

## **Keynote Address**

### **Teaching large classes with diversity in mind – Adopting knowledge plurality in a large class**

**Jacqueline de Matos Ala**

Department of International Relations, University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa

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#### ***Abstract***

*There is a growing acknowledgement of the need for greater knowledge plurality in our university curricula that reflects ideas and theories that have their genesis in both the global North and South. This paper reflects on not only the importance of knowledge plurality for students but also how this can be achieved in a large class environment. Through the careful selection, sequencing, pacing and assessment of knowledge, the dual challenges of introducing a range of new, often complex knowledges, in a large class environment can be successfully navigated. Further, I found that creating multiple zones of proximal engagement, together with introducing knowledge in different formats can mitigate the potential high cognitive load such a course places on students. Ultimately, the plurality of knowledge encountered provided students with exciting new ways of understanding and explaining international relations in a myriad of context and the large class context did not distract from this outcome.*

**Keywords:** *knowledge plurality; curriculum studies; large classes; inclusive learning; decolonization*

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## **1. Introduction**

I teach a course on “thinking, theorizing, and researching International Relations (IR)” to final year undergraduate students at the University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa. The course design is innovative in that it is knowledge plural which is unique for a course on IR theory. Currently, the theories of IR are comprised predominantly of knowledge that has either originated in the West or been appropriated as Western by its scholars. Moreover, these theories reflect the interests, contexts, and ideologies of Western states. However, with the proliferation of the discipline in the global South, the demand for knowledge diversity that takes account of the realities, histories, cultures as well as philosophies beyond the West has increased. Consequently, there has been an exponential rise in scholarship demonstrating the importance of knowledge plurality in the theoretical component of the discipline (Acharya & Buzan, 2007; Blaney & Tickner, 2013; Smith & Tickner, 2020; Qin, 2020). Nevertheless, despite the increase in the production of scholarship exploring knowledge from global South sources, Western knowledge still dominates most IR curricula globally (Wemheuer-Vogelaar et al., 2016).

My decision to create a knowledge plural IR theory curriculum was motivated by the desire to present a more complete, complex picture of my discipline that would be more relevant to the multicultural contexts of (my) students from the global South than one populated exclusively by Western knowledge. This decision was further reinforced by the emergence of local and international social movements at universities demanding that curricula incorporate more diverse voices especially those of under-represented and marginalized populations (Morreria et al., 2020). What has added complexity to the designing and teaching of this course is the large size of the class. Thus, the pedagogic innovations I employ need to work well within a large class context. Therefore, I intend to offer my course on thinking, theorizing, and researching IR as an exemplar of a large class that has attempted to incorporate a plurality of knowledges, particularly from the global South, into a curriculum. Moreover, I believe that the relevance of this paper transcends teaching contexts from the global South given the fact that large multicultural classrooms are also reality for higher education institutions in the global North too.

## **2. Terminology - What do I mean by a knowledge plural IR theory course?**

In the context of this paper and the course I am discussing, ‘a knowledge plural IR theory course’ refers to a course that is populated by theories or concepts from multiple locales in the global North and the global South. I also acknowledge the complexity that accompanies the use of the terms global North/West and global South, especially as these are not geographically accurate or exclusive to a geographic region. The use of the term global South not only references a geographic region but is also a metaphor for the oppression

caused by colonialism and global capitalism. Additionally, it constitutes a site of resistance to Western oppression (Sousa Santos 2012). Further, I use these terms because they are the ones used in the literature that I engage with.

### **3. Theories of learning informing my pedagogic approach**

My pedagogic practice has been informed and shaped by the ideas of various socio-cultural learning theorists who contend that learning is a social activity where knowledge is co-constructed by participants within specific historical, social, and cultural parameters (Vygotsky, 1978). For Vygotsky (1978), the structured, systematic learning processes students encounter throughout their formal education are imperative as these facilitate the development of higher mental function as well as the acquisition of specialized knowledge (in contrast to everyday knowledge). He also notes that instruction must be ordered systematically for learning and cognitive development to occur. Learning occurs optimally when educators and learners engage with knowledge collectively. The role of the educator or more knowledgeable peer is that of mediator, providing the necessary scaffolding to enable learners to engage with more complex knowledge with their assistance than they would be able to on their own. This is what Vygotsky refers to as the “zone of proximal development’ Moreover, multiple representations of knowledge from different sources are encouraged to allow learners to appreciate not only different points of view but also the complex nature of the world which as previously stated is a key objective of my course.

In a similar vein, Bruner (1996) argues that learning occurs through the active interaction with knowledge by learners and educators, particularly by facilitating discourse between these parties on specific issues. Divergent opinions and understanding of concepts can fruitfully be exchanged through class discussion. It allows for multiple representation of knowledge. It also lets learners share knowledge that others may not possess thereby instigating a zone of proximal development scenario. This learning approach is also conducive to accommodating different learning styles (Bruner 1990). Within this classroom context, the educator again functions as mediator, shifting agency for learning to the students as their sophistication in mastering knowledge and related academic skills grow. This type of environment further accommodates intersubjectivity by allowing multiple viewpoints. Further, if a learner’s understanding, ideas or opinion are factually incorrect or socio-culturally unacceptable, discourse can be used as a mediator to change or adapt the learner’s stance to the correct or acceptable position. Bruner believes that these forms of mediation develop important habits of mind such as tolerance and the ability to incorporate new knowledge into one’s mental schema. These not only benefit the individual but society at large. Significantly, Bruner (1996), Cole (2005) and Hasan (2002) assert that where educational policies and practice positively and effectively accommodate and engage with

social and cultural diversity, formal education can benefit all learners equitably. If this is done effectively, in multiple settings, it has the potential to reduce societal inequity.

Adopting a sociocultural approach requires that a course facilitate numerous mediated opportunities for students to engage with knowledge, guided either by the lecturer or more knowledgeable peers. This is logistically far more complicated to execute effectively in a large class environment as ‘zones of proximal development’ require the creation of more intimate learning environments. The approach also entails carefully scaffolding knowledge and related academic skills so that they move from a multi-structural to an extended abstract level as per the structure of the observed learning outcome (SOLO) taxonomy. I would also like to dispel the notion which often accompanies a sociocultural approach to learning which contends that knowledge that originates within the same ethnic or cultural context as learners makes it automatically accessible to them. Philosophies and contexts originating in the global South still represent specialized, abstract forms of knowledge. They are as sophisticated and powerful in terms of their explanatory capacity as those from the global North. As many originate in precolonial times, they may not align with the way in which societal norms have evolved and may need adaptation. However, these knowledges are valuable in that many offer different and highly relevant explanations, interpretations, and envisaged outcomes of IR. Including them in curricula, moreover, serves to counter the knowledge hegemony of the global North and to decolonize knowledge. Nonetheless, making this knowledge accessible to students in a large class environment is not automatically easier because it may align with students’ cultural contexts.

#### **4. Going bravely into the unknown**

When designing the course for the first time, the selection and sequencing of the course material was very difficult as novelty limits your frame of reference. I was able to use some material from the previous course on Western IR theory regarding the Western origins of IR theory and how these theories are aligned and support the interests of Western states. To explain Western knowledge hegemony, required that I develop a section on how knowledge is created within a Social Science discipline and then relate it back to IR theory. Here, I had to use conceptual frameworks from the field of the sociology of knowledge as none existed in my own discipline. Moreover, I had to identify and select various philosophies from the global South that I felt would be generative in explaining and analyzing IR. Pedagogizing this knowledge involved selecting relevant ideas and concepts from these philosophies and then demonstrating how they elucidated our understanding of IR. How these theories gave us new or different perspectives from those of the West was also incorporated into the curriculum. The step after this was placing the themes I wished to cover in a logically, sequenced order that began by situating students within a known area, namely, Western IR theory which had been covered in previous years of study and then guiding students

through the unknown and strange. I also needed to consider how I would pace the course content given its novelty. In my experience with teaching large classes, a more relaxed pace best accommodates the learning pace of most learners. The novelty and complexity of the course material meant I needed to consider providing even more time to certain topics. Additionally, opportunities for more engagement between students and the lecturer as well as their tutors needed to be factored into the course pacing if I wanted to create space for zones of proximal development. Having narrated lecture slides posted on our learning management system allowed students to review a theme as many times as they required. Recording lectures on MS Team provides the same opportunity.

The next challenge was making the reading material accessible to the students. Many readings available on theories, ideas and concepts from the global South are complex and esoteric. Thus, I tried to select the ones that I felt would be most accessible to my students. Where students needed to read more complex literature, due to its germinal nature, I would then build readings into the relevant lecture. Here, the students and I would unpack the content together and then relate it to the content of the lecture as well as the overarching aims of the course. Each year, I have added refinements in terms of the selection, sequencing and pacing of the course to improve on what did not function optimally that year. Especially in large classes, I think being flexible when things do not work well is important. Sometimes, problems need to be fixed right away and not left to the next year. It is important that all learners in large classes participate in a course that creates an environment conducive to the learning of all students. In large classes, pedagogic problems that are ignored tend to amplify exponentially and resolving these requires far more work than would have been required with an early intervention.

Realizing the complexity of the course material, I decided to have students write two reading responses for their course work marks instead of essays. Students needed to have more time to process the course content. The reading responses required that students compare and contrast two readings, evaluating (a) the arguments of each author and (b) the contribution these readings make to either problematizing knowledge exclusivity in IR or adding to knowledge plurality in the field. Students also needed to reflect on how the readings added to/challenged their understanding of IR. The reading responses provided a focused, structured environment for students to engage with and reflect on important course readings. The reading response required students to demonstrate a multi-structural level of engagement (as per the SOLO taxonomy) with the assigned course material. Only in the final assessment are students required to answer two essay questions.

Assessment criteria are made explicit to students for each assessment. Assessment rubrics are provided to the students for each assessment. These are designed for each specific assessment and cover both the engagement with content that students are required to demonstrate as well as the concomitant academic skills. These rubrics are used by the tutors

to mark the assessment. This provides consistency in marking which can often be difficult to maintain in a large class. Most importantly, despite the large size of the class, the use of a rubric provides each student with individual feedback on their work that will assist in improving their performance in their next assessment. Feedback should be recognized as a very important zone of proximal development as assessment drives learning (Carless 2015). Although multiple choice questions are often used for large class assessment as they reduce the time taken to mark assignments, they provided limited opportunity for learning through focused feedback and lecturer/peer-student interaction.

The complexity of the course content as readings makes the cognitive load<sup>1</sup> potentially very heavy and could prompt students to disengage from learning. At the start of each course, I acknowledge that this course is very different to any IR course students have encountered to date especially because we are doing IR theory differently. I warn that the course content is also conceptually more complex. However, I tell students that I am their guide and co-traveler in this course. I expressly discuss how the course has been designed to assist them in understanding the content and mastering the necessary academic skills. I find that this discussion assists in diminishing the sense of alienation that students often experience in large classes. Thus, there is a transition from large class to a community of learners where students will always be given guidance from their tutors (more learned peers) or myself. I have built numerous opportunities within the course, for question-and-answer sessions between the students and myself. These are well attended and highly interactive.

Even with a large class, giving students opportunities to be active agents in their learning gets them to invest more in the course. I also make it clear to students that the course has been designed to help them learn and that the course material provides new ways of explaining IR which are often more relevant or pertinent to studying the global South. What intrigues students is that this course approaches IR from perspectives that they have not

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<sup>1</sup>Our short-term memory is used to comprehend and acquire academic knowledge. According to cognitive load theory our short-term memory is constrained by its capacity to absorb information and the amount of time it can focus on this task. (Abadzi 2006). Thus, presenting large amounts of content and/or expecting students to employ a variety of cognitive skills in short periods can result in cognitive overload. The risk is particularly high when students are being introduced to new knowledge. Both the quantity of information that a student's mind can hold as well as the amount of time in which they can optimally work with this information decreases exponentially when students are required to process high levels of cognitive load (Feldon 2007). Consequently, students will only grasp a limited amount of the knowledge and/or skills the lecturer sought to impart. To avoid such situations, we should avoid populating our courses with superfluous knowledge and cognitive skills that will ultimately detract from the key knowledge and skills that we want to impart. We must also be mindful of the interaction between short-term and long-term memory. Information held in working memory is not immediately transferred to long-term memory once it is not being used by short-term memory. The consolidation into long term memory takes hours - maybe even days and in the interim is at risk of being forgotten. However, every time information is recalled it is reconsolidated. The more recall takes place, the stronger the neural processes entailed in remembering this information become. Additionally, new information can also be integrated with this recalled knowledge. Thus, providing opportunities for revisiting or revising knowledge within a course helps students remember.

previously encountered. Students very quickly start to enjoy the course, which is very unusual for a theory course.

To further lighten the cognitive load of the course, instead of being given additional reading for small group tutorials, I give students video clips related to that week's class to watch. A set of scaffolded questions are provided to help students engage with as well as reflect on the content of the tutorial. Our tutorials have proven to be a great way of utilizing zones of proximal development. In this context, the tutor, who is one of our postgraduate students, acts as a more knowledgeable peer. Even in online tutorial formats, most students have been active participants. Within a large class context, tutorials provide a more intimate learning space. They eliminate the intimidation many students feel in speaking in a large class context, thereby providing a more conducive space to share ideas and ask questions. Presenting knowledge in this alternative format provides students with a different way of assessing knowledge. It also provides an opportunity to revise and reinforce the knowledge encountered that week which further improves learning.

I have found it very important especially with the move to emergency remote teaching to provide even more information on our learning management platform. It is often necessary to repeat certain information, especially assessment criteria, dates and rubrics on several 'pages' that students will read as well as going over these in class. The course in this format requires even more opportunities for engagement between lecture-tutors-students to function optimally. I have now also taken to posting additional video clips linked to issues that were explored in class to further expand students' perspectives.

## **5. Conclusions/ concluding remarks**

It has taken 4 years to get the course to a place where I am satisfied that my selection, sequencing, pacing and assessment of knowledge works optimally to facilitate learning. I have removed topics and reading that made the course more complicated, replacing these with more suitable ones. The sequencing of topics has been refined. I have added more knowledge from Asia, Indian and Latin America. I have assigned certain topics more time to be covered. Additionally, I have switched the readings used for the reading responses to ones that are more relevant to the topic being covered. The tutorials and tutorial topics have worked well from the outset, though I have also refined some of the material to make things more relevant. Moreover, numerous zones of proximal development have encouraged a high degree of participation in the course by students and has improved overall academic performance. Thus, through innovations in both the design and teaching of the course, introducing knowledge plurality in a large class environment is not hard to do. The students enjoy the course – which is rather unusual for a theory course. They particularly appreciate

that the plurality of knowledge encountered in this course provides exciting new ways of understanding and explaining international relations in a myriad of context.

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