrumental approach to knowledge as simply serving the needs of a global market. A marketised perspective emphasises the direct role of a degree in HE to secure future material affluence and to meet the needs of industry in global society, rather than to study as an on-going investment in the self (Molesworth, Nixon & Scullion, 2009: 280). Students are treated primarily as consumers in this model, where, through their tuition fees, they purchase a ‘product’, rather than benefit from the transformative potential university education offers for the whole of life (Mezirow, 2000). Mezirow (2000: 8) suggests purely instrumental learning reinforces ideology, fosters conformity and impedes development of people’s responsibility and agency.

On the other hand, in his section entitled ‘On Intellectual Craftsmanship’, Mills offers instruction on developing student’s critical research skills and guidance on how original sociological ideas can be generated. Consultation with literature is one part of the educational process, the other is to develop a reflexive attitude towards life; to be attuned to and use life experience (Barron, 2013: 4). Mills would encourage students to be creative, not instrumental alone, and to translate their active experience into their academic work as researchers in HE: ‘learn to use your life experience in your intellectual work: continually to examine and interpret it’ (Mills, 1959). Yet HE students are journeying through a system that is increasingly structured for a swift

progression towards a high paid job, rather than crafted for reflexive inquiry, that transforms student understanding throughout life (Hayes, 2015).

As HE has become partly measured by the numbers of students it attracts and later places into well-paid jobs, pressure on time has led to a method where learning experiences of students are broken down into discrete modules and sessions, usually separated into weekly folders that reside in online learning environments. Whilst this provides consistency, students can come to view research processes in a similar, fragmented way within the modular system (Hayes, 2015). Topics are presented chronologically, week-by-week and students can easily miss important connections from their first or second years of study that might be helpful to revisit later. Instead students are encouraged to simply complete a set of tasks to ‘have a degree’, rather than to ‘be learners’ (Molesworth, Nixon & Scullion, 2009: 277) who are *living* their research, in relation to their own past, present and future, as a ‘process of becoming’ (Dall’Alba, 2009). The idea of students *living research* in this context is an adaptation of the approach suggested by C. Wright Mills (1959) in *The Sociological Imagination* (Hayes, 2015). The concept of *living research* can help students to revisit advice written more than half-a-century ago, at a time when Mills could not have foreseen the ‘marketisation’ of HE. Mills suggests that successful scholars do not split their work from the rest of their lives, but treat scholarship as a choice of how to *live*, as well as a choice of career.

When many universities now place a strong focus on discrete skills for student employability, we suggest that embedding the transformative skills emphasised by Mills, through non-traditional means of doing and communicating research for the study of IR empowers students. This builds their confidence and resilience and thus helps them make connections that aid their employability. In a broader approach to

university study, digital media can aid students to link their prior experiences with their topics of study, as well as anticipate the skills needed for their careers to come. The audiovisual projects encourage students to see more clearly the connections between theory and practice, thus contributing to a professionalisation of MA students through fieldwork methodologies and acquisition of new skills.

Feedback from the students suggests that the assignments made them less passive about presenting their ideas, as Table One demonstrates. As such they are enabled to be social scientists, in a way that feels less intimidating and formal than in an essay alone. Mills reminds students that: ‘your past plays into and affects your present’, ‘it defines your capacity for future experience’ (Mills, 1959). This shifts the focus from education as a ‘product’ that the student-consumer ‘buys’, to a personal involvement that Mills explains to students is: ‘in every intellectual product upon which you may work’ (Mills, 1959). This encourages students to understand the transformative potential of their university experiences personally, through the projects they work on, but it might be taken further to invite student input into the pedagogical design of our future courses to come. This is also supported by the view from the module’s second examiner, who commented that the projects empowered students, and gave them an opportunity to explore their own understanding of security. Mill’s advice from 1959 remains relevant for student researchers, from the moment they enter university education (across all disciplines) to the point where they move into future employment and feed-forward their experience into their post-transformative lives.

Table 1: *Amalgamated student feedback, collated from informal in-class feedback forms.*

LIMITATIONS

Whilst the audiovisual project was received with enthusiasm by students for the second year running, the method is not without its limitations. These can be divided into practical and ethical. With regards to the practical, the main problem we faced was in the first year that the assessment ran. It was weighted at 30% of the module, which student feedback indicated was far too little for the amount of work involved. Some students managed to create projects that required relatively little editing, others chose projects which relied on consideration of angles, continuity and 'cutting' of footage. The following year, weighting was increased to 50% to better reflect the work involved. The problem of complex editing was also highlighted; as a result, the projects in the following year were somewhat technically less complicated but just as compelling.

Some students also faced ethical challenges, which went beyond the standard issues related to anonymity, consent and transparency. All students had to apply for ethical approval, following the University's ethics framework. The 'standard' ethical issues and forms were dealt with and approved by the module leader, whilst the more complex ones were escalated to the School's Ethics Approval Committee. One such challenge came from the group researching knife crime, who requested permission to film the 'knife amnesty bin' in the city centre. The School Committee turned down their request on personal safety grounds, noting also that the amnesty bin should allow individuals to deposit weapons anonymously. The Committee cited a risk of the group accidentally capturing someone using the amnesty bin. The committee however, allowed the students to take a photograph of the site, and splice this image into the video footage. This led to an extensive in-group and in-class discussion on research

ethics, crime and anonymity, particularly since the group noted, that the bin itself is in direct sight of a CCTV camera.

Our experience highlights that students were able to translate these challenges into active learning experiences. For instance, whilst they have extensive research methods training (which includes ethics) as a part of their programme, much of that training, particularly the encounter with research ethics, remains theoretical; and often does not get applied until they begin their dissertations towards the end of the course. In our experience, very few students on taught postgraduate courses in Politics and International Relations choose projects where primary data gathering is not always possible or necessary (for instance, analysing EU policies, examining opinion polls and existing quantitative data, analysing political events and their significance), and so the opportunity for ethical debates remains limited.

Whilst challenges exist, they have the potential to lead students into new spaces of critical thinking and reflection, particularly where ethics are concerned. The audiovisual assignment led many students to assignments and primary data that existed in their immediate surroundings, and thus provided new practical and ethical challenges, which in turn generated class discussions.

CONCLUSION

The value of the audio-visual projects for the study of critical IR is not that they are ‘anti-essay’ but rather that they are an active learning experience which complements the traditional written assignment (Bleiker, 2001:510), and has its own merits of textual engagement and research. As evidenced through student feedback, the real value in using audio-visual assessment formats to teach critical IR, is that the resulting projects resonate with the emergent debates and presentation formats in this field. By fo-

cusing on form and exploring security audio-visually, students produced research and knowledge, without worrying about the structural constraints of written assignments.

This is important to counterbalance the trend towards treating students as consumers (Molesworth, Nixon and Scullion, 2010) which can give students the impression that they simply receive, rather than co-create knowledge. Instead we can stimulate debate and develop alternative pedagogies that help to enhance critical citizenship (Levidow, 2002: 13). These support students to test the boundaries of the discipline of IR and understand important links with other disciplines, such as Sociology.

The project is deeply embedded in social science methodologies, inviting students to engage a ‘sociological imagination’ (Mills, 1959). This enables students to *be* social scientists (Dall’Alba, 2009), in a way that feels less intimidating and formal than construction of an essay, where they may feel trapped in the ‘ivory tower’ or intimidated by an existing wealth of research, unable to see their own original contribution. It should be acknowledged that these student productions contribute to (re) shaping world politics and our knowledge and engagement with them (Hansen 2011). Student feedback demonstrates that learning experience is enhanced through the opportunity to engage with course themes in a different, non-linear way, and the ability to employ a full spectrum of communication strategies and discourses (including humour, satire and parody). Feedback suggests that the method of thinking and presenting it required made them less passive about their ideas and their presentation.

The project also helps to meet the varied learning styles and needs of a diverse student population: the technology crosses linguistic barriers, for instance, and in a class where 23 out of 26 students are non-native English speakers, this has considerable significance and potential, especially in building confidence. We link this feature with advice from C Wright Mills (1959) to students to use their life experience in

their intellectual work. From such a diverse student body, personal experience brought to these projects can only enrich the group as a whole.

Indeed, such assignments, being primarily visual in nature, can be completed using the minimum amount of language (or indeed no language at all), offering potential for use in classrooms where students might struggle with the main teaching language, or indeed have disabilities which mean that they find spoken expression much easier than written language. Technology also acts as a leveller, as none of the students had prior experience of recording and editing files, so it helps remove the students' own preconceptions such as 'I am not good at essays/exams/presentations.' This helps remove some common blockages which prevent students from engaging fully with assignments they may find intimidating. The audio-visual projects encourage students to employ acquired knowledge, and, according to feedback, see more clearly the connections between theory and practice. We would argue therefore that this empowers students and builds their confidence to help them make connections that not only aid their employability, as they anticipate a broad range of skills needed for their careers to come, but that enable them to *live* their research, in relation to their own past, present and future, as a 'process of becoming' (Dall'Alba, 2009).

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Key Quotes

1. These student projects provide examples of ‘direct encounters with the political’ (Bleiker, 2001:511)
2. As such, these active learning experiences, through diverse digital media, freedom and lack of rules and constraints, enable students to make their own original contributions to IR, linked with their diverse life experiences.
3. The audiovisual projects encourage students to see more clearly the connections between theory and practice, thus contributing to a professionalisation of MA students through fieldwork methodologies and acquisition of new skills.

ⁱ To reflect the module content better, the module was renamed Critical Approaches to Security Studies, starting with the 2015-2016 academic year.

ⁱⁱ Linked through the module’s Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), Blackboard.

ⁱⁱⁱ More information at <http://humanterrainmovie.com>

^{iv} Available at <https://www.david-campbell.org/topics/images-atrocity-conflict-war/> last accessed 16 February 2016.

^v Students formed their own groups in Week 1 of the course.