Example Assignments

Assignment #1: Human Rights Data Collection Project and Reflection Paper

To me, one of the underappreciated aspects of human rights scholarship and practice is the difficulty of obtaining evidence of wrongdoing, either for prosecutions or scholarship. In many cases, we rely upon states to provide us information and data on violations that the state itself may have committed. This aspect of the discipline makes human rights distinctly unique in a way that I'd historically had trouble getting students to appreciate.

My solution was the "Human Rights Data Collection Project," wherein I tasked students with collecting data on potential human rights abuses in the US. Some of my research has focused on civilians killed by police in the US, and the data collection project was inspired by that work. There is no systematic accounting of how many people die at the hands of American police each year. Myself and others have managed to use privately-collected estimates in our research, but these are based on news reports and can only tell us so much: One of the main issues is that while we're interested in the decision to shoot rather than the accuracy of the shot itself, we only have data on people killed by police. The focus on deaths obscures the larger universe of police shootings, excluding people who are shot and survive as well as people who are shot at but never hit.

I sent my students to collect data on every incident where a police officer fired a weapon in the municipality of their choice. While this data isn't collated by the federal or state government, the information is collected at the department level, as officers have to file paperwork every time they discharge a weapon in the field. Accessing the data, then, is simply a matter of filing Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests to each local police department. Along with a guest speaker, I spent a few class periods teaching students how to file FOIA requests as well as proper data collection techniques. I also gave them a list of variables and sample size restrictions (2010 onwards, primary law enforcement agency for a municipality of 75,000 plus) and sent them on their way with a letter from me explaining the project and my contact information. At the end of the semester, they submitted their data and a reflection paper on their experiences.

The project was a pedagogical success, even though many students had issues collecting the data they were assigned. Some students found their departments to be wonderfully cooperative, providing the data free of charge without much hassle. Other departments demanded imposing "processing fees" in the thousands of dollars. One department demanded $500,000 to process the request; a follow-up revealed that they were conflating weapon discharges at shooting ranges to inflate the number of requested documents and bury shootings in the field. Another department flat-out refused to provide any documentation at all, prompting a call to the District Attorney and the eventual uncovering of a suspect shooting that had thus far evaded public attention.

Their relative success in gathering the data is unimportant; the pedagogical value of the enterprise is that the students gained a much greater understanding for and appreciation of the work of human rights scholars and practitioners. The project also helped students in other courses: One student used her newfound FOIA skills in a project for another class, uncovering school board meeting minutes from the desegregation era that revealed the underlying racial animus of local administrators as they put up procedural hurdles to integration. In all, I found it a great example of the power of experiential learning: I could explain the unique nature of human rights until I'm blue in the face, but it would never stick as well as it did because of this assignment.

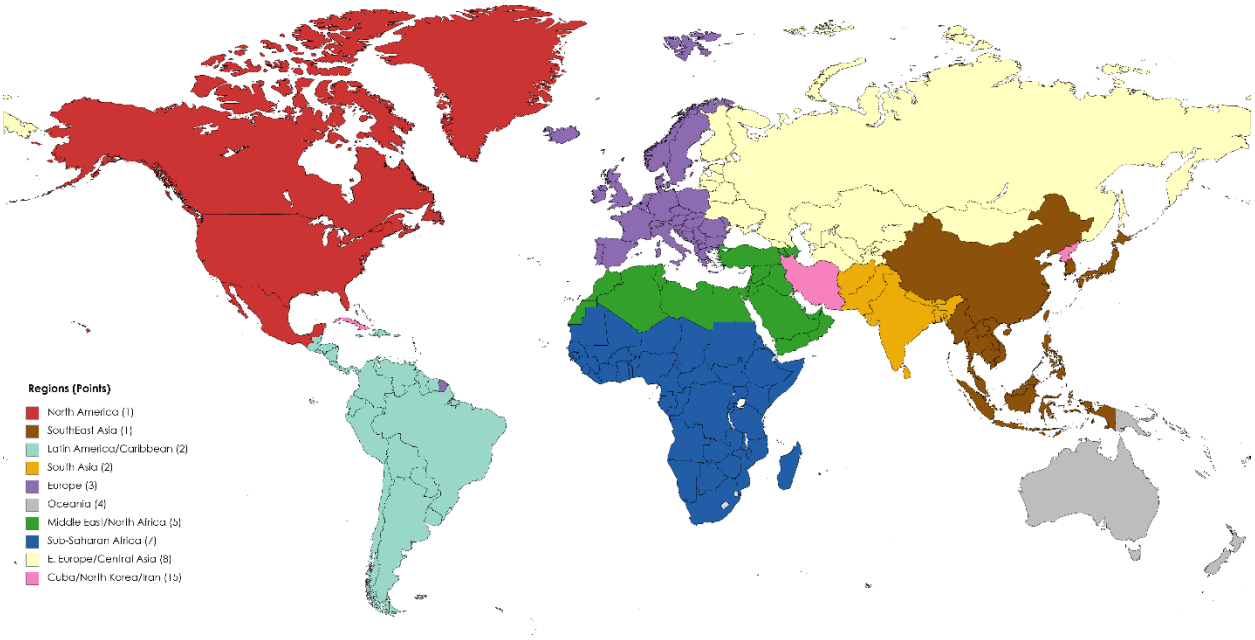
Assignment #2: The Great Scavenger Hunt

The mission of my General Education "Global Understanding" class is to help non-major students understand major contemporary issues in international politics while giving them a foundation to understand

issues that will arise in the future. One global issue that strikes particularly close to home for our students is global trade; many of our students are from rural North Carolina towns stuck in an economic depression ever since the textile and furniture factories left the country. As a result, many of my students enter the course with a built-in animosity towards international trade. While this animosity is understandable, it's also important that they understand the benefits of trade and an interconnected world, and how that world shapes their lives.

I introduced the Great Scavenger Hunt, an active learning project that tasked students with going out into the world and documenting trade goods. The rules are fairly simple: I divided the world into 10 regions, with point totals based on the difficulty of finding goods from that region (specialty foods and beverages aren't allowed). Each student had to gather 5 items, documenting them with a photo of the "made in" tag along with their student ID card. Items count for double points if no other student submitted an item from that country, and the student with the highest point total received a bonus on their grade. Students submitted a short reflection paper on their experience.

Pedagogically, I've had a lot of success with this assignment. Students seem to have taken to it, and regularly cite it as one of their favorite parts of the semester. More importantly, they almost universally come out of it with a better understanding of how global trade networks underpin their everyday lives. As one student remarked: "Now I'm turning over the labels on stuff all the time just to think about where it's from, and I blame you for that." The map with point totals is provided below.



Assignment #3: Prisoner's Dilemma and Axelrod's Tournament

Teaching the foundations of International Relations theory can often be a dry affair, especially as the material from the latter half of the twentieth century tilts more and more towards formal theory. Traditionally, I've used various in-class exercises based on the Prisoner's Dilemma to provide a through line and highlight various schools of thought, modifying one or another aspect to produce different results in the classroom. In one variation, I show how reciprocity can create security communities by having students play the Prisoner's Dilemma in groups. After each round, the group can vote for someone to be removed, sending them to a corner of the classroom known as "Backstabber's Island." Students' first instinct is to defect given the previous

iterations of the game that they've seen, but after a few rounds they vote out the troublemakers and begin to cooperate in earnest.

I like to conclude this section by re-creating Axelrod's famous Prisoner's Dilemma tournament, in which the author solicited strategies for a computer simulation of the Prisoner's Dilemma, pitting each strategy against one another and declaring as the winner the strategy with the highest point total. The winner was "Tit for Tat," a strategy that began with cooperation and simply reciprocated its adversary's actions from that point forward. The takeaway, and the reason the piece is influential, is because it turned the dismal projections of the Prisoner's Dilemma (the only rational choice is conflict) into an affirmation of the value of reciprocal cooperation. Despite the weight of the piece, simply describing a computer tournament from the 80's isn't exactly the most compelling material for today's undergraduate.

Enter my own version of Axelrod's tournament. By simplifying the potential inputs, I allowed students to create their own strategies that I could then pit against one another. Students could select from a set of pre-made strategies (including Tit-for-Tat) or create their own by choosing their initial move and then specifying their strategy's probabilistic reaction to any of the four possible outcomes. I made one small change to the rules based on a critique of Axlerod: Tit-for-Tat is fundamentally incapable of "winning" a matchup, and only "wins" the tournament because it scores the most points. If we instead scored the tournament based on "wins" (like we do nearly every sport), Tit-for-Tat isn't a viable strategy. I allow the students to choose how they'd like to win the tournament. They can try to compile the most wins, or they can try to compile the most points.

While my first few attempts at the tournament stumbled in places trying to get students to understand the mechanics, I've since smoothed out the wrinkles and the exercise is invariably popular. Students get very competitive and try to scheme out the best possible strategy, and the change to the rules produces a variable environment such that there is no one best strategy. Beyond helping students better understand Axelrod's contribution to the literature, the results of the tournament set up a dive into constructivism. When individual actors are allowed to define "winning" for themselves, it turns out that anarchy really is what you make it.

I've found remarkable success with this exercise, but have recently tabled it because it's just too labor-intensive on my part. Given my current setup I have to tabulate each matchup individually, and my last batch of 55 strategies meant I had to adjudicate nearly 3,000 matchups. I am, however, working on creating a program that will handle the adjudication for me, and I would like to make this program free and available to instructors worldwide who might find the exercise useful. I would also like to use the data generated by this program to update Axelrod. Below is a chart of the results from a recent iteration of the tournament.