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Abstract:

Keywords: International Relations, Teaching Political Science, Games, Zombies

I am an International Relations professor, who teaches Introduction to American Government all semester, every semester. While there is an Introduction to International Relations course in the catalog at Kingsborough Community College, it rarely obtains enough student registrations to actually be offered. When I was given the chance to teach a guaranteed-to-run section in Fall 2016, I jumped at the opportunity, and decided to use it as a way to change the reputation of the introduction to international relations course. I theorized that making IR more fun for everyone would lead to increased student engagement and learning, which would in turn make the course more popular and therefore more likely to run on a regular basis. My self-centered desire to teach the class more frequently was a motivator, but more important was the goal of exposing more of the students at Kingsborough to the way world politics works. Luckily, there are solid pedagogical reasons to make learning more active in an international relations classroom, and even to involve “fun” topics and activities, like movies, zombies, and games. This paper reviews those reasons, with support from pedagogical literatures on gaming, pop culture and political science and on teaching with film, and presents how they were used to inform the redesign of the IR course POL 59. I have also included observations, student feedback, and student course grades to demonstrate how the incorporation of games in my intro to IR sections led to better student learning as measured both by students’ opinions of the course and their learning and their course grades.

While there is an Introduction to International Relations course in the catalog at Kingsborough , it rarely obtains enough student registrations to actually run. In order to change students’ perceptions of the course, I first had to identify the impediments to student registration. Student expectations of the course regarding their interest in the subject appeared to be a challenge. While a few students every semester are very interested in registering, the course has a reputation among students as being “too hard,” “unrelated to all of my other courses,” “boring,” and “no fun”.¹ Despite the interest of some students, if a large number do not register early when a section is offered, the class is cancelled.

Although I knew I could develop pedagogical material to address low student interest and levels of engagement, I could not do so if the course was never offered. I needed students in the

¹ These comments are drawn from student evaluations and personal conversations with students.

classroom in order to attempt new strategies to develop their interest and understanding of IR. Consequently, when the opportunity arose to teach a section of international relations through Kingsborough's learning community program, I had the chance to control for some of the logistical concerns. Because the learning communities program takes new freshmen and schedules their courses for them, all learning community sections are guaranteed enrollment, meaning that I would actually get to teach international relations, and to a relatively small group (the class size cap at Kingsborough is 45, but learning community sections are 25). However, it also meant that I would be getting a room full of students who had not necessarily chosen to take the course because they were eager to know more about international relations. Instead, students would be enrolled because their learning community advisor had selected the section for them. Thus the other challenge - low student expectations for the course - remained. I would be getting an entire classroom that had never attended Kingsborough before, and had likely never taken a college class before and, as a result, I anticipated that students may not enter the course with a high level of interest in the subject matter. I also recognized this situation gave me the opportunity of a guaranteed-to-run section to use as an experimental space where I could test methods of how to make the class more popular among students. Could I make the course fun and interesting to a wide array of students, while still covering the core content of the course and maintaining high standards for student learning?

Pedagogy of Fun

A review of the literature on teaching and learning in political science offers several strategies for adding more fun into an international relations course, such as using pop culture references to increase student interest in course content and employing games to improve student engagement. The increase in student engagement is argued to lead to enhanced student learning and better overall outcomes, measured both by student opinions and student grades. Incorporating pop culture into a course has a long history across disciplines, and several scholars have found movies to a useful teaching tool for international relations. For example, Engert and Spencer (2009) have analyzed the benefits and potential downsides of teaching international relations with film, both fiction and documentary. They divided the purposes for using films in international relations into four general approaches; films can be used to: 1) teach about historical events that are important in international relations, 2) illustrate international relations topics, such as new wars, genocide, or terrorism, 3) study cultures that impact international relations, or 4) help explain and critique international theories. Valeriano (2013) used films to construct an intensive summer course where movies helped make use of the large time blocks scheduled for classes as well as provide an accessible way for student to engage in international relations topics. Webber (2005) also discusses the benefits of using film in class, specifically the 1996 blockbuster *Independence Day*, to teach the main paradigms of international relations theory, realism and idealism.

Increasingly, pedagogical research has also shown that active learning activities improve both student interest and student learning, with Ruben (1999) arguing that active learning can address many of the shortcomings of traditional approaches to teaching, including being too “unchallenging—in a word, ‘boring’” (500). As Lantis, Kuzma, and Boerer (2000) highlight, using games to teach international studies is not new, with manual and computerized simulations dating back to the 1950s and 1960s. Asal and Kratoville (2013) review articles about teaching international relations with simulations through the lens of constructivist learning theory, finding three strategies that are key to developing effective simulations: “goal setting, relating the simulation back to theory as it progresses, and keeping students engaged” (141). Although Ishiyami’s (2010) meta-analysis of 134 papers about active learning pedagogical articles shows there is limited evidence proving the effectiveness of active learning activities, including simulations, Ishiyama concludes that this is not necessarily grounds for disavowing simulations for teaching, but that further rigorous research into their effectiveness is needed.

To that end, numerous individual papers explain, evaluate, and endorse different active learning activities. Shellman and Turan (2006) endorse the idea that students learn more by doing and saying instead of reading and listening, and having found that their simulation on international terrorism, the future of Iraq, and globalization enhanced both student learning and student engagement. McCarthy (2014) provides evidence of statistically significant improvements in student learning for both games and simulations over lecture-based classes for international politics courses. Asal’s (2005) excellent “Playing Games in IR” provides an easy-to-follow blueprint on bringing three games into the international relations classroom: Classical Realism, Prisoner’s Dilemma, and the board game Diplomacy.² Simpson and Kaussler (2009) incorporated both simulations and movies into introductory courses on international relations; their article contains easy-to-follow instructions for the simulations they incorporated as well as lists of films organized by international relations topics. They conclude that the combination of movies and simulations is “the most effective method of explaining abstract theoretical concepts and approaches as well as providing a holistic and truly objective way of teaching such charged topics like war, terrorism, civil war, and conflict” (427).

Course (re)Design³: Adding in Zombies, Movies, and Games

To increase student engagement and learning of international relations, I redesigned my course by changing the assigned readings and adding in movies and games, along with assessments to

² My sincere thanks are due to Victor Asal, not only for his extremely helpful articles, but for taking the time to share materials and talk through several of his favorite games for IR via Skype. My course was far better for his insights, and a lot more fun.

³ Syllabi and assignment sheets for both semesters analyzed in this paper are available in the online appendix at <http://bit.ly/IRFunAppendix>

measure how effective each change was. I obtained IRB approval to conduct research in the classroom assessing the value of these course changes.⁴ Table 1 summarizes the changes made, the purpose of each change, and how the effectiveness of each change would be measured.

Table 1: Changes to the Course, Purpose, and Measurement

Change to the Course	Purpose	Measurement of Effectiveness
Replacing traditional introductory textbook with Dan Drezner's <i>Theories of International Politics and Zombies</i>	More interesting reading, themed around zombies, will increase student interest and engagement with the assigned reading.	Midterm and final examinations
In-class Star Trek viewings	Encourage students to use IR to analyze events in a fictional universe	Student reflections posted to Padlet
Meme Assignment	Provide students the opportunity to work with international relations concepts in more creative ways.	Meme and Reflective Paper
Movie Papers	Provide students the opportunity to work with international relations concepts in more creative and personally interesting ways.	2 Movie Papers
Games		
Realism Rock Paper Scissors	Provide students the opportunity to learn the principles of realism, power, and anarchy as an introduction to international relations theory in a hands-on manner.	Reflection posted to Padlet & Student Survey Responses
Prisoner's Dilemma	Provide students the opportunity to learn the the principles of realism and liberalism, as well as the concepts of anarchy, cooperation, and the shadow of the future, in a hands-on manner.	Reflection posted to Padlet & Student Survey Responses

⁴ Protocol 2016-1105 reviewed all consent documents and processes through an Expedited Review Panel and found the research was exempt. This research project was conducted in a manner fully consistent with Kingsborough's institutional standards for human subject research and in full compliance with the APSA's Ethical Guidelines.

Diplomacy	Provide students with the experience of the competition between states that led up to World War I, during which they will apply their learning of international relations theory, specifically power, alliances, and absolute versus relative gains.	Reflection posted to Padlet & Student Survey Responses
Globalization Bead Game	Provide students with the experience of competition in the global economy from the variety of perspectives that are present in the international system, from very rich countries to very poor countries and everything in between.	Reflection posted to Padlet & Student Survey Responses

A decade of university teaching and my own research in the area of Open Educational Resources has made me skeptical of the utility and cost of standard textbooks, so I decided to use Daniel Drezner’s *Theories of International Politics and Zombies*. In addition, I also felt that a text that employed a pop culture frame - teaching international relations by using zombies - would be more interesting to students than a regular IR textbook. I also planned to supplement with relevant articles via the library’s journal subscription services. The Drezner book is only 168 pages and costs just \$16.95, but is the best introduction to IR theory I have ever encountered, at any length or price. In addition, the use of a non-traditional textbook with a pop culture frame helped set the tone for what students could expect in the class, and in particular for non-traditional assignments and activities.

I also incorporated movies that were science fiction, using Scharf and Roberts (1994) and Gokcek and Howard (2013) as inspiration, so students could discuss the concepts of international relations without getting bogged down in pre-existing prejudices. Gokcek and Howard (2013) also highlighted the importance of keeping students directly engaged instead of passively viewing, so I distributed a worksheet for structuring notes prior to showing the films in class. We watched *Star Trek: The Next Generation*’s “The High Ground” as an entry into discussing terrorism. By using fictional characters that did not have the names of actual parties, students were able to more easily examine the question of defining terrorism from multiple perspectives. We also watched excerpts of *Star Trek VI* together in class, using the same methodology; students would watch a segment while taking notes on a worksheet,⁵ then we would discuss students’ findings. Students were actively engaged in these discussions, and in the words of one student respondent on the post-course survey, “I found it helpful when periodic pauses in the

⁵ Please see appendix for movie worksheets.

movie were made to discuss what aspects of IR were shown.” A sample student worksheet is provided here to illustrate that when we worked together in class, students were able to analyze fictional movies to make connections to both international relations concepts and real world events.

Figure 1: Student Worksheets from In-class Movie/Television Analysis

Star Trek: The Next Generation "The High Ground" Worksheet

	Quote	Brief Explanation of Scene- What is happening	What IR concept is being explained/illustrated? How does this scene connect to course readings or historical examples?
First Scene		Bomb has been exploded. People are injured. Doctor has been kidnapped.	FARC Colombia Terrorism. There was violence, civilians were targeted. Political goal.
Second Scene	The strength may be useless when facing the terrorism.	Federation is being asked to provide military support to one of the sides. Picard refuses to do so in order to avoid being becoming involved in civil war.	Intranational Conflict. Yugoslav wars. Conflict in Eastern Ukraine.
Third Scene	In a world where children blow up children everyone is a threat. History is written by the winners.	Ansala believe that terrorism is the only way to win. They don't see their actions as being wrong. They compare it to the American Revolution	"The Troubles" Non-State actors - Terrorism.

Including movies and zombies were not the only changes I made to the course. Inspired by the literature on the benefits of games in the political science classroom, I decided to ensure that every unit had at least one game, movie, or student-lead activity.. In order to make thoughtful and pedagogically sound revisions to the course by adding new teaching techniques, I sought advice from other IR instructors for activities that had worked well for them, analyzed the existing literature on games in the IR classroom, and scoured the Internet for developed and tested activities.

Throughout the first six weeks of the semester, we played “Realism Rock, Paper, Scissors,” “Prisoner’s Dilemma and Variations,” and Diplomacy, the board game, all of which have been explained in detail and reviewed in Asal (2005). I also included an adapted version of Oxfam’s Bead Game about Globalization later in the course.⁶ The Globalization Bead Game involved students each receiving a different bag of colored beads, with an objective of which specific beads they would need to win and some instructions. Different players got different instructions and different amounts of beads to symbolize the varied distribution of resources and information and what power those differences exert; for example, the instructions for the resource bag representing a very high income country clearly spelled out the rules of each round of the game, while the instructions for the resource bag representing a highly indebted poor country was just a bunch of random characters. Without speaking, players must trade for the red and yellow beads needed for survival as well as the varying color beads need for their specific objectives. Each round, more players would die off, making the difficulty of keeping up in the global economy viscerally clear to the students as they played. Since reflection and debriefing are essential parts of learning through games, during each game, I had students write their reflections in-class to help facilitate small group and class-wide discussions of the related IR concepts and theories. These reflections were also required to be shared to the class Padlet wall, an interactive webpage where students could post comments, images, or other files to share in discussion.

Assessing Non-Traditional Pedagogies & Their Learning Outcomes

One important aspect of redesigning the course was to make more space for students to work with international relations concepts in more creative ways than writing traditional research essays. That meant including a range of assessment tools to evaluate student learning. The literature on the benefits of innovative assignments covers many different types of assignments, ranging from Pleschova’s (2007) interview assignment to instructors’ use of camcorders in class in Hargis and Marotta (2011) to Bray and Chappell’s (2012) Power Walk interview assignment.

⁶ Instructions for the Bead Game are available at <http://londonregionreel.pbworks.com/f/The+Bead+Game.doc> Files for printable labels for the starting beads and individual objectives for each player are available at <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1mDrOCg-P6tbSa5hsgwrWANxots1fLL4kwsFyWzR8nhM/edit?usp=sharing> and <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1HWVVMBi5kWeW5Mt14evhd1lp7r8DeJahqRembrLy5Dc/edit?usp=sharing>

While the assignments vary widely, the outcomes are similar: students who complete innovative assignments learn more about the subject and are more deeply engaged with the material.

As such, in addition to a midterm and final exam and student reflections, I selected two non-traditional assignments for use in the redesigned international relations course. Similar to Wells (2018), I included an assignment on memes, where students would create their own meme explaining an aspect of international relations theory and then write a short essay explaining the meme; this would allow students to work with the concepts creatively by applying them to the new context of the meme instead of just summarizing the definition as often happens in more traditional assignments. I also wanted to allow students to bring in their own interests to the course, so I included two papers in which they would find a movie of their own choosing and use it to illustrate international relations concepts. These assignments were similar to the paper assignment described in Valeriano (2013), although mine were shorter and worth a smaller percentage of points for the course than Valeriano's intensive term paper. My purpose in making these papers shorter and including two of them was to give students the chance for feedback and improvement. Finally, to ensure participation in and reflection on a three-day in-class game of Diplomacy, I required a 1-2 page essay that would be submitted the week after the simulation.

Results

To determine the utility of each intervention for improving student engagement and learning, a multi-pronged assessment is in order, starting with a review of student reflections from each game and then moving on to analyses of the grades on the written assignments and overall course grades.

Student reflections from the games show significant evidence of student learning and engagement with challenging concepts, as shown in the following student reflections (emphases mine).

Realism Rock Paper Scissors Reflections

“The whole class was each given a card that represent [*sic*] resources. The game was that we could fight against each other to steal someone else's resources or not. I chose to not participate in the fighting but people kept coming up to me trying to steal my resources. I noticed that many *people did choose to fight even when we had the option not too. Which made me learn that we (people) are power hungry & we always want to take & take.* While some, myself included, chose to stay out, the majority of people did want to fight. Which means that *even though we do have the option to not fight & stay peaceful. We'll always be greedy & try to take power from wherever we can get it.*”

“So basically what we did was we played a card game with the whole class. Each student got a card that represented resources. Then what we were told do was we can choose to battle other kids in a rock, paper, scissors match and whoever won a game got a resource. At first everyone was fighting everyone, people were losing resources left and right. I was taking most of the resources but we [won't] get into that. As we progressed [in] the game less people started battling each other. What we saw from this was the power for each student or state with resources started to balance out. Kind of like a *balance in power*.”

“Well we played a card game where we each started off with one card. That card represented our resources. We were given the option to battle the others in a game of rock papers scissors and whoever won gained that person resources. So once the game started we all automatically went in for the kill and battled one another. I think one student had 9 resources which was the most. Some had none. Some joined *alliances* and others like me were a bit stand off ish and chose what battles i wanted to partake in”

“... i was one of the students that was more careful but people came to me to battle and i win 2 more cards after that i didn't do anything on the third round. Slowly on the third round less and less students battle against each other because 2 student end up with most of the resource and rest of us only had some of it. *In the realism game i learn that the people with the most "power" survives and the weak have to suffer.*”

Even though they had only completed minimal reading on the course's content by the second day of class, the students playing “Realism Rock, Paper, Scissors” were able to develop an intuitive understanding of complex parts of realism, including self-help, balance of power, and alliances, to name just a few.

A similar level of sophisticated analyses was also evident among students after they played a few rounds of Prisoner's Dilemma and Variations:

Prisoner's Dilemma Reflections

- “1. Tells me a few things , one , you can't trust no one , NO ONE.
2. Be careful who you do things with or get involved with.
3. Always take the safe side , If you have options to avoid jail time, etc. look forward to that option more.”

“In the game I learn that you are *better off cooperating*. Good will come to you. Never trust anyone.”

“this dilemma tells me that *cooperation doesn't work* in the system because at the end you never know what the other person would say against you so you have to make your own decisions and trust your own instinct instead of trusting someone else.”

“As we started the game we realized it would be hard to trust anyone because of how big of a group we were. Yet, the majority of us decided to stay quiet other than one player so he was voted off. *Larger groups create less trust*. Weaker, untrustworthy, or sketchy people were kicked out of the group to create that sense of loyalty within the group”

“... *the groups were much smaller* which made it easier to trust your group member but the game we played today had more people involved, so it was a bit harder to trust everyone but we got the hang of it once we kicked the rat out.”

Students experienced firsthand concepts like enlightened self-interest, the problem of collective action, the benefits of institutions for ensuring cooperation, and the costs of defection, then discussed their experiences and understanding in the context of the assigned course readings, which cemented the meaning for students. These games also became reference points to which we could return throughout the course as we went further into the study of these topics. For example, students referenced key points from Prisoner's Dilemma when we discussed institutions during the classes on international organizations and human rights, even though those classes were several weeks after the game.

In contrast to the first two games incorporated into the class, the board game Diplomacy required a bigger commitment of class time and out of class preparation from students. Students had to read the instructions and watch videos to learn how the game was played before the class meeting in which the game was to be played. Students were assigned to teams for game play, and had to write an individual reflection paper after the game was over, worth 10% of their final grade. These papers all included deep reflection that connected their learning from their reading and class lectures to their playing of the game, as shown in the following excerpts:

Diplomacy Reflections

“My team despite its lack of players did extremely well. Germany my country, won the game along with Russia and Austria –Hungary. Realizing we were the three countries who had the most supply centers, we signed a treaty stating that we wouldn't go against each other. Ultimately, we became the superpowers of Europe. . . I would observe the other countries movements carefully so that when

my partner came back from negotiating, we could have a better judgment in writing our next order. Looking back at it, we played the game like true realists. Realists believe that power is the main goal, just as we did. As Machiavelli said during medieval Italy, “ Wars don’t just go away, they are only postponed to someone else’s advantage”

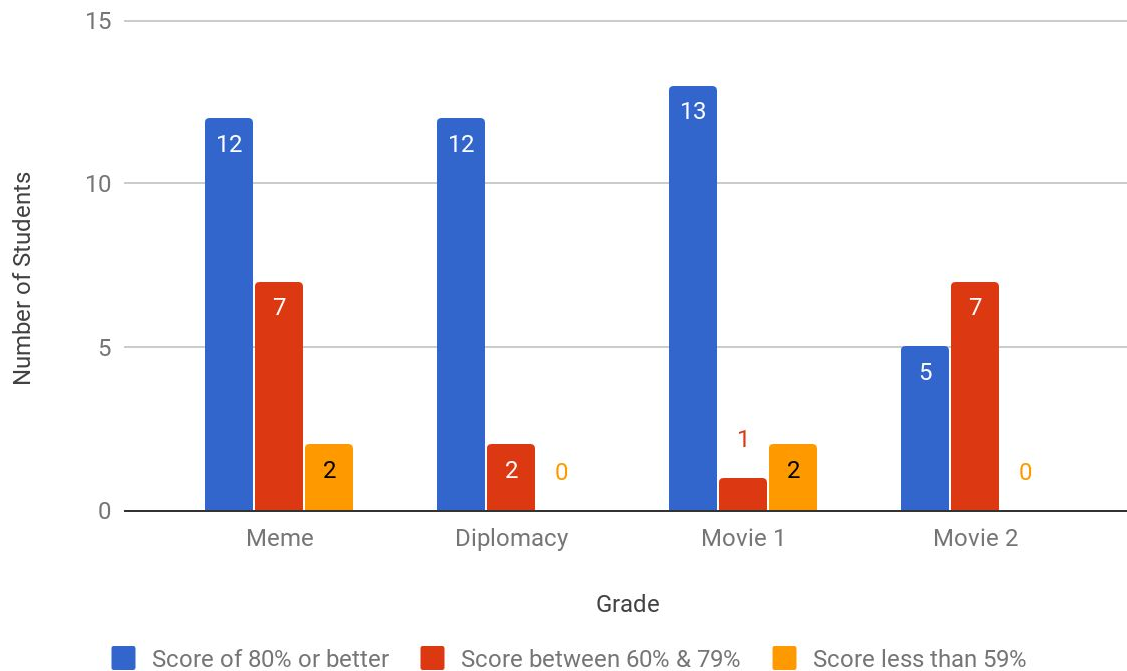
“Let’s say Italy decided to stay its own in the beginning. We would have been able to gain a lot of power and would have at least one army or fleet near or in each country. Once that happens and we decide to finally be in an alliance with, lets say Russia, then this would be perfect. Simply because we could be just as powerful, if not, more powerful than Russia. So, in the end, if Russia decided to go behind our backs and form an alliance to try and take us out, Italy would not be weak. We would still have power to take out Russia and the countries surrounding us. The problem with forming an alliance with Russia, or any big country, is that if your country is weak you could automatically be overthrown at any given moment. It is never your choice (maybe that is why there are so many nuclear weapons around the world). That is why you try and build your power yourself first to try and be equal or above average than the enemies. I'm not saying that all alliances are bad, because they're not. All I'm saying is, be smart about when to join an alliance. Overall, I enjoy the game. It made me think a lot about not only my countries move, but other possible moves other countries may have. Diplomacy game gave me a better understanding of international relations.”

The same pattern of reflections indicating enhanced student learning that occurred in the reflections about Realism Rock Paper Scissors, Prisoner’s Dilemma, and Diplomacy appeared in students’ Globalization Bead Game reflections, which included high-level thinking about complex international relations phenomena. This student’s in-class reflection is representative of the class’s discussion on the game and what it means for the differential positions of countries in the global economy based on their wealth, resources, and level of development:

“This game is difficult. Hard to balance. There seems to be too many greys. I don’t know if you can actually win this. Seems unfair. Not being able to talk is a part of the difficulty. . . I won but you can’t win. I died. I had no red and yellow. This is impossible. . . Some states have advantages, privileges. Globalization is not fair for every state, some were already steps ahead.”

Though my informal observations and student reflections during class activities provided me with valuable feedback regarding the revisions to the course, they were not enough to establish more formally whether the incorporation of zombies, movies, and games into the classroom helped students achieve the desired learning outcomes. Student grades on the written assignments also seem to indicate that the games and non-traditional assignments were beneficial to student learning. Figure 2 shows student grades for the written assignments in the course: the Meme Assignment, the Diplomacy Reflection, and Movie Papers 1 and 2.

Figure 2: Written Assignment Grades



The largest number of students submitted work for the meme assignment, and most students earned a score of 80% or better on the assignment. This is especially notable, as the meme, diplomacy, and movie papers all required the same small amount of writing, 1-2 pages, yet many more students completed the meme assignment than the subsequent written assignments during the course. More than just the high completion rate and good scores, there was substantial evidence that the meme assignment was both enjoyable to students and also useful in their developing knowledge of international relations theory. Many of the memes were creative takes that demonstrated deeper understanding of a concept than just writing a few paragraphs would have developed. Several students said they used their own memes, as well as those of their classmates, to help them study for the midterm exam. In class discussions, as well as on the midterm exam, students demonstrated a good working knowledge of realism, liberalism, and constructivism, which were the topics they could choose to illustrate for the meme assignment.

Several of the memes students created were so effective at expressing concepts, I now include them in the class lecture slides on realism, liberalism, and constructivism.

The Diplomacy reflections also earned most students high scores. Students were responsible for explaining what happened during the three days of team-based Diplomacy game play⁷ in a short reflection paper, which also required them to include at least one citation from their assigned course readings. The papers for this assignment were so uniformly good that instead of awarding five bonus midterm points to the winning teams from the game, as I had promised, I awarded the bonus points to everyone who submitted a reflection. Many students also correctly used analysis of their Diplomacy game play as part of their midterm examination essay question, which required students to use examples from history and from the games we played in class to illustrate the major schools of international relations theory. This was especially satisfying, as getting the students to engage in Diplomacy was challenging. It was my first time playing the game as well as my first time using it in class, so I had managed my expectations down, but after the first day, students were really trying hard with the game, and all of the Diplomacy essays submitted were extremely strong.⁸

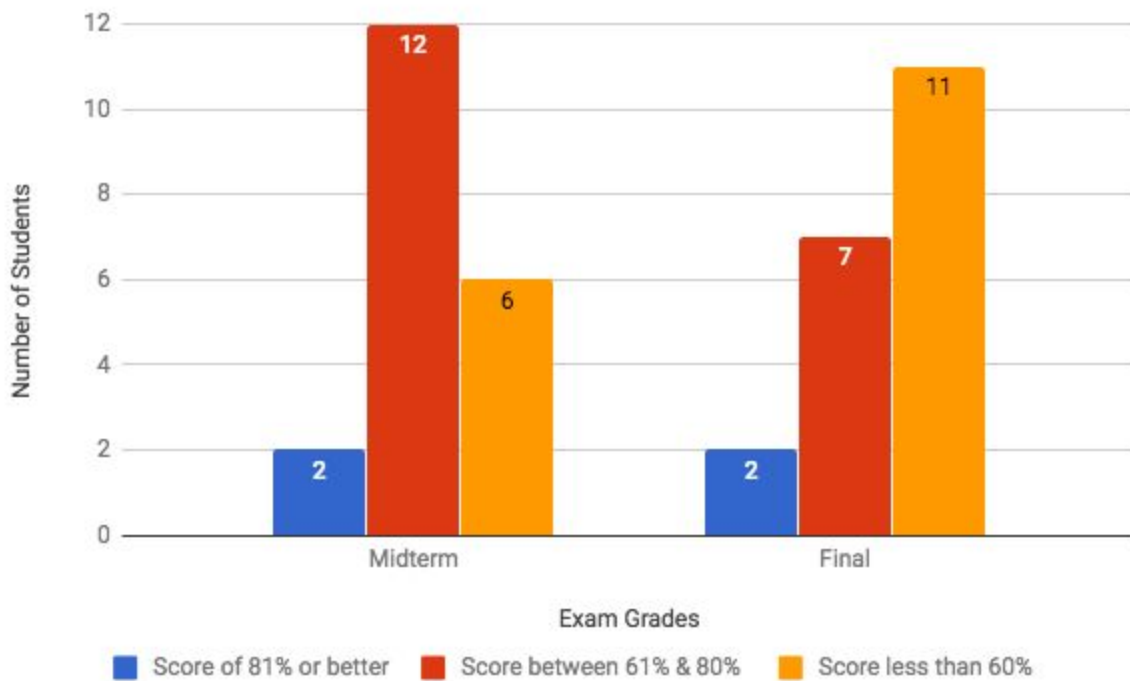
Students were somewhat less successful on the two movie papers. I had expected the movie papers to be a chance for students to bring in more of their personal interests to the course, but I had wrongly assumed that all students would be interested in movies or television shows. At least three students said they did not watch movies or television in any way, so the assignment was an extra burden on them. The challenge of completing two specialized assignments in a compressed time frame is also apparent in the far smaller number of papers that were handed in for the second movie paper assignment. I had originally planned for two papers to allow students to improve on the second paper with feedback from the first, but what this really meant was that students were spending more time thinking and writing about movies than they were about international relations, or simply not completing the assignment at all.

While the student reflections and written assignment scores provide some evidence of the benefits of the movies, games, and zombies revisions to the course, more standard assessments of learning, such as the midterm and final exam grades, provide much less support of the efficacy of the revisions. Fall 2016's midterm and final exam grades, (each worth 20% of the final course grade), were extremely low for most students, as seen in Figure 3.

⁷ Some students had religious observance on one or more days of the in-class game, so they had the option of either communicating with their team around the observance and writing about that, or of playing an online version of the game. Both options were exercised by affected students.

⁸ The two Diplomacy essays that received grades of 60% reflect points deductions for severe lateness, not for quality; those essays were also rather good.

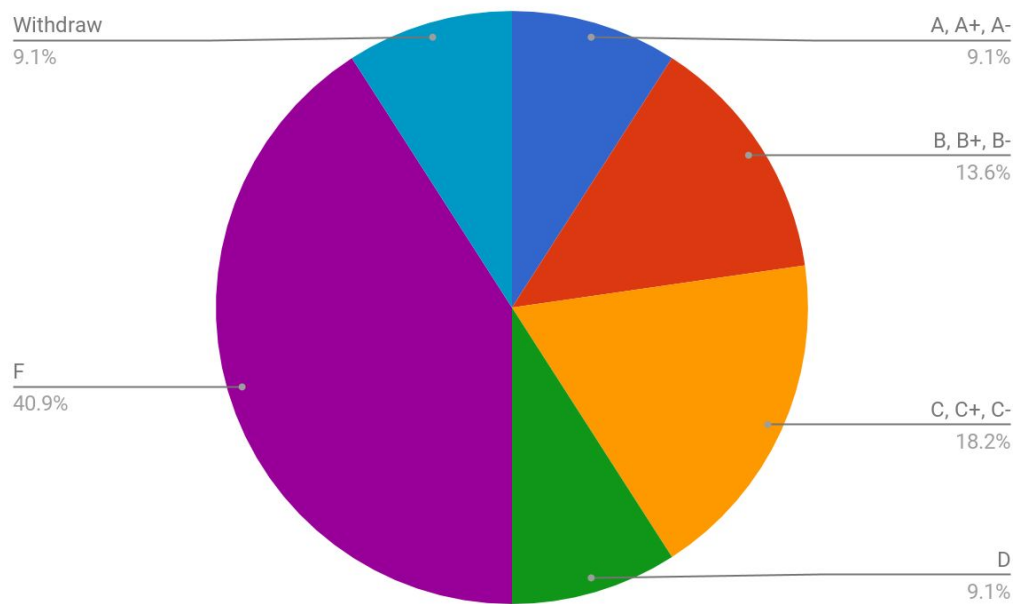
Figure 3: Fall 2016 Exam Grades



Only two students scored better than 81% on both the midterm and the final, with a large number of students failing to earn more than 60% on either exam.

So, how did students do in the course overall as well as on individual assessments? The grades for the revised course are less than heartening, as shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4: Fall 2016 POL 59 Course Grades

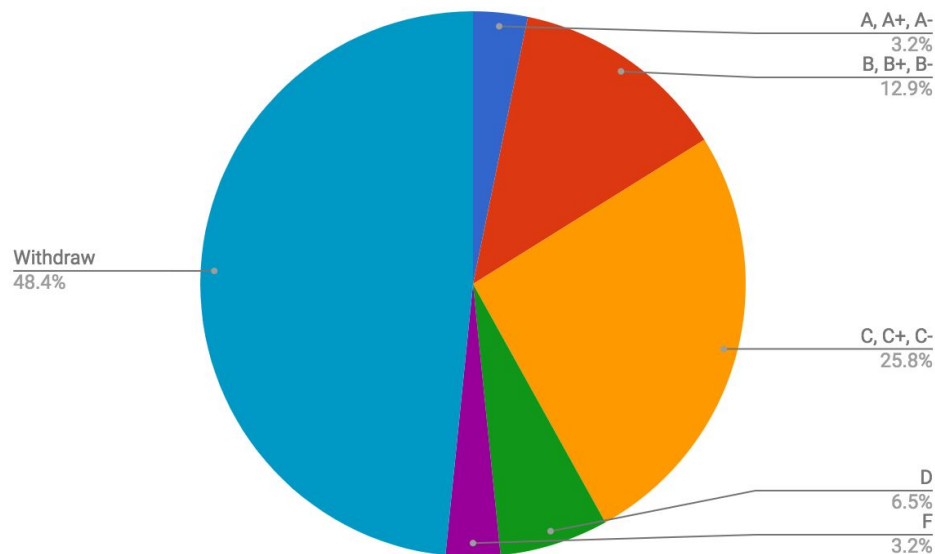


Nine students (40% of the class) failed the class outright, while an additional two earned Ds, which means that 50% of the class did not get credit for the class, a rather poor outcome, regardless of approach.

The suboptimal outcomes of the last POL 59 section I taught in Fall 2013 was one of the primary reasons for changing my approach this time, but in terms of final grades, the changes to the class do not seem to have made a tremendous difference. A comparison of these courses' final grades cannot be a perfect for many reasons,⁹ yet making the comparison sheds further light on the insufficiency of the revisions to the course for improving student outcomes such as final grades. Figure 5 lists the grade distribution for the Fall 2013 section.

Figure 5: Fall 2013 POL 59 Grades

⁹ Specifically, there were differences in logistics, pedagogical approach, and course materials. The Fall 2016 class was a day class, whereas Fall 2013 was an evening class. As noted earlier, the Fall 2016 course was part of the Kingsborough's's learning community program, while the Fall 2013 did not have the same affiliation. And, as detailed above, the Fall 2016 class relied on a different pedagogical approach and course materials; there were no zombies, movies, or games in the Fall 2013 course.



Overall, final grades were generally better in the Fall 2013 section than in the Fall 2016 section, with a larger percentage of the class earning a C or better than in the fall 2016 section. By this measure, the revisions to the course actually lowered student grades. However, it is interesting to note that while overall final course grades were not better in the zombies, movies, and games section taught in 2016, the withdrawal rate was significantly lower. This means that a larger proportion of students in the Fall 2016 section stayed with the class to the end of the semester, which would provide evidence of greater student interest in the revised approach to the course.

Survey Says . . .

I was interested not only in how students performed on the assignments and exams, but also in their opinion of the approach to the class, so I conducted an online survey at the end of the class.¹⁰ According to the survey results, most students were pleased with the use of games throughout the course to learn about international relations, but were less amenable to the way movies and television had been used. Eleven students found the games very helpful for learning international relations, two found them somewhat helpful, three found them not helpful but not harmful, and zero students saw them as a waste of time for learning about international relations. Students were given the chance to add any comments about the use of games, most of which were very positive, including “Playing games and relating them to politics made politics a bit easier to understand, especially for hands-on learners like myself. The games and in-class activities should remain an integral part of IR teachings,” “The games and in class activities made the lessons easier to comprehend. It motivated me in learning more and paying attention in class,” and “It’s a great way to illustrate concepts of IR to freshman students.”

¹⁰ Students received extra credit on their final exam for completing the survey, but could earn the credit by logging in to the survey and answering only the last question, that they did not wish to participate in the survey. 18 students logged in and received credit, of which 16 completed the survey and 2 opted not to complete the survey.

Students were far less positive on the use of movies and television shows in the class, with only five students saying they felt that the use of movies and television shows in the class was very helpful to learning international relations, nine saying it was somewhat helpful, and one saying it was not helpful. Free responses on this question illustrated that while a few students found it helpful, others were confused or annoyed at the professor's selection of movies:

“The films were only helpful if you understood the film itself.”

“The only issue was my knowledge of Star Trek was very minuscule, thus confusion was inevitable. I had to do more research on Star Trek than I had to do on IR concepts.”

“The film might have been engaging for the teacher, but definitely not for the students. I could barely understand what was going on even with the explanations.”

If at First, You Don't Succeed . . .

On traditional measures of student learning, namely final course and exam grades, including zombies, movies, and games, does not seem to have improved student learning, yet student responses, reflections, and written assignments demonstrated real evidence of improved student learning. After analyzing all of the data assembled here in preparation for revising the course for Fall 2017, I found the fault to be less with student performance and more with the means through which I have been measuring their achievement, as well as the insufficiency of the reading I assigned. The students in the revised 2016 section did learn a great deal about international relations, and several of them would have earned better grades if my grading schema had been better designed.

My recent research on another course (Brandle 2018) shows that my students' grades have tended to be rather low. I have identified two causes of this differential: the systemic challenges facing my students, which confront all Kingsborough students, and my grading schema, which affects only my students. Broton and Goldrick-Rab (2016) cite several examples of research finding that “Material hardship seems to inhibit educational attainment” (p18). Put more simply, it is hard to focus on school when facing housing and/or food insecurity, as is likely the case for many students in my class. 70% of Kingsborough's student population comes from homes with household incomes of \$30,000 or less per year, and 68% are responsible for caring for other people (family members, children, etc.) for at least a few hours each week (2016 Student Experience Survey). I therefore added “life points” in to the grading schema for the Fall 2017 syllabus, to allow for the challenges students might be facing; instead of having 100 points available, there are 115 up for grabs. This makes space for students who have family

emergencies, minor illnesses, or are in some way overloaded by events beyond their control, without making them dependent on pleading for a special allowance from me while still maintaining the integrity of the course. Put more simply, instead of imposing inflexible deadlines and point deductions or ad-hoc extensions for students who request them, the life points approach extends the same courtesy of flexibility and self-management to my students that I demand for myself in my professional affairs. This should allow for students to stay in the course and even do well in it, regardless of the life interruptions that happen, which should reduce both withdrawal rates and low grades.

In addition to the life points, for the Fall 2017 section, I worked to make the grading and points process more transparent and understandable, both on the syllabus and during discussions of grades on exams and assessments. Knowledge of what a syllabus is and how to use it is not innate, especially for first-generation college students, who make up 47% of Kingsborough's student population (2016 Student Experience Survey). As a learning community that specifically targets incoming freshmen, spending time both at the beginning of the semester, and then at regular intervals throughout, to make the course requirements clear should result in better outcomes for students in my course as well as in the courses they take in subsequent semesters.

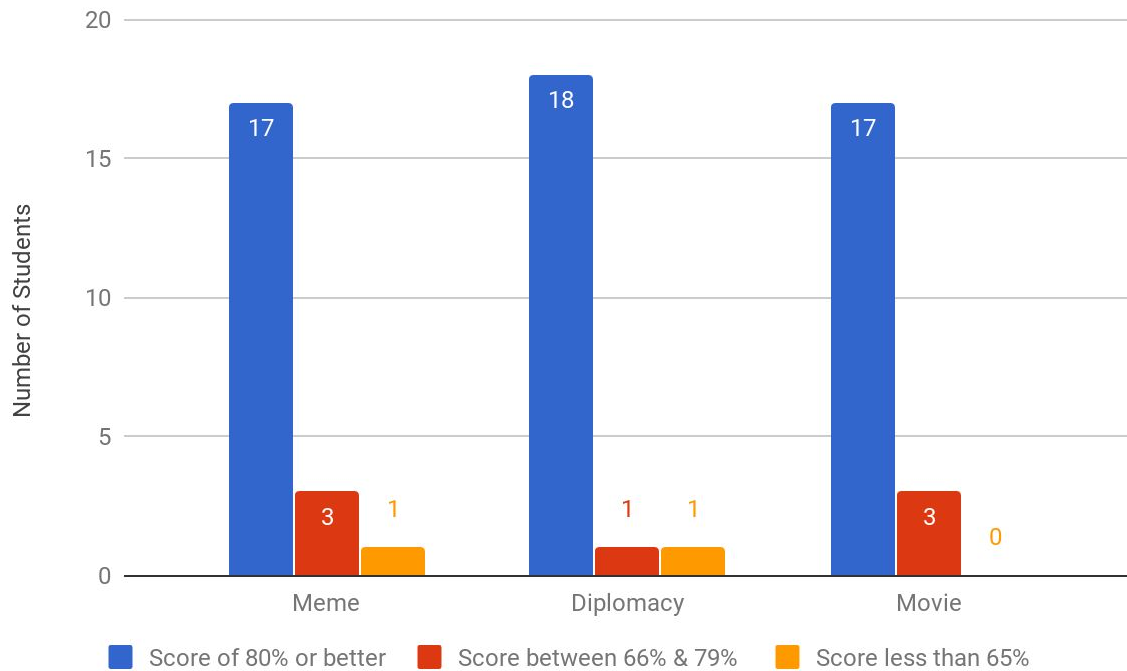
The games, active learning in class, and nontraditional assignments were the clear winners in terms of both assignment grades, student opinions, and my own informal observations in class. Incorporating movies and television shows was popular among many students, but maybe needs more scaffolding, especially for programs that are not currently popular. For Fall 2017, I dropped one movie paper from the requirements, as two papers about movies proved difficult for both students and myself to manage, though I did maintain screening science fiction movies in class. Written assignments were increased from 10 to 15 points each, to account for dropping the second movie paper and to more accurately reflect the amount of effort expected for each assignment.

Finally, I decided to assign a general textbook in addition to the zombie book and journal articles for the Fall 2017 section. While the Drezner book was an excellent introduction to IR theory, it really only covered theory, which meant that readings for topics later in the course, such as armed conflict, globalization and trade, international organizations, human rights, and international law, had to rely exclusively on more dense scholarly journal articles. The Drezner book also assumed a baseline knowledge of world history. Drezner referred to historical events and conflicts as examples to illustrate IR theories, but he did not explain these events in detail. This echoes the warning in Valeriano (2013) that a text needs to be selected with care to provide the necessary background information, while also considering its brevity and cost. It became apparent during the class that most students did not have the needed background in world history or world politics to apply to the concepts of international relations about which they were

reading. This likely contributed to the lower midterm and final examination scores, and for that, my choice of assigned reading bears responsibility. One student response from the end of semester survey sums up the issue succinctly, “I knew nothing about politics going in and I thought it may have been easier to grasp if I had an introduction to politics class prior to IR.” An introductory course with no prerequisites in a community college should provide the means for students to fill gaps in their knowledge, not penalize them for not having it already. I did the students a disservice by not also assigning a general textbook for them to work through. Luckily, I discovered an excellent free digital textbook published by E-International Relations to adopt for the following semester. *International Relations*, edited by Stephen McGlinchey, provides a more traditional textbook overview, which I used in conjunction with the Drezner book during Fall 2017.

The total impact of maintaining the games and movies in the course along with refining the grading schema and including an introductory textbook appears to be quite significant. Figure 6 shows the Fall 2017 scores on the Meme, Diplomacy, and Movie Assignments.

Figure 6: 2017 Meme, Diplomacy, and Movie Assignment Grades



Evidence of increased student engagement can be found in more students submitting each assignment than in 2016, while the number of students scoring 80% or above increased for all three assignments from 2016 to 2017.

Exam grades on both the midterm and final, provide additional evidence for the benefit of the revision to the course and the assigned readings. Figures 7 and 8 show the midterm and final examination scores for 2013, 2016, and 2017.

Figure 7: Midterm Examination Grades for 2013, 2016, and 2017

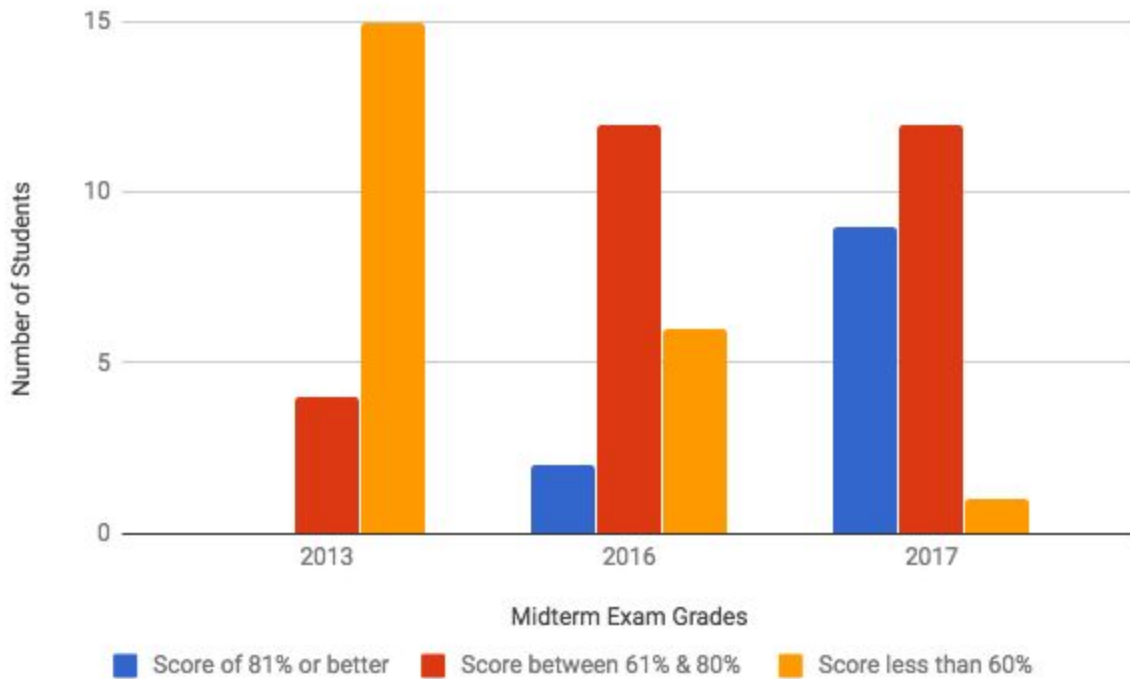
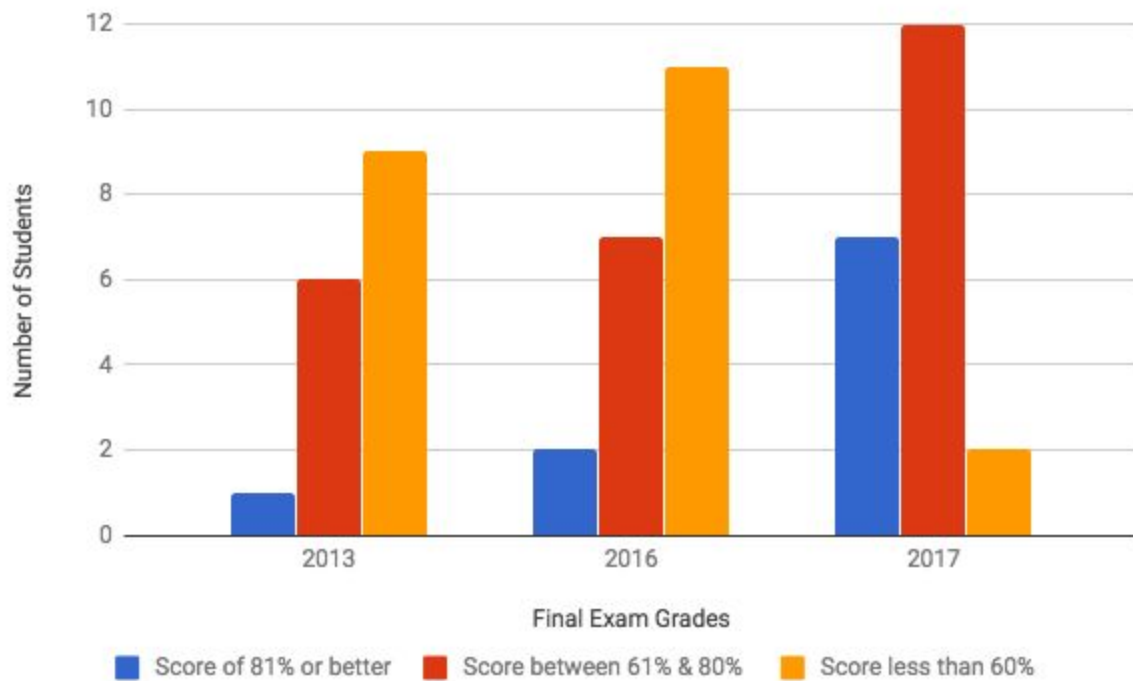


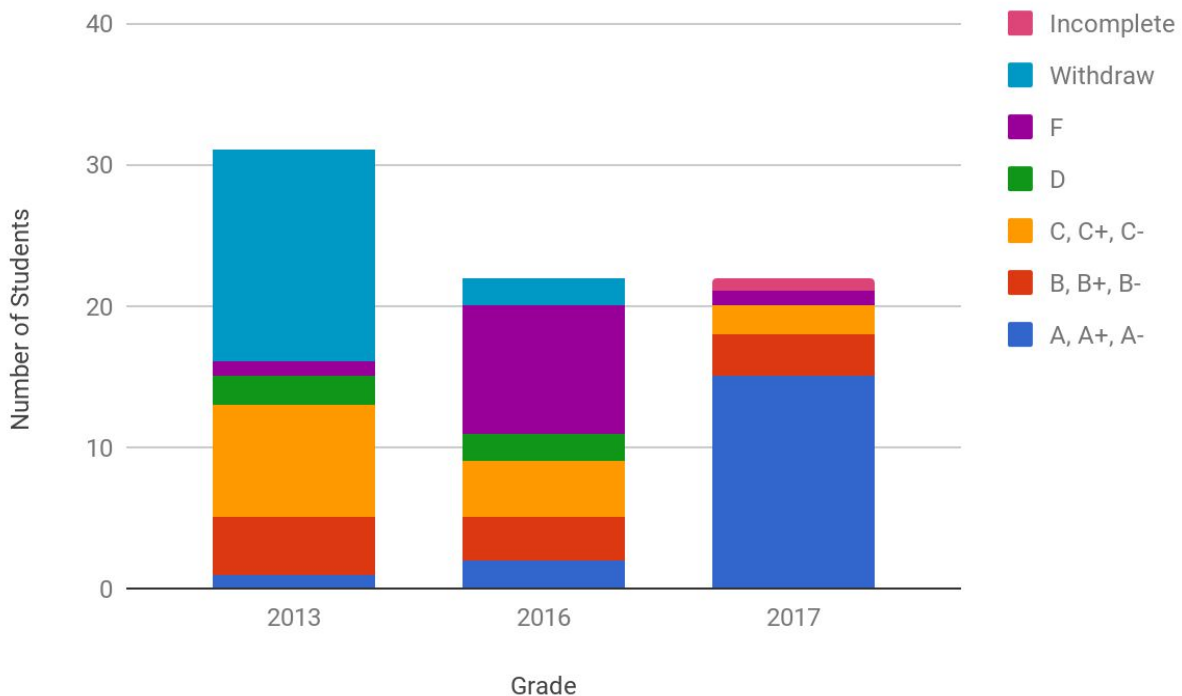
Figure 8: Final Examination Grades for 2013, 2016, and 2017



The same exams were used in 2016 and 2017, with the 2017 students scoring much higher on both assessments. Only two of the final exam scores in 2017 were below 65%, and the class average in 2017 was 14 points higher than in 2016.

With high grades on both the written assignments and the exams, it is not surprising that the final course grades are significantly higher for 2017 than previous years. Figure 9 shows the final letter grades from Fall 2017, along with the games and zombies version of 2016 and the traditional approach taught in 2013.

Figure 9: Final Letter Grade for 2013, 2016, and 2017 IR Sections



The Fall 2017 section represents a significant decrease in the dreaded DFW grades, with only one student failing and no students withdrawing or earning Ds. Not only did more students pass the class overall in Fall 2017, many more students than in previous iterations earned high grades, with 68% of the class getting an A, A+ or A-.

While the courses grades were much better in 2017, they still do not tell the entire story. Student opinions on the end of semester survey from the 2017 section were also more positive than those from 2016.¹¹ While the number of students who would be likely to recommend the class to a friend stayed at 2 across both semesters, the number of students who reported they were somewhat likely to recommend the class to a friend increased from 6 in 2016 to 11 in 2017, while the number of students who say they are not likely at all to recommend the class to a friend decreased from 8 in 2016 to only 1 in 2017. The same number of students (11) in Fall 2017 found the games very helpful for learning about international relations as in Fall 2016, while 10 students in 2016 and 11 students in 2017 said that most of their reason for recommending the class was because they liked the games used in class. Open-ended responses from students expanded on the usefulness of games in class for gaining a real understanding of international relations: “[The games] helped a lot because physically you got to see the examples in class play out. The reading was a little difficult and wordy, but the examples and games in class helped to

¹¹ The same extra credit incentive was offered for the survey, with 17 students logging in to the quiz, of which 14 chose to answer and 3 opted not to participate.

clarify that,” and “I think it was easier to learn while playing the games compared to reading about the topic.”

Despite the readings being increased by a full chapter per unit, the amount of student dissatisfaction with the amount of assigned reading decreased from 2016 to 2017; only ten students thought too much reading was assigned, while four thought the assigned readings were a good amount in 2017, as compared to fifteen students who said the readings were too much and only one who said they were a good amount.

The Fall 2017 students held a similar opinion on the limited benefit of incorporating movies into the course. Only four of the 2017 students thought the movies and tv shows screened in class were very helpful for learning about international relations, which is down from the five students who selected that option in 2016. Both 2016 and 2017 sections had nine students say the movies were somewhat helpful for learning about international relations, which is hardly a ringing endorsement. The open-ended responses from 2017 were similar to those from the 2016 section in questioning the movies selected, and seeking for more interesting movies. Comments included “Generally the films chosen aren’t “thrilling,”” “The movies and films were not interesting and well they were a bit confusing as to what was going on,” and “I felt they were better films out there than the film that was being showed in class.” Based on this feedback and the observations in class during both semesters, my vintage Star Trek VI and Star Trek: The Next Generation selections are not connecting with students. In future semesters, I will replace the screenings I selected with requiring students to make short presentations on their movie papers. This should have multiple benefits, including giving students a more concrete audience for their papers and allowing them to share films that are actually resonant to them with each other, instead of forcing my own selections on the class.

Table 2 summarizes the changes to the course, and whether they were successful in improving student learning.

Table 2: Success of Course Changes

Change to the Course	Was the Change Successful?
Replacing traditional introductory textbook with Dan Drezner's <i>Theories of International Politics and Zombies</i>	Somewhat; supplemented with the e-IR <i>Introduction to International Relations</i> textbook, and will drop the Drezner book completely in the future.
In-class Star Trek viewings	Not really; will drop from future versions of the course, and devote the class time to student presentations of their movie papers.

Meme Assignment	Very!
Movie Papers	Somewhat; two papers was too much work for students in the context of the course, so reducing to one higher-stakes paper with more scaffolding in class.
Games	
Realism Rock Paper Scissors	Very!
Prisoner's Dilemma	Very!
Diplomacy	Very!
Globalization Bead Game	Very!

The most broadly stated lesson from this project is that pedagogical research works: taking time to analyze, reflect on, and experiment with different approaches to teaching leads to better teaching and learning. In regards to teaching the introductory class on international relations, this study provides evidence that using games to actively engage students in their learning is a highly effective teaching strategy, while my use of science fiction movies was less effective.

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