Case Study Title: 'What Matters is What they Think: Cultivating Student Voices and Reflexivity'
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Institution: University of St Andrews
Subject area: International Relations
Programme/Course: Mapping the Boundaries of Emerging and Evolving Securities
Module/Unit: IR3054
SCQF Level: 10
Assessment Name: At the TAPPS event I presented on two assessments called

- Critique and Find
- Reflection Piece

Tied to these assessments I also outlined several formative assessments that serve as building blocks. I mentioned

- Allowing students to write their own conclusions at the end of every lecture
- Inviting students to create their own 'security maps' in the first IR3054 tutorial
- Asking students to select and prepare a 'quote of the week' throughout IR3054
- Designing and delivering two interactive sessions and tutorial on each written assessment

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1. **How would you summarise your practice case study?**

In IR3054 I designed a series of pedagogical and learning practices that cultivate student voices and reflexivity. This aligns with my intended learning outcomes (ILOs), which clearly outlined in my module booklet. Student have access to this document during advising. As such, they are aware of these intentions and practices as they self-select into IR3054 module. To achieve my ILOs, I use several formative exercises and diverse modes of assessment.

For example, in Lecture 1 and every lecture thereafter, I invite students to write their own conclusions. This is done very simply. I explain my intentions then provide them with five minutes to jot down their key take away points (I set a timer). This 'thinking space' creates a key pause and nurtures the idea that their own personal ideas matter. It also allows them to capture their thoughts in the moment rather than rushing to their next class, task or meeting. I support the idea of pausing and cultivating student voices in the first IR3054 tutorial. Here I invite students to create what I call 'security maps' in allocated time (15 minutes). This 'playful' exercise asks them to document 'what security means' to them. They can use visuals, drawings, writing, words, whatever they link. I supply everyone with blank pages and colouring pens. Creating security maps allows each student to pause to consider their own ideas. I give the prompt – what security means to you – in the first lecture. In the SoIR our teaching schedule is often staggered. Following this practice, IR3054 students have a week to contemplate this prompt before their first tutorial. Security maps are created individually but shared collectively. This pedagogical exercise creates another reflexive pause that invites students to find and trust their own voices. In this exercise, they begin to foreground what they think rather than simply relying on existing literature. They also start to see how their own ideas relate to required/additional reading materials. Creating security maps also builds group collaboration, teamwork and peer-review engagement into the tutorial environment. Asking students to document their own conclusions and security maps in WK and tutorial 1 tie to assessments. They are key reference points they can return to when they write their critique and find and reflection pieces. Pausing at the start to document initial ideas is key as students can forget what they were thinking in WK 1 by the time we get to WK 11.

In IR3054 I also use what I call 'quotes of the week' throughout the module. Again, this pedagogical approach is very relaxed and 'playful'. Every week students are asked to select one quote from the assigned readings that helped to deepen their understanding of that topic. We the open every IR3054 tutorial with students sharing their quotes and explaining why they picked them. All students share their quotes individually. To manage time every student is asked to only pick one line for their 'quote of the week'. This pedagogical exercise is low stakes as everyone is doing the required reading and participating. However, it is extremely effective. Overall, it fosters deeper levels of engagement with readings and peers. It also cultivates a practice of weekly reflections and lays the groundwork for their written assessments.

The IR3054 ‘critique and find’ assessment teaches advanced critical thinking skills and reflexivity. Again, it promotes ways for students to find their own voices and pause throughout IR3054. The assessment has three steps. First, students provide an in-depth ‘critique’ of a core reading they have already done in Week 1 & 2. Students the self-select their own texts and identify their own critiques of said text. Second, students must then ‘find’ a new reading that is not listed as a required reading. Technically there no limit on the type of article that what student can ‘find’ once it is relevant. In short, they can pick something not listed in the module booklet. The third step is that students must connect the ‘critique’ and ‘find’ together. Put differently, there must be a link between the two parts of this assessment. The assessment is 1,000 words in length. However, I specify that students must dedicate approx. 500 words to the ‘critique’ and 500 words to the ‘find’. This assessment is worth 20% of the module credits. To support this assessment, I run a collective interactive session and tutorial prior to the deadline to allow students to have more thinking and practice time.

My IR3054 ‘reflection piece’ assessment invites students to write in a different style. It allows them to elaborate on what they have learned during IR3054, starting from their Lecture 1 conclusions and ‘security maps’ to their thoughts at the time of submission (late in WK 9). In this piece, students are invited to be very honest and use their own words. Put differently, their own voice can shine through as they document how their own ideas and curiosities have evolved. In the IR3054 reflection piece students must engage with one text or quote that changed their understanding of security. I anchor this criterion by asking them to document one turning point or ‘Aha!’ moment, which is outlined as an essential part of their grade. I provide students with some materials and reference points on how to write a reflection pieces as they can be quite daunting. However, I emphasise that there is no single way to approach this assessment. Once again, to support diverse learners and reflexive work I run a dedicated interactive session and tutorial prior to the IR3054 reflection piece. Both allow students to build their assessment as they go. The reflection piece is 2,000 words long and worth 30% of the module credit.

Templates for both assessments (i.e. the ‘critique and find’ and reflection piece) marking schemes, feedback sheets and criteria are provided in the IR3054 handbook.

2. Why did you develop or enhance your assessment and what was your rationale?

IR3054 aims to show students that security is constructed and contested. This challenges 'traditional understandings' of security studies. This module engages with what is termed 'critical security studies' (CSS) and I draw heavily on securitization throughout this module. Both CSS and securitization show students that security is not give. Moreover, it teaches them that there is no single security story. I designed my assessments with these insights in mind. Going further, my assessments invite students to realise that they are key speakers, actors and creators. Put differently, they learn that they can define what security means to them and discern which stories they find (un)convincing.

These intentions bleed into the formative parts of the module (writing their own conclusions, the security maps and the 'quotes of the week' and the interactive sessions. Each activity provides guiding compasses that students can use to cultivate their voices, knowledge and reflexivity. My ILO's are also advanced by the different modes of assessments. The critique and find asks them to critique existing stories (in academia) and find alternatives (inside and outside academia). The reflection piece asks them to pause and tap into their own voices. I have tailored the IR3054 exam so that it allows students answer questions that are reflective and reflexive in nature. This ensures that the exam blends academic content with opportunities to use skills they have acquired in the module. Personally, I feel it is essential to allow students to see how complex and messy security is in theory and in practice. I also feel it is important to show students that they play powerful roles in the (re)production of (in)securities.

3. What enhancements or changes did you implement in assessment in making this more innovative, diverse or inclusive of diverse learner cohorts?

In the School of International Relations (SoIR) at the University of St Andrews, I co-founded the Teaching Forum (TF) in 2016 and co-convened it for ten years (2016-2026). I also co-founded and co-convened our Distinguished Teacher Lecture (DTL) series, which is tied to the TF. The DTL is an annual lecture dedicated to pedagogy and collective conversations. It is extremely inclusive and welcoming. By design, it is open to student of all levels, all staff across the university and even members of the public. The first DTL was delivered by Professor Robbie Shilliam (John Hopkins University) in 2019: https://politicalscience.jhu.edu/directory/robbie-shilliam/. It centred on the need to decolonise IR and our teaching practices. This talk had a major and transformative impact on me.

A key lesson I took from Professor Shilliam's DTL was that diversifying our assessment structures and styles is one way to challenge existing power structures and inequalities in HEI. After this talk, I immediately changed my IR3054 assessments for the next AY. Initially, I removed a second standard essay (2.500 words) with the reflection piece. Doing so promoted me to create formative and continued steps to support this type of writing at UG level. This is where my 'quote of the week' idea came from. In AY 2025-26 I continued to diversity and alter my assessments styles and formats by introducing the 'critique' and 'find' assessment. In the same AY (205-26) I designed the two interactive sessions tied to each IR3054 assessment. This change allowed me to focus on making space and time for students to develop academic and employability skills. To make space for the interactive sessions I removed two entire topics from IR3054. Rather than rushing from topic to topic, reading to reading, I made space for students to pause, reflect and engage more deeply with their readings and ideas. I was hearted to hear the keynote speaker at the TAPPS Sharing Event St Andrews, Dr Miri Firth PFHEA, outline the importance of diversifying assessment structures and formats on 20 March 2026. My interest in improving and growing as a teacher is a key motivation behind the abovementioned rationale. Joining others, I see critical pedagogy as a continuous practice. In this light, I constantly reflect on and adapt my teaching approaches and assessments. This allows them to remain innovative and responding to ongoing developments taking place inside and outside of Higher Education.

4. **What informed your approach to the changes you made, e.g. student feedback, observations of student difficultly, insights from literature or research findings, assessment pass rates etc.?**

I think some of this might have already been covered in point 3. I made the changes for several reasons. First, I wanted to diversify my assessment format and delivery to make it more inclusive, pluralistic and useful. Building from Professor Shilliam's DTL 2019 talk I am making more conscious efforts to decolonise the IR3054 curriculum. Changing my assessments was one small yet tangible way I could do this. Second, students verbal feedback during office hours and tutorials informed me that they constantly felt overwhelmed in their studies and under time pressure. I believe that learning how to pause and reflect is part of critical thinking. So, I decided to build reflection points and thinking time into IR3054. Again, I adopted several formats to achieve this teaching practices

- Giving students time to write their own conclusions
- Giving students time to make their own security maps and discuss them collectively

- Giving students time to do formative work throughout IR3054
- Giving students time to pause, critically engage and reflect
- Giving students time to re-read readings and course materials
- Giving students space to find and trust their voices
- Giving students the change to write reflection pieces

As noted above, my moves to change IR3054 over the years is informed by critical pedagogy and practices. There is an excellent 2013 'Interventions' section on links between 'critical security' and pedagogy in the journal Critical Studies on Security that I found very inspiring. It is in Volume 1(3). I am copying the citation for the introduction below

- "Interventions Introduction." 2013. *Critical Studies on Security* 1 (3): 347. doi:10.1080/21624887.2013.869072

More recently, I enjoyed the 'playful' approach outlined in the article below

- Giuditta Fontana, David J Wilcox, Using LEGO® in Political Science and International Studies: A Flexible and Effective Tool for Playful Learning, *International Studies Perspectives*, Volume 27, Issue 2, May 2026, Pages 97–114, https://doi.org/10.1093/isp/ekaf012

5. **What key changes have you seen as a result of this change to your assessment practice?**

It is hard to answer this question in any definitive way. However, based on verbal and written feedback students benefited from the changes I made over the years. They particularly enjoyed learning how to pause and having more time to deeply engage with texts/topics. In the last AY (25/26) student shared that they found the two interactive sessions extremely helpful for the planning their assessments and the quality of their writing. Many noted it improved their time management and consistent engagement with IR3054.

As the module convenor I noticed that students were far more engaged in last AY and had excellent attendance. From an administrative perspective the extra time I provided in the interactive sessions and tutorials cut down on the number of extensions requests I would normally have received. A significant change that I have noticed since running IR3054 is how many students continue their studies with CSS and securitization in mind. Many self-select my 4th year module and use these frameworks in their IR4099 dissertation. This is 10,000 –

12,000 work piece worth 60 credits that students can opt to complete in 4th year. Finally, I mentor many students through PGT/PGR applications and post-study careers. Through verbal and written feedback many have expressed that IR3054 has shaped their career paths and employability skills.

6. **How are you evaluating the effectiveness of these enhancements or changes implemented?**

I constantly evaluate the effectiveness of IR3054 in many ways. In person, I do this through weekly tutorials and office hours. Both weekly contact times provide me with constant feedback loops that allow me to modify things as needed. They also allow me to consistently address concerns and answer student questions to ensure that no student gets lost. After WK 3 I ask students if they are happy to continue writing their own conclusions. To date the answer has been 'yes'. But if they disliked it, I could/would revert to more traditional conclusions or find a new approach with their input. Another way I engage effectiveness is via the interactive sessions and tutorials. Both create lots of space for extra questions to be raised and answered. I also like that I can share the same advice with everyone at the outset and each student can them tailor them to their own specific assessments.

More formally, I am basing my answers in this form on extremely positive MEF/MEQ feedback I have received for IR3054 and teaching award submissions for the same module. I have also been applauded by previous Directors of Teaching and External Examiners for my assessments and formative exercises when they review my module booklets. Finally, I have shared a lot of my ideas with colleagues and PGR students through different Teaching Forum sessions. These conversations continue to shape how I assess the effectiveness of my teaching approaches and practices. Externally, I presented some of these ideas at the University of Glasgow Best Practice in Social Sciences Teaching Workshop on 7 August 2024. I was very grateful to received excellent feedback from participant in different educational roles and careers.

7. Tips for practitioners:

Do you have any tips for practitioners wanting to make similar enhancements or changes in their assessments that you could add in?

It is always hard to give exact tips since everyone's teaching is different. I am also champion pluralism and diversity in teaching methods, assessments and approaches. My main invitation to everyone – including myself – is to constantly reflect on your teaching approaches, intentions and styles. They can be adapted as you go. Equally, if you try something new and it 'fails' you can also return to older approaches in the next AY. Teaching is often trial and error. Doing creative work can also take a little while and a few attempts.

The 'quote of the week' exercise is a very nice way to promote engagement and ease students into complex topics. It is also low stakes. I use it in small groups (10-25 students). But it could be used in larger settings and even on digital learning forums. If students have disabilities or health issues (of any kind), I can work with them to modify the way we approach this exercise.

The security maps are specific to IR3054. But the goal of asking students to pause and jot down their initial ideas is easy to use in lots of other teaching environments. I always stress that the goal is not about being artistic. It is about students finding and trusting their voices. If students have disabilities or health issues (of any kind), I can work with them to modify the way we approach this exercise.

Inviting students to write their own conclusion each week is applicable to lots of teaching spaces and assessments. In digital learning environments you could invite students to post their conclusions in a group forum and ask others to write a reply. I used this format during COVID-19. I set up an online discussion forum on Moodle and a IR3054 teams page where they could post their maps, a summary of their ideas and thought. During the pandemic I also ask student to respond/reply to two students maps to promote engagement. I have not done it but there is also scope for students to write group conclusions or to create group maps in break out groups.

The critique and find exercise can be a little daunting for UG students. At the University of St Andrews most students are used to writing in longer formats and in essay styles that are linear. Equally, I am asking them to critique and find together. So, my tip here would be to ensure that you explain the different steps carefully and leave lots of time for Q&A.

Personally, I think running some kind of collective session outlining expectations is wise, which is why I created the interactive sessions. This way all students are getting the same information and can learn with others. They also create a pause that students need to get to grips with the new assessment and writing style.

In terms of the IR3054 reflection piece my top tip is to be patient and very encouraging. Students are often taught not to use first person voice or autobiographical approaches. Consequently, they are very nervous to write their own stories or use 'I'. Equally, a reflection piece can be quite intimidating and vulnerable for students. It is not easy to share your own thoughts. As the teacher, then, I try to offer extra reassurance as they start this kind of work and create pedagogical scaffoldings to support this work. I think building these skills up over the course of a module is a key part of giving students the confidence to share their observations. Often, I can reassure them and say – 'well you have been doing this all along with your security maps, lecture conclusions and quotes of the week'. This is true. Again, I think my decision to weave in an interactive session and tutorial prior to this assessment was extremely beneficial to the students (as reflected in MEQ/MFQ scores and post-module emails). The length of the reflection piece could be altered (increased or decreased). Technically, it does not need to be verbal. It could weave in visual mediums and creative practices too. At the TAPPS Sharing Event St Andrews, for example, Dr Carol Jasper, University of Stirling presented on, 'Making Epistemology Engaging: Use of Photovoice in Teaching Research Methods'. I found her use of visuals very interesting as an alternative way of reflecting and narrating learning experiences.

For me the idea of asking students to reflect on what they learnt in a module could be woven into any learning environment. Making it personal rather than using a standardised quiz or feedback form also allows students to fully acknowledge how their ideas have changed or stayed the same. If you were teaching a year-long module you could weave multiple reflections into the syllabus (i.e. more like ongoing and shorter journal entries). At the TAPPS Sharing Event St Andrews, Dr Nick Brooke presented on, 'Enabling Student Agency in Assessment - Independent Research Project'. I think the reflection piece could support the creation and delivery of independent research projects too.