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### Five Needs of International Security Students

*Note: The following is excerpted from my portfolio submission to the 2024 Adjunct Teaching Excellence Awards selection committee. It is not a teaching strategy as such, but rather a strategic approach to teaching. Although my experience and teaching responsibilities lead me to the international security framing, with extremely minor adaptation I believe it can be useful to educators working in any specialized program preparing driven students set on becoming practitioners.*

#### What do international security students need?

I see this as the most important question I have to answer as an international security educator. Understanding that international security students almost exclusively pursue careers in national security, foreign policy, or adjacent forms of advocacy or analysis (including journalism), **I have identified five needs: theory; reality; specific skills; emotional validation; and collegiality.**

#### Theory

My professional experience has shown me too many examples of national security professionals and military officers approaching challenges as though they are wholly novel. An enormous advantage of my own graduate education is the theoretical grounding I gained; many supposedly “new” problems are really old problems happening to new people. I seek to transfer this grounding to my students by addressing three challenges of theoretical teaching: de-mystifying the fundamentals; staying current with the changing field; and treating the students as theoreticians worthy of respect.

##### *De-mystifying the Fundamentals*

Seminal theory readings frequently use inaccessible language. I have found the most effective way of de-mystifying the content of these often intimidating works is to invite the students to shed any pretense of erudition. We are going to use plain English to understand these concepts. Deontological ethics? That simply means a field defined by rules instead of by its contents. Supererogatory actions? Going above and beyond. There is a time and place for specific academic language; I submit it is not when gaining a basic grasp of these concepts. Convince the students that you are willing to do as much of this plain language exploration as it takes and they become ten feet tall where a moment before they fretted and hesitated.

##### *Staying Current with the Changing Field*

I’m so glad that comprehensive exams are behind me – I don’t need to worry about reading new theoretical scholarship in the fields I study and teach. Right? Wrong! The temptation is so strong to hew to the field and subfields as I left them to embark on dissertation research; however, the imperative of helping the students to trace the evolution of each field (for example, orthodox Just War Theory consisting of *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello* possibly expanding to include *jus ad vim*) means that I never feel like I am done exploring.

##### *Treating the Students as Theoreticians Worthy of Respect*

Getting a grip on theory is hard work – hard enough that it can be tempting to simply rattle it off while the students furiously scribble notes and then move on to another topic. I see it as critical to turn the helm of

the conversation over to the students. They have grappled with the readings, I have gently helped them to de-mystify the concepts into plain English, and we have traced the evolution of the field – they have thoughts! This last step of theoretical exploration and internalization is one that I am only equipped to facilitate, not to lead – the students’ organic observations and contributions to discussion with one another provide an authentic benefit worth a hundred lectures. It’s just as important that I make clear that I’m treating what they have to say seriously – they are no less equipped to offer an opinion or pose a paradox to the theoretical literature than I am; I’ve just had more time with it.

### **Reality**

Here’s the thing – international security students will be content to deal with theory for only so long. Their ambitions to enter the national security, foreign policy, or strategic analysis communities means that they crave tethers to real-life phenomena – preferably ripped from the headlines. Although a consecutive approach to theory *then* reality is possible, I have not found this to be advisable. Instead, at every step of theoretical education I aim to tie concepts to real, relatively recent cases (see my course as case study). The demonstration of theoretical concepts through real cases helps the students stay motivated to keep learning theory and shows them the glaring demand for specific skills to contend with said cases.

### **Specific Skills**

Education and training are fundamentally different endeavors – two students receiving an education might reference the same texts and take the same courses but have entirely different exploratory experiences. On the other hand, I would expect trainees to have very similar experiences and be capable of similar if not identical actions at the conclusion of their training. The truth is that there are aspects of training that are inevitable in education, particularly in an educational program that takes a pragmatic approach to its students’ known career aspirations.

I know international security students need the ability to deliver concise, well-organized verbal analysis and option proposals. I know they need to be able to summarize facts rapidly but accessibly, and I know they need to be able to clearly articulate frameworks used to break down complex and dangerous problems. To this end, I teach these specific skills – strategic close reading, concise summary, and the scaffolded drafting of a serious graduate research paper that allows them to apply a theoretically informed analytic framework to a real case.

### **Emotional Validation**

I have become convinced that the defining characteristic of the higher education student is anxiety. This manifests in different ways for different students but I haven’t yet met one who wasn’t dealing with substantial levels of anxiety. In my experience, the students want validation for this and other emotions (and justifiably!). I see an important responsibility in my teaching to be acknowledging that the anxieties are justified and that we (the student and their colleagues and I) are going to be able to address them. This includes students who hold a negative self-view with regard to the course material.

This is an area where I originally struggled. One of the hazards of military service is a temptation to embrace stoicism. It was not until I recognized my own anxieties (first as a student and then as an educator and even as a professional) that I was able to recognize them in the students. It remains difficult for me to accept that fear of inadequacy is a real and present force in my professional life, but choosing to invite students to confront this same fear more than justifies my brief discomfort. Recognizing, validating, and helping students to manage the anxiety of degree and professional demands is directly relevant to the next need: collegiality.

## Collegiality

Aspiring international security professionals want and need a community of colleagues characterized by mutual respect for one another as people and as experts. While expertise may be a bit longer in coming, interpersonal respect and community-building are things we can address *immediately* and with the highest priority.

I have developed a number of practices to help establish this environment of engagement, respect, and community:

- A. Every classroom a circle. I eliminate all rows but the first – we are all face to face.
- B. Presence. Barring disability accommodations, electronic devices are dark, silent, and put away (even laptops!). I piloted this in my first semester of teaching and it is consistently identified by students as a much-appreciated feature of the classroom that they did not originally expect to like. Our attention is on one another and the subject matter – this can be intimidating, but student feedback indicates that it is validating and community-building in a way that electronic devices can undermine in other settings.
- C. Durable, visible name tents throughout the whole term. If you respond to a point that a colleague made, you must credit them by name – no anonymity!
- D. No interrupting. I am the only one allowed to interrupt anyone in the seminar and I will only do it in the event of an emergency, if we are running out of time, to correct a factual inaccuracy before the conversation gets too far, or because a student has expressed an exciting insight and I can't help but seize on it (after which I apologize profusely for interrupting). When a colleague has a contribution, it is worth considering.
- E. No judgment. We agree to the premise that no one in the group came to class with the intent to hurt anyone else. If anyone says something that does cause hurt, it is a valuable opportunity to explain that hurt so we can all learn to respect the boundary that was transgressed. International security topics – particularly within ethics and the use of force – can be inherently distressing. No one will be judged for their emotional reaction – I've seen too much nervous laughter in the face of actual atrocity to judge it as malicious or inappropriate, and everyone is entitled to their tears.
- F. No selling yourself short. Don't worry if your contribution is not expert – if you were already an expert, why would you be taking this class? Don't worry if a promising thought has occurred to you that maybe doesn't completely make sense – it'll still give the seminar a jumping off point. And *do not* begin your comment by undercutting yourself (for example, "this might be dumb, but..." or "I'm not sure if this is right, but..."). Not only do you deserve to have confidence in yourself and your contribution, but if you can't pose a flawed argument or inquiry in this environment—the one where you're literally supposed to learn about the field—where can you pose it?

## Conclusion

It bears stressing that as ardently as I may appear to state some of these principles above, I am sensitive to the possibility that cramming them down students' throats is unlikely to be successful. My challenge is to walk the walk, consistently displaying the patience with students that I espouse above. Sticking it out means that I can take enormous pride in my role in helping to shape international security professionals who are theoretically literate, tethered to reality, proficient in the skills of the field, secure in their emotional intelligence (or at any rate more secure than when they arrived), and both grateful for and committed to a thriving community of respectful and mutually supporting colleagues.