

## CHAPTER 10. IT TAKES TWO TO TANGO: HOW TO GET INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS STUDENTS ENGAGED IN THEIR LEARNING

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### Introduction

A lack of sufficient levels of student's attention and active class engagement are considered to be the biggest challenges in teaching in higher education in the last few years. This chapter describes the results of a teaching innovation to remedy this challenge at Masaryk University during the Autumn 2017 semester. The innovation started out from the observation that in the past students had neither been focused nor motivated in class and that they were passive observers rather than active learners. In order to elevate student participation in the classroom, to heighten their interest in the subject matter, and to assist in their learning, I replaced the traditional ninety-minute frontal lecture format with several shorter interactive activities. These consisted of Skype calls, pair/group work, and interactive mini-lectures.

My chapter investigates whether these activities met their expectations by being as motivating for students to take part in as expected and whether their heightened interest manifested in the form of improved learning outcomes. The three activities that I have introduced were found to be interactive and students not only participated but also showed genuine interest in these activities. As a result, the level of student interest in an activity corresponded with the amount of learning students attributed to that activity.

Nevertheless, my expectation that the activity I estimated to be the most interactive would also be the most interesting for students was not met. However, these findings suggest that the students' motivation to engage and learn has improved so that it can be concluded that the innovation has reached its main objectives.

### Context and aims of the innovation

The innovation has been implemented in my Arctic Geopolitics course, which was offered for the first time in Autumn 2017 at the Department of International Relations and European Studies at Masaryk University in Brno, the Czech Republic. The course was optional and open to bachelor students of the new International Relations and European Politics program offered in English. Arctic Geopolitics was a semester-long course with thirteen weeks of sessions lasting ninety minutes each. Since I was the only teacher of the course, I enjoyed relative freedom regarding course design.

The characteristics of the course and of the student body could negatively impact student motivation. First, the department approved the course with a pass/fail grading option, which could demotivate students since once they reached the minimum threshold required for passing the course, there was no incentive for additional effort. Second, the nineteen students who enrolled in the course came from different countries from all over the world with different knowledge levels and affinities toward Arctic issues. Since only a few originated from Arctic countries and the majority were from countries distant from the Northern Pole (for example, China, Kazakhstan, France, Spain, or Mexico), this topic might have seemed remote or even exotic to them. These, together with my earlier observations about students' classroom behaviour, made the motivating of students to further engage with the topic even more essential.

Student engagement during class in the guise of e.g. participation and interest, is strongly connected to their motivation. There are two main types of motivation: extrinsic and intrinsic. Extrinsic motivation focuses on establishing students' initial interest in the given topic by drawing them in the learning process via e.g. engaging classroom activities. An interactive class session composed of several break activities, is an excellent way to help students to stay focused and re-activate their attention span every fifteen to twenty minutes. As Nilson (2014) points out; well-chosen student-active breaks, aptly named 'brain breaks', comprise the heart of the interactive lecture. If the activities implemented in the classroom are interesting and intriguing enough, students' willingness to engage with classroom material will increase. Extrinsic motivation is particularly important at the beginning of the semester when most students have not yet acquired a taste for the subject matter. Ideally, after some time extrinsic motivation evolves into intrinsic motivation, when the incentive to learn comes from within due to a genuine interest to learn more about the topic (Kvasz 2005). Intrinsic motivation, however, is not guaranteed to emerge. In that case, the instructor's best option is to continue to rely on extrinsic motivation.

Since I assumed that my students' wandering attention resulted from them having little intrinsic motivation to learn about the Arctic, my classroom innovation focused on extrinsic motivation. Accordingly, I divided each of my classes into three interactive sessions: a Skype call with an expert; pair/group work; and an interactive mini-lecture.<sup>1</sup> The first session centred around a short video Skype call with an expert on a specific issue related to the Arctic. Experts called in from various locations and gave fifteen-minute presentations after which students had the opportunity to ask questions.<sup>2</sup> The expert Skype call was inspired by earlier findings that the use of digital instruments in class can improve the interactive aspect of classes. As several academics (Felten 2008; Sealey 2008; Swimelar 2013; Glazier 2015) pointed out; engaging students in international relations by getting them online not only exposes them to current international developments,

1 Additionally, depending on time limits, various other 'supporting' activities were included in class—e.g. a quiz—which allowed students to recap the most relevant content from previous classes.

2 During the course ten experts from different Arctic locations participated in the Skype call.

but also provides them with the opportunities to develop communication skills and visual literacy. The expert Skype call fulfilled a similar role: students could learn about recent developments regarding the politics of the Arctic from scholars who did not only have vast knowledge of various aspects of the issue but who also spoke from their personal experience of living in the Arctic.

The second session was composed of student pair/group work, where they discussed the assigned issues. This was followed by a moderated plenary discussion which confronted students with the opinions of all their peers. This approach allowed them to practice building and defending their arguments based on what they had learnt about the topic. That is, students learned via performing and at the same time applying the class content (Nilson 2014).

The third session included an interactive mini-lecture. In this part I explained different concepts to students and combined front lecturing with the frequent asking of substantive questions. At the same time, students were encouraged to engage by asking questions themselves and giving comments. This way, students could formulate their own questions and apply new concepts. Such an interactive format of sessions was to help students to learn new skills and further develop their critical thinking.

### Research design

In order to evaluate the outcome of the innovation, I collected data from three consecutive classes (15 November 2017; 22 November 2017; and 29 November 2017). I used two main data collection instruments: peer observations and student surveys. Student surveys were voluntary filled out by each student who attended the actual class session: of the nineteen students enrolled in the course fourteen (seventy-four per cent) were present during the first innovation session, eleven (fifty-eight per cent) in the second, and thirteen (sixty-eight per cent) in the third.

Peer observations were completed by three colleagues. Ideally, classroom observation data should have been collected and analysed by the same person attending all three sessions. However, due to the tight schedules and workload of my colleagues, each of the classes were observed by different persons. The potential inconsistency stemming from this variation was balanced with detailed observation instructions. In addition, I would argue that the diversity of their responses is a considerable contribution to the collected data and research in itself.

I used the collected data to evaluate three hypotheses. Hypothesis 1 (H1) expects that *the learning activities and associated teaching styles were interactive* as intended. Although I have chosen three activities—Skype calls, pair/group work, interactive mini-lectures—that I considered all highly interactive, it is vital for the innovation that these would lead to the expected interactive student behaviour in practice. Therefore, I used my colleagues' peer observations to assess H1. Observers were asked to (1) keep count of three different types of interactions: teacher-to-student, student-to-teacher and student-to-student. In the teacher-to-student interaction, observers further focused on the distinction between voluntary and non-voluntary responses to see

how forthcoming students were with their answers. Additionally, observers paid attention to the level of activity/passivity of students during pair/group work (student-to-student interaction). Finally, observers were asked to monitor the interactivity of the entire class and provide written comments. I used quantitative methods—means and frequencies—to analyse the first two and qualitative methods to assess textual information.

In hypothesis 2 (H2) I expect that *the more interactive an activity is, the more interesting students will find it to be*. H2 analyses whether the level of the presumed interactivity of a learning activity is aligned with the level of student interest. Since the observers evaluated class sessions as a whole and did not provide separate information on the interactivity of each learning activity, I used my own educated assumption to rank the activities based on how interactive they were. My expectation was that the pair/group work would be the most interactive, and thus be evaluated as most interesting because the core of the activity is comprised of communication between the students. I also expected it to spill over to the subsequent plenary debriefing. The second most interactive and interesting would be the Skype call as it has an element of possible interaction between students and someone else than their teacher who is equipped with a different expertise, life experiences, and perspectives. Even though the mini-lecture was interactive, I considered it the least interactive because it was very similar to the expert Skype call but lacked the element of personal experience from living in the Arctic.

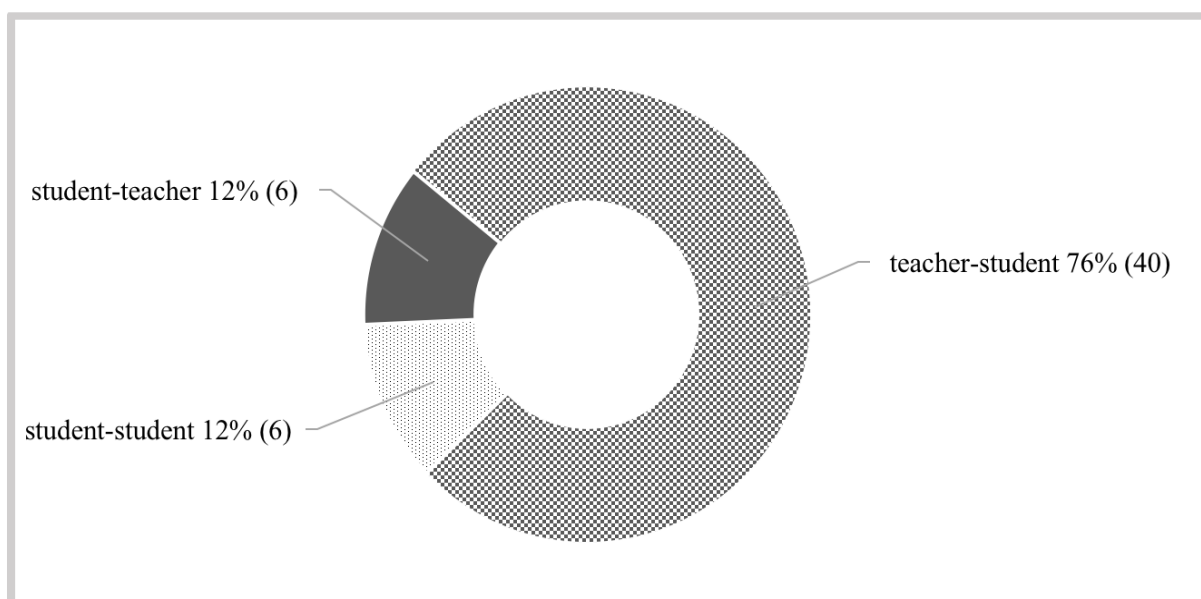
To test H2, I used student surveys, which were distributed among students at the end of all three classes. I asked students to evaluate how interesting they found each activity on a scale ranging from 1 ('not interesting at all') to 10 ('very interesting'). Students were also asked to provide a verbal explanation of their evaluation, which enabled me to check whether or not their reasoning fell into the scope of the dimension of motivation. When comparing students' levels of interest with the assumed level of interactivity of the learning activities, I used both descriptive statistics and textual analysis.

Finally, hypothesis 3 (H3) anticipated that *the more interesting students find an activity, the more they learn from it*. H3 follows up on H2, which already investigated students' level of interest in the three interactive activities. Since, as mentioned above, this course was graded pass/fail, I could not rely on grades for the evaluation of student learning. Hence, I used information provided by students. Specifically, I asked students to answer two minute-paper-style questions after each class. They had to name three pieces of information they remembered most vividly from that day's class and identify in which activity they learned about those. For the evaluation of students' responses, I primarily used textual analysis, which enabled me to identify their most vivid learning moments.

## Findings

All three observers' written comments conveyed that my innovative methods were interactive, and students took part in those interactions confidently and without reservations providing evidence in support of H1. As illustrated in figure 1, the most frequent form was teacher to student interaction. During all three classes, there were more than forty direct questions initiated by me towards students, which constitutes seventy-six per cent of all class interactions. More interestingly, eighty per cent of all my questions received voluntary responses by students (thirty-two out of forty), demonstrating their willingness to participate and a fairly high level of engagement. Hence, it happened only on a few occasions that there was no voluntary answer forthcoming and I had to call on a student.

Figure 1. Distribution of the three types of class interactions based on classroom observation

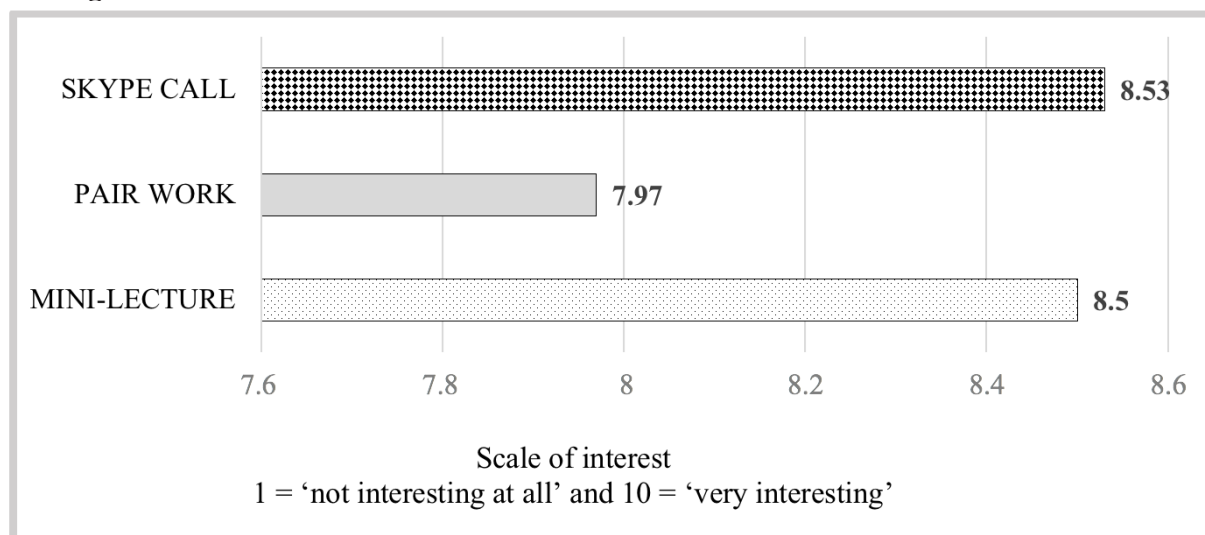


Although the number of interactions initiated by students was rather limited, they do signal the motivation of some students to participate. Students asked me questions six times during the three classes, i.e. twelve per cent of all class interactions. The same figure reflects student-to-student interaction during in-class plenary discussions (excluding pair/group work). Certainly, a positive outcome of the observation is that twenty-four per cent of the interactions in all three classes were dominated by students. Student performance during the pair/group work is even more encouraging: students willingly, sometimes even very passionately, interacted with each other. Indeed, my observers noted that, unlike during traditional frontal lecturing, no student remained entirely passive. Thus, the interactive nature of my classes motivated students to become more active.

My expectation that exercises of a more interactive nature would be more interesting to students (H2) was not confirmed. In general, students found the activities quite motivating—and attributed higher scores than midpoint. The results show that, according to students, the least interesting to them was the pair/group, evaluated with a 7.97 score on average. The Skype call was evaluated as the most interesting activity with an 8.53 average score for all three classes, followed by the interactive mini-lecture with an average score of 8.5 (figure 2).

These choices were also supported by students' verbal explanations. Several students expressed a high level of interest in the Skype call activity: 'The Skype call enables you to get inside information on Arctic issues. I enjoy it because it is better than reading a book and it is more personal. Different points of view have a large benefit', and 'the very interesting speaker made the Skype call a really interesting part of the course'. Students also expressed their appreciation for the interactivity of the mini-lecture and interest in having even more interactive lecturing during classes: 'I like the concept of the mini-lecture. I think we should spend more time on it as this is the part of the class where I learn the most', or 'I love the mini-lecture. It provides a thorough explanation of the topic in an interactive way. Much better than regular lectures'. Thus, it seems students found these two exercises particularly motivating.

Figure 2. Students' evaluation of how interesting the activities were in three consecutive classes (average)

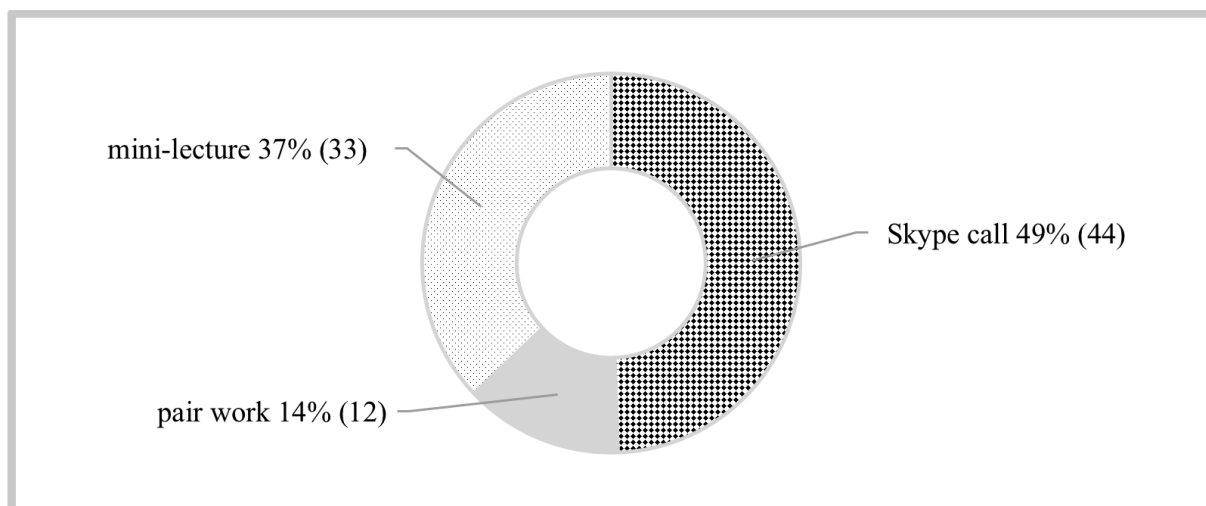


A relatively low level of student interest towards pair/group work and reasons why H2 was not confirmed could be explained by several factors. First, by chance, the topics selected for the Skype call and the interactive mini-lecture could have been more appealing to students. Second, pair/group work discussions may have lacked sufficient guidance, thus students may have been uncertain about the benefits of their discussions. Third, the shift from lecturing to student-centeredness might have been too dramatic. Students were more comfortable with activities where

interactivity augmented a practice (lecturing) they were familiar with and thus could engage with it more easily. Pair/group work could make them uncomfortable—because they were not prepared, or suffered from shyness, so that they could not enjoy it and find it motivating.

Finally, H3 about student learning was confirmed. Figure 3 illustrates the frequency of the most vivid learning moments and activities during which these took place. According to their answers, students learned the most from the Skype call (forty-nine per cent), followed by the interactive mini-lecture (thirty-seven per cent), while they found the pair/group work the least influential to their learning (fourteen per cent). These results are in line with the findings in H2. Students not only considered the Skype call the most interesting, they also indicated that they learned the most from this activity. The interactive mini-lecture was ranked as the second most interesting activity and also appeared in second place when it came to self-assessed learning. Interestingly, while the average student interest was nearly identical for both the Skype call and the interactive mini-lecture, a larger gap emerged between the two activities regarding their impact on student learning. Nonetheless, pair/group work remains a distant third: students believed it was the least interesting and claimed they had learned the least from it. Thus, results show a correlation between students' perception of how interesting an activity was and that of their learning.

Figure 3. Distribution of the most vivid learning moments across the three learning activities in all three classes



## Conclusion

This chapter presented the outcomes of an innovation to motivate students to participate in and learn from classroom activities. Students were introduced to three interactive activities: Skype call, pair/group work, and an interactive mini-lecture. While observers found students active during all three activities, students identified the Skype call as most interesting, followed by the interactive mini-lecture. Contrary to my expectation, the pair/group work which I considered



the most interactive, was evaluated by students as the least interesting. Since results showed that the more interesting students found the activity, the more they learned from it, the role of student interest should not be underestimated. We often tend to direct our attention solely towards learning, however from a motivational perspective it is also important how appealing the students find the learning activity.

The results also show that the context, in this case student expectations vis-à-vis their learning methods, remain very important while shifting from teacher-centred to student-centred approaches. This is because a dramatic diversion from previously experienced learning methods may be counterproductive to both student motivation and learning. Introducing innovations via baby steps may be a more successful strategy as student learning from pair/group work indicated. In general, enough evidence surfaced to support that pair/group work was beneficial to student learning as it assisted them to increase their factual knowledge and to learn argumentation. Nevertheless, my experience from this innovation suggests that improvement is necessary in terms of future design and implementation. This time all students were expected to read the same text before class and then discuss it during pair/group work, which they perhaps found not very interesting. Next time, I could opt to split the text, and give different sections to different pairs/groups to read these at home. Subsequently, the jigsaw group method can be applied to discussions in the classroom. In this way, students will be dependent on each other to succeed in understanding the text. I also plan on making pair/group work more structured where students' attention is directed toward the most critical issues in the text. With these modifications, students' interest in and their learning gained from pair/group work could be enhanced even further. This is particularly important as I want my future students to benefit at least as much from pair/group work as from the Skype call and the interactive mini-lecture, making this innovation even more beneficial to their learning.

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