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What's wrong with this picture? Connecting pedagogies to students' lives

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WHAT'S WRONG WITH THIS PICTURE? CONNECTING IR & P PEDAGOGIES TO STUDENTS' INNER AND OUTER LIVES.

Introduction

Academics research, publish and debate extensively and intensively on what we can know in Politics and International Relations, and the areas associated with them. But we are far less engaged with research into how we can best communicate what we know to our students. This article discusses a 3-year trial of a visual pedagogy that matches how we teach, to how our students live and learn. That pedagogy challenges the prevailing hegemony of text as the medium of the message, addressing how media are changing and how universities are too often out of touch with the lived realities of the world they are tasked with serving. It offers a pedagogy fit for purpose in the visual, digital 21st Century.

Despite our teaching and career progression becoming increasingly subject to benchmarking against UK Professional Standards Framework, relatively few colleagues research and publish on IR & P pedagogies (Lester, 2014; van der Sluis, et al., 2017). This has come to mean that we remain, all too often, rooted with the orthodox and dominant tendencies, especially concerning our primary large group delivery platform, PowerPoint. This does not imply the profession is content with this situation. But alternatives seem to be lacking for many (Adams, 2006; Barber, 2007; Coats, 2006).

The image above is perhaps both familiar and unfamiliar. It's familiar because it's how most people use Powerpoint to teach in lectures, most of the time, all over the world. We tend to let the software itself frame how we present from the outset, when the cursor is blinking inside the placeholder, next to the bullet point where we start typing our content. And we tend most often to fill each slide with several bullet points, sentences and paragraphs of text. A review of the literature affirms this approach (Adams, 2006; Barber, 2007; Kernbach, et al., 2015; Mahin, 2004). And experience of academic lectures to students and at conferences over the last 25 years confirms this is the standard means of presenting. It is also the norm beyond the academy, in the Private and Third Sectors (Thompson, 2003; Cuthbertson, et al., 2015; Kosslyn, 2007). Indeed, it has become 'parodied, disparaged and blamed for failures to communicate clearly' (2007, p. 77). Peter Norvig, Google's then Director of Research, went as far as to suggest that PowerPoint was more dangerous than an AK47 assault rifle, because very bad things can be done with it (Jarvis, 2014, p. 165). Edward Tufte, Emeritus Professor at Yale University, famously quipped that 'Power corrupts, and PowerPoint corrupts absolutely' (2015). It has even been blamed in part for the Columbia shuttle disaster in 2003 (Thompson, 2003; Meira, et al., 2010). We may know the phenomenon as '[Death by PowerPoint](#)'.

Pedagogic hegemony

PowerPoint has become a hegemonic pedagogic and instructional tool for the 21st Century, sanctioned and necessitated by neoliberal managerial priorities in processing the greatest number of students in a partly-privatized Higher Education system. It has been facilitated in this process by Microsoft's ubiquitous techno-deterministic approach to conveying material to audiences. It's cost effective, whether it is or isn't good teaching practice. It involves, as one scholar put it, the laborious 'shovelling' of masses of information from academics to their students (Schrand, 2008) by means of a digital projection platform created originally to help professionalize presentations. This diverse digital platform is capable of many things, including projecting film, online video and sound, but we mostly persist in perpetuating the familiar textual hegemony common to the pre-digital era. Not everyone uses PowerPoint to project text exclusively in lectures. Sometimes, we will punctuate text and bullet points with audio-visual material but these is primarily as an appendage, not a vital medium for learning and understanding. Despite the potency of the digital era for communication, we tend to persist with an eccentric text-centricity that marginalizes visuality despite visuality's ascendancy being unparalleled in human history. It is a near-universal condition partly because Microsoft Office and PowerPoint have near universal reach, and partly because the software itself discourages deviation from text.

But perhaps the presence of the first image (above) is also unfamiliar because it's appearing in an academic journal designed to do what we want to do in lectures, which is to convey complex understanding and learning. Journals have been by their very nature the locus of the literary, and if images are used at all, it is in a supporting role for the longstanding textual paradigm (Mitchell, 1994). Images are used primarily to 'simply entertain or illustrate, providing a respite from serious academic work' (2008, p. 23). Such attitudes mean that the application of the visual in IR (and most other) teaching continues to be marginalized (2010, p. 44; Bleed, 2005), in a similar way that orthodoxy in IR resists innovation and challenge (Grayson, 2015; Roberts, 2010; Baxi, 1998).

The persistent practice of textual hegemony is harmfully at odds with several important elements of our students' inner and outer worlds; and with emerging pedagogy that reasserts an ancient idiom we appear to have forgotten. In short, the prevailing pedagogy we privilege appears to do a disservice to our students' potential learning and teaching experiences.

Falling walls and rising technologies

IR has been well-placed to observe, if not predict, epoch-shifting phenomena that combine to create the altered reality our students know as 'life'. The artefacts they take for granted like laptops, the web and digital camera phones arose from the juncture of geopolitically-unbridled technological development facilitating and facilitated by the reduction of barriers to global mobility. After 1989, the digital revolution merged with its

political counterpart, producing for our student audiences the capacity to capture, transmit worldwide and then download digital representations of an increasingly-accessible world. Where once we snapped and waited a fortnight to see if our cameras had been pointed in the right direction, now globalization and digitization combine to host and distribute hundreds of millions of images to billions of souls (Mitchell, 2002; McStay, 2013; King, 2016). Facebook alone can absorb 300 million images a day (Cuthbertson, et al., 2015, p. 158).

Outer worlds

As early as 1996, the Harvard Educational Review noted an imminent shift towards 'multiliteracies' that reflected the kind of transformations presently sweeping social, political and technological existence (Cazden, et al., 1996). That trend will increase as better and cheaper technology continues to breach underdeveloped and emerging markets. Indeed, students sometimes have a hard time understanding how previous generations have so relatively few photographs of their childhoods. Peter Felten refers us to the idea of the 'pictorial turn' (Felten, 2008, p. 60; Curtis, 2013) in human evolution. This denotes the notion that the flood of technologies able to capture images is matched by the capacity of technologies to distribute them to an unparalleled degree. Such diversification is matched by the expansion of forums for the editing, production and dissemination of amateur and professional moving images; there has never before been such a range of things to watch on TV. It is not to suggest people don't read. It is to argue that people have never had more imagery to look at.

There has never been a more visual time for human beings (Goldfarb, 2002; Beetham & Sharpe, 2013). This is the era in which visual media have become 'the main means of communication and expression in postmodern culture' (Tietje & Cresap, 2005). This visual environment helps shape our students' lives and expectations long before they arrive with us, leading Coats to argue that universities face 'the most visual of all learning cohorts' (2006, p. 126).

Yet on arrival at university, this is not the experience they receive, for the most part. Until they get to tertiary education, their learning experiences have combined the textual and the visual, from the first moments they see pop-up books, video and TV on demand, playschool and through to post-16 education. But unless they have chosen a particularly visual subject like Art and Design or graphic communication, their experience will switch from a balance of textual and visual media, to one that is almost exclusively textual; this is normally the case with IR & P. Our students' external worlds are quite at odds with what happens when they come to study. The primary medium through which they are taught

is textual. Where static and moving imagery appears, it is not considered as a medium in itself for the communication of knowledge, ideas and learning, but as an appendage to hegemonic textual preferences historically associated with the study of Social Sciences generally.

Inner worlds

It doesn't match up to the visual era Felten and others (above) note. But in addition, it is at odds with the way our students' brains work. Multimedia Learning (MML) scholarship tells us that we learn better with images and text, than with text alone because sighted people are dual processors of information (Mayer, 2014; Mayer & Sims, 1994). The short version (drawn from half a century of peer-reviewed research and publication on cognition and memory) is that we can receive information through two channels (Paivio, 1971; Paivio, 2014; Lewis, 2016; Ayres, 2015). One channel covers audio-textual information and the other covers visual. Sighted people are set up to engage and understand the world through both our ears and eyes, and to this extent, we are all visual learners. It is not the case, according to MML research, that a given percentage of the population learns visually. We all do (Mayer & Moreno, 1998; Paivio, 2014; Sorden, 2013). If we didn't, we wouldn't be reliably successful at crossing roads or any other such act that required us to see what was around us, process that information and make choices about what to do with it.

This image connects exterior visibility with interior processing

MML further argues that using text alone or predominantly, overloads our ability to process the text we are receiving (Lewis, 2016; Mayer & Moreno, 2003; Sweller & Chandler, 1991). In this sense, using text and not using images is a double-edged sword. It overloads the channel through which we attempt to process masses of text whilst leaving unused our visual processing channel, reducing the potential learning experience (Ayres, 2015; Beetham & Sharpe, 2013; Paivio, 1971; Sorden, 2013). It may be likened to a 4-cylinder car engine running on only two cylinders. The two that are working are overloaded and cannot properly propel the weight of the car (text). The two that aren't working are wasted potential (not using visuals). The message from MML is clear: images and text are better for learning and understanding than text alone – an apposite image is worth a thousand words.

MML is not alone in terms of inquiry concerning images as a legitimate and effective medium for communication. International Relations scholars have not been asleep in this debate – although 'pedagogy' appears in only 2 titles found during a search of the E-IR database in March 2017. In the same year that Felten proposed a pictorial turn, Cynthia

Weber advanced the use of 'still, moving, and multiplying media (photography, film, web-based windows)' (2008, p. 138). Jack Holland notes that university staff presently use TV 'clips, episodes and even entire series as part of their modules and programs' (2016, p. 173). Holland used *The West Wing*; Deylami and Havercroft edited a book on the US miniseries *'The Wire'* (2017). Safia Swimelar uses mainly film to support teaching on human rights (2013), as have others like Simpson and Kaussler (2009) and Kuzma and Haney (2001). This work, and the research of Brandon Valeriano (2013), also concerned with film, stands alone as inquiry into effectiveness in given Politics and IR modules; but it is not contextualised in higher pedagogic theory that critiques the idea of visual imagery as a legitimate medium in its own right for the communication of complex matters. To paraphrase Marshall McLuhan, the message is the medium.

This article is concerned with considering the viability of imagery as a medium and as important as text in some respects, especially when it comes to enhancing student intellectual engagement, and to stimulating active learning in large group settings. Death by PowerPoint is not in our imagination. The following section reviews a 3-year experiment undertaken with IR & Politics students at a UK university years 1-3. The visual method was the subject of a [TEDx](#) talk and a [consultancy](#) developed with the support of the host university. This writer has been using high quality, full-slide images in conjunction with reduced visible text (original text can be moved to the 'notes view' area of PowerPoint) in all lectures for all modules. Images can be any format (paintings, photographs, Photoshop) and were all stills. They divide into representative or literal images that effectively described a given subject, and figurative or metaphorical images that conveyed the unfamiliar through familiar frames of visual reference.

From the student base, volunteers were sought over three years for randomized control trials each semester following the usual scientifically-respected protocols (Concato, et al., 2000; Fives, et al., 2015). Two groups of 10-15 were used each time. The first of these two groups attended a 10-minute presentation on a matter of Politics and IR delivered using text and bullet points. The second group received the same information expressed with text and images. Each group completed an online survey immediately after the experiment.

The quantitative results are published in forthcoming journals but an abridged version appear below. The research questions concerned student intellectual engagement with academic material in lectures, and the presence or absence of key characteristics of active learning, selected from the established scholarship on the subject. The experiment also considered impact specifically on dyslexic students, by request of some dyslexic students'

exposed to the teaching method in the course of two semesters. The results of the controlled trials appear below. The placebo group exposed to standard methods is marked in blue. The experiment group is yellow.

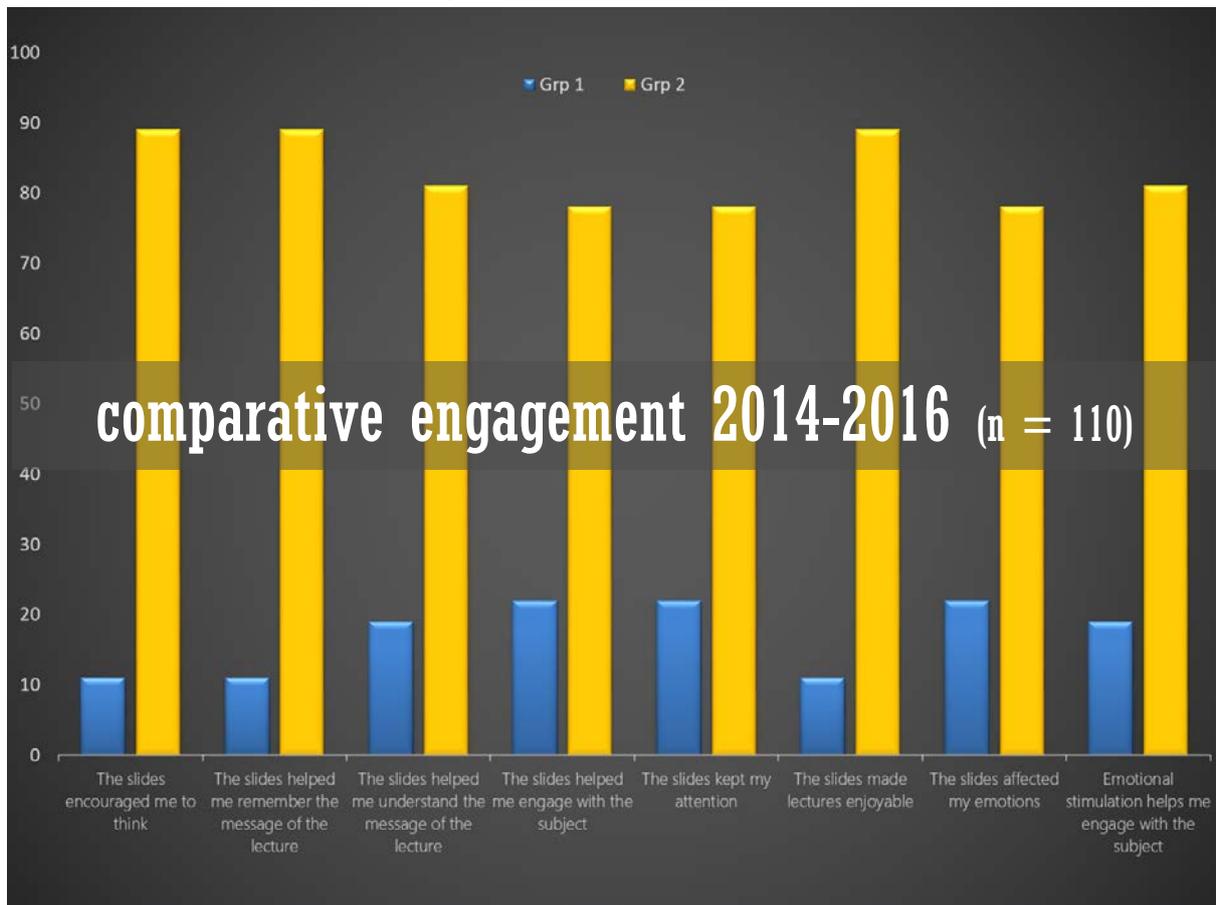


Table 1: Comparative engagement 2014-2016

This pattern was consistent in each year, with students at each level, with no significant variation between males and females or across ages.

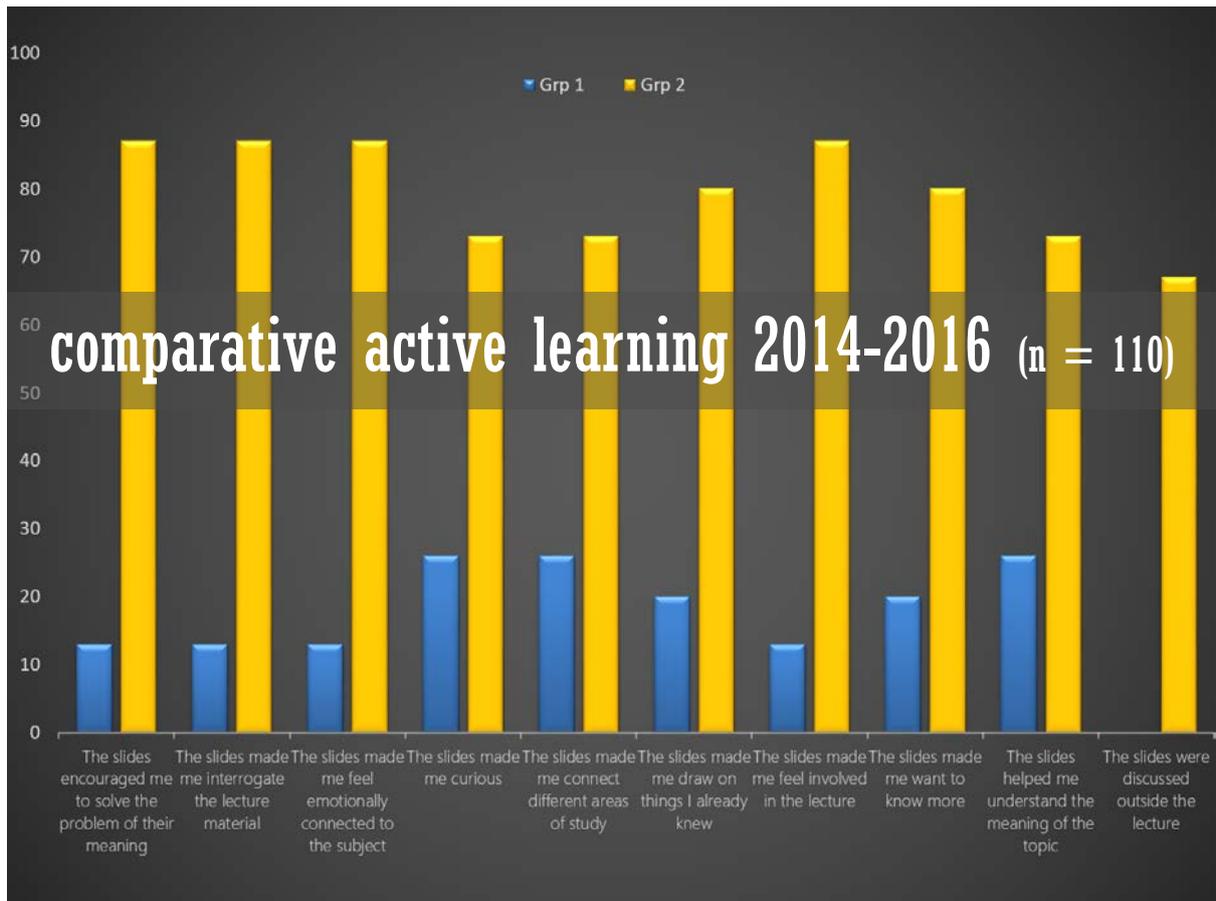


Table 2: Comparative active learning 2014-2016

The process prompted by the images was described by one group of students as 'auto-interrogative' after some lengthy discussion with the moderator. They couldn't prevent themselves from trying to establish the meaning of the images and were, often, not even aware they were engaged in such a process.

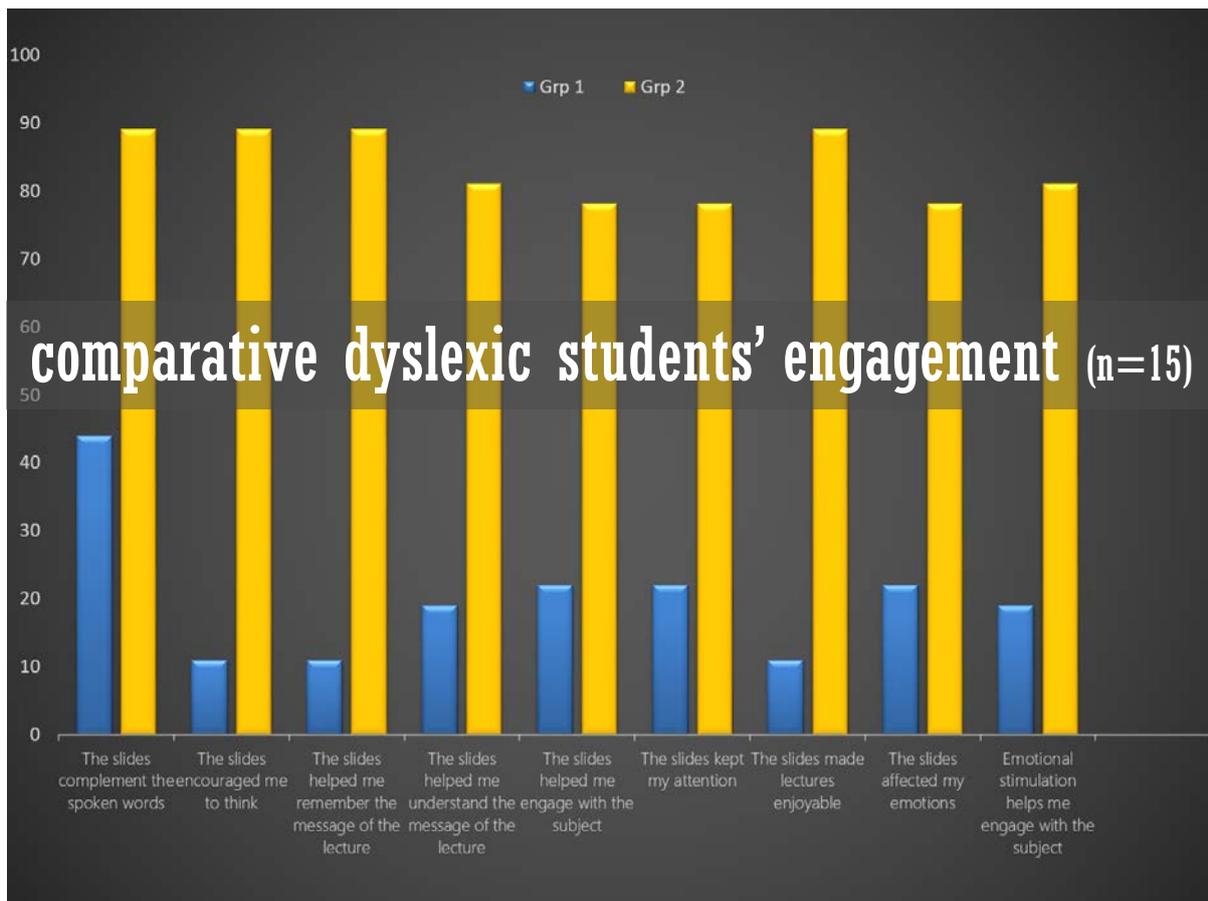


Table 1: Comparative dyslexic student engagement 2016

Dyslexic students' reactions mirrored those of neurostandard students. It is received wisdom that many (not all) students experiencing dyslexia find text challenging generally (von Karolyi & Winner, 2004; Schneps, et al., 2007; Coppin, 2009) at a higher level than neurostandard students. But both groups experience text overload which can be relieved by balancing text and images more evenly.

Conclusion

In International Relations and Politics, we devote ourselves to considering how globalization, technological transformation and social evolution impact the subject material we research. But we spend relatively little time considering how these forces affect how we teach. Given the undeniably visual range and scope of the digital world, the ways the subject matter of PIR lend themselves to visual reproduction and dissemination, and the extent to which our students' worlds are conveyed to them visually, then to paraphrase Grayson, it would seem 'amiss to omit it from the teaching of international relations' (2015, p. 161). There are, quite literally, billions of images accessible as more people join key image-sharing sites like Facebook, with expanding visual representation of

world events and the means to capture and project them. MML scholarship, itself based on decades of respected and recognized research into cognition and memory, tells us that hegemonic pedagogic practices in IR teaching are at odds with the capacity of our brains to interpret and make sense of the world visually. The outcome of empirical testing in line with respected methodological approaches with IR&P undergraduates of an easy-to-develop visual teaching practice corroborates the predictions of MML theories concerning the potential for visual learning pedagogies to transform passive didactic lecturing spaces into engaged spaces of active interrogation and learning. The visual opportunities facing the discipline's pedagogy in the ultra-visual 21st century should be openly engaged with, rather than shunned for appearing to be unorthodox.

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