The Case for Creative Folklore in Pedagogical Practice

Abstract

The political question of who can produce knowledge and how we delineate epistemological standards without reproducing epistemic marginalisation is central to critical pedagogy in international relations. While critical pedagogies often attempt to enact an emancipatory agenda, they largely rely on the educator as knowledge (re)producer and student as passive consumer with little say in what it means to be emancipated, the oppressions at stake and the means of enacting this project. Drawing on Simon Bronner's definition of folklore, this essay explores folklore as a creative practice allowing us to explore who the 'folk' are in the process of teaching and how we constitute disciplinary 'lore' to incite students to revise and reflect on disciplinary boundaries. The essay focuses on international relations pedagogy as a creative practice, arguing that deploying a folklore lens allows us to challenge the uncritical reproduction of disciplinary boundaries.

Contact details:

Kathryn Starnes, 30 Woodhead Rd. Glossop, SK13 7RH United Kingdom

Email: K.starnes@gmail.com

Twitter: @IR_MotherGoose

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Contributor Details: Kathryn Starnes is a Senior Lecturer in International Relations at Manchester Metropolitan University. She completed a PhD at The University of Manchester. Her book, *Fairy Tales and International Relations: A Folklorist Reading of International Relations Textbooks* uses a novel folklorist approach to understand how marginalising practices are embedded in how we recount stories about IR. She has also published on literary approaches to reading canonical neoliberal texts.

ORCiD: 0000-0003-3421-1335

Introduction

Pedagogical research is often devalued in International Relations (IR), but classrooms are a microcosm "of the forces of domination and marginalization at play in larger society" (Nicholls, 2011, p. 25) and reproduce disciplinary boundaries (Starnes, 2017).[1] Despite pedagogy's devaluation, since the 1970s, the national diversity of the authors textbooks cite has served to measure theoretical diversity in IR (eg. Rosenau *et al.*, 1977; Berenskoetter,

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2018). A crude engagement with the politics of the canon, these efforts signal a tradition of thinking about what we teach and who is cited (Starnes, 2017, pp. 27–35). Furthermore, claims to assess the 'state' of the discipline frequently presage attempts to redress marginalisation in disciplinary history. Recent challenges to racialised and gendered canonical boundaries reintroduce the work of women and Black scholars (Anievas, Manchanda and Shilliam, 2015; Vitalis, 2015; Owens and Rietzler, 2021). Nonetheless entrenched disciplinary boundaries are legitimised by retelling history, absent these scholars, to students.

Myth is often deployed to examine disciplinary history and pedagogy through IR's defining narratives (Weber, 2010; de Carvalho, Leira and Hobson, 2011; Hirst *et al.*, 2022). In 2001, Cynthia Weber's (2010) textbook *International Relations Theory* used Barthes to unpack how we teach IR theories. Through film comparisons, she reveals the 'myth function' that makes a theory appear to be true. Central to Weber's (and subsequent) work is a claim that what we teach as *the* discipline is political. To teach content without excavating its 'myth function', or "the cultural practice in which conscious and unconscious ideologies are circulated through stories that *appear* to be true" depoliticizes the discipline's foundational assumptions and the cultural practice of teaching (Weber, 2010, p. 6).[2] Using a Barthesian conception of myth speaks to a belief that which stories we tell must be interrogated.

I argue below that folklore facilitates critical interrogation of the who and how of knowledge (re)production in pedagogical practice. Rather than examining myths, or (re)introducing scholars, I propose examining knowledge creation through the relationship between knowledge and who constitutes the knowledge production community. Folklore, understood as the process of creating, revising, and sharing informal and formal knowledge within a

[2] Recounting IR's history is often referred to as 'storytelling'.

community whose boundaries also warrant interrogation, reveals this relationship. Conceiving of pedagogy as folklore reveals pedagogy as a continuous process undertaken by a community concerned with knowledge (re)production. Folklore broadens our focus from context-based understandings of what is produced and who is cited to include an understanding that we are also producing a community entitled to (re)create knowledge. Exploring the 'folk' who do the producing alongside the 'lore' they produce allows us to interrogate *how* knowledge is created and *by whom*, but more importantly, the relationship between the how and the who as creative practice.

Stumbling Blocks

Previously dominated by questions of representation, IR's pedagogical efforts increasingly emphasize emancipation. Folklore has much to offer this commitment to 'transgressive teaching' (Parisi *et al.*, 2013). Teaching intended to, following hooks, help students identify the silences and exclusions of mainstream IR proliferates (Parisi *et al.*, 2013; Ling, 2014; Barr, 2018; Koomen, 2019). This teaching often challenges myths or (re)introduces voices but does not consider *how* these and other marginalisations are reproduced through pedagogical practice. Other teaching efforts attempt to emancipate students (Parisi *et al.*, 2013; Ling, 2014). While radical, these approaches are troubling because they presume to define emancipation neglecting the oppressions they reinscribe.

If pedagogy encompasses knowledge (re)production, shaping how subjects are defined, then folklore addresses stumbling blocks frustrating IR's radical pedagogy. Focusing on what knowledge is passed down, combined with emancipatory efforts, reiterates oppression and classroom hierarchies. Pedagogy exploring myth, aimed at emancipating students, relies on a linear connection: knowledge is produced, students enlightened, knowledge challenged/revised, future generations incrementally more enlightened. Students remain

knowledge recipients and knowledge a product, albeit edited. For pedagogy to emancipate, students must identify oppression and define emancipation. However, for pedagogy to inspire constant questioning, make space for marginalised knowledge, question how knowledge is defined and who creates it (a more radical project), then we must address the co-constitution of knowledge and the community (re)producing knowledge. Inspired by Jacques Rancière, Paulo Freire and bell hooks, redefining pedagogy as folklore encourages us to re-evaluate the relationship between our pedagogy, knowledge production and knowledge producing subjects.

Attempts to challenge classroom hierarchy within IR's radical pedagogy are often motivated by Freire: "the pedagogy of the oppressed, [is] a pedagogy which must be forged *with* not *for* the oppressed…" (2017, p. 22); education of the oppressed must be co-intentional (2017, p. 43). Similarly, Rancière advocates presuming equality of intelligence, because the hierarchical world of intelligence is at odds with the will to learn "as people" rather than students (2007, pp. 8–11). IR's emancipatory pedagogical attempts vary, with, for example, Barr exploring autoethnographic pedagogy as a way to challenge epistemic privilege (2018, p. 1107) and Koonen declaring the goal of "teach[ing] and learn[ing] about a colonial, racist discipline with anticolonial and anti-racist lenses with and alongside students…" (2019, p. 393). Similarly, Parisi et al cite as success: "that students realize they do have expertise, and that they can think and speak for themselves" (2013, p. 416). These efforts recognise students' knowledge and attempt to afford epistemic equality.

However, these attempts risk making classroom hierarchy less visible, more difficult to challenge. Efforts often entail reflecting on parts of students' identities: first generation, minority, working-class, immigration status. Nonetheless, as hooks notes, students are not homogenous and our efforts to mitigate hierarchy, to challenge epistemic inequality are likely not experienced in the same way by all students (1994, p. 39). Our attempts to challenge

classroom hierarchy will likely fail, reinscribing aspects of belonging, legitimacy and the 'right to know' invisible in their familiarity. It is not only the content we teach that contains a "system of self-evident facts of sense perception" that Rancière calls the distribution of the sensible, but also how institutions and societies organise us into hierarchies (2004, p. 12). We risk reinscribing "who can have a share in what is common to the community based on what they do and on the time and space in which this activity is performed" (Rancière, 2004, p. 12). To understand the relationship between who is producing knowledge and what is produced, we need means to reflect on the relationships within the knowledge producing community we are bringing to bear. This means acknowledging our pedagogical practice (re)constitutes a community of knowers and epistemic gatekeepers, sustaining epistemic inequality.

Re-evaluating pedagogy requires understanding the relationship between the people involved and the artefacts they (re)produce. Pedagogy should be understood as constant (re)creation, with authors/educators claiming to 'tell a story in their turn' about what it means to produce disciplinary knowledge (Starnes, 2017, p. 55). 'Canons' must be treated as ever evolving, canonical boundaries as artefacts of an informal transfer of implied standards we negotiate in knowledge producing communities. This rejects understandings of knowledge production that claim to curate knowledge, to hand it down unadulterated (Starnes, 2017, pp. 158–163). For Freire, this means moving away from a banking model of education, towards a model that is co-intentional (2017, p. 43) and problem-posing, "an act of creation; it must not serve as a crafty instrument for the domination of one person by another (2017, p. 62). Subject (re)formation is part of thinking about who constitutes student/instructor dynamics and what constitutes the 'content' we 'teach' (or (re)create). It is insufficient to consider where we and students come from, we must also ask who students are to become in an intellectual community. Pedagogic practice inherently changes subjectivity. As Nicholls explains:

"Because Freire, like Fanon and Simone de Beauvoir links subjectivity to intersubjectivity, liberation necessarily requires solidarity; one can only transform one's desire for freedom into a reality if one is part of a larger movement dedicated to the same aim" (2011, p. 15).

Intersubjectivity challenges efforts to encourage students to define emancipation for themselves. Tensions arise about which oppressions take precedent and how privileging one project marginalises others. These tensions and relationships must be interrogated. Emancipation cannot be *delivered*. We must teach students to think about their relationship to epistemology. While existing attempts encourage students to think of themselves producing, they must also think about themselves as policing knowledge. Without this, we risk what Nicholls, drawing on Macedo's introduction to *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2011, p. 12) warns is a trivialisation of the dialogical method. In attempting to emancipate by producing students as knowledge producers we must consider how they will become sentries of knowledge production.

Radical Proposal

To address who constitutes the community of knowledge producers, what knowledge is produced, and what it looks like to produce knowledge, I turn to folklore. I propose that the reproduction of knowledge is an interative storytelling practice of constant (re)creation with the iterations connected via a community of story creators. Seeing this relationship allows us to reconsider hierarchies of knowledge producers and the seemingly linear knowledge production/transmission process.

Simon Bronner notes several crisis points in defining the folklore discipline, such as the 1960s when the folklore discipline struggled to incorporate social practices and written artefacts, the notion of tradition and continuous production (2016, p. 8). In reconciling these tensions anew, Bronner reminds us that for Burne in 1913 it was the *relationship* between

artefacts and the groups who use them at stake. Rather than examining rituals, the community performing rituals, or the resulting products, some define folklore as a relationship of learning (Bronner, 2016, p. 13). By focusing on the practices used to pass down tacit and informal knowledge that enable us to participate, we arrive at a "practice-centred definition of folklore that retains a consideration of context . . ." (Bronner, 2016, p. 15). Consequently, folklore enables us to understand a relationship between iterative actions and the people producing those actions in the context of passing down and renegotiating knowledge. It requires us to think about the rituals we use to identify and define knowledge and who is qualified to participate. We must think critically about the 'folk' and the 'lore' as co-constitutive and productive of boundaries of membership and knowledge. Folklore encourages us to think about the community of knowledge (re)producers, their creative practices in producing knowledge, and knowledge transfer as a relationship: the folk and the lore are co-constitutive.

Understanding pedagogy as folklore makes space for re-defining the boundaries of what knowledge 'should' look like. Instead of revising an existing myth with student emancipation in mind, we examine the practices defining our knowledge production community, and the resulting products, with a view to understanding how our interactions collectively recreate the stories we share. Re-creation of knowledge allows us to constantly contest the hierarchies we can never eradicate, rather than depoliticizing them by attempting their erasure.

Alongside this explanation of community, defined by its productive function, is a consideration of the processes of production and product. We cannot understand the community unless it is through this intersubjective relationship arising through the shared processes of creating and reproducing knowledge. To reveal this relationship, we must eschew any notion that knowledge is transmitted intact. Not because this is inferior,

oppressive pedagogy (although it is), but because understanding how the community defines itself, requires understanding the creative rituals that collectively occupy the group. This requires radical reconsideration of the 'stuff' we create and how we create what we treat as knowledge. We must understand what we teach, the history and stories we use to define, and 'the canon' are producing knowledge *and* a community. When we recount a disciplinary story or present a text for 'study' we are producing knowledge and informally articulating ontological and epistemological norms in the story and in our (re)telling and (re)creation of it. To treat this as curation, where knowledge is transmitted wholesale (no matter how 'emancipating'), denies the political aspects of pedagogical practice—even actively *depoliticizing* pedagogy as we claim to emancipate. Acknowledging that we are creating knowledge and creating students as knowers in a community with shared rituals invites (re)invention and contestation of those rituals, those informal practices that establish epistemological norms and ontological terrains. I have written elsewhere about how a claim to (re)create a text invites 'use and abuse.' This extends beyond conceiving of the canon as a creative site and considers how even a mundane seminar discussion invites (re)negotiation and (re)creation of knowledge.

For IR, this means moving beyond discrete myths and classroom hierarchy to consider that when we reproduce a discipline for and with students, we engage with folklore. We do not just pass down curated, well-debated artefacts, or just produce knowledge producers. We also pass down informal knowledge about the process of creating official Knowledge and a set of rituals and community-defining practices. This is true of pedagogical practice beyond IR. We are not just teaching what has been created but also how to create and be recognized as a creator. That is intrinsically a creative process that must be understood as producing intersubjectivity, generating ontological boundaries and epistemological norms.

Conclusion

Conceiving of pedagogical practice as folklore encourages us to consider pedagogy as creative, productive of knowledge and a knowledge production community defined by the rituals and habits we engage in when we (re)produce knowledge. This makes two contributions to radical pedagogy. The first allows us to move beyond attempts to address classroom hierarchies to acknowledge and question the hierarchies present in and beyond classrooms that are always part of whose knowledge is considered legitimate. The second allows us to interrogate and re-frame the knowledge production process as creative. Knowledge production is creative in terms of the rituals and processes involved in the production of the stories we (re)produce. Acknowledging creation encourages us to interrogate the boundaries policing participation in this process. This may mean a radical understanding of the seminar space as productive, or reinterpreting 'the canon' to include (re)writing and (re)negotiation. It also means acknowledging that knowledge production rituals produce a community that creates and recognizes who can create. The co-constitution of knowledge and a knowledge producing community allows us to consider the relationship between the 'folk' and the 'lore' of our disciplines, who is allowed to create and what it means to create.

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