The “We” Problem in Teaching International Studies

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This article addresses the problems that emerge when students in international studies courses approach the subject matter from the perspective of the first person plural. Whether in terms of “we,” “us,” or “our,” many college students choose to adopt a personal perspective in discussions of international affairs. While it is natural for students to base their analysis of international studies on their personal observations and experiences, this inclination to adopt a collective first person approach detracts from the scholarly neutrality toward which students of global studies should aspire. Furthermore, a first person plural approach to course subject matter creates the false impression among students that they are all in agreement over contentious issues of global interactions and the theories employed to study them. The article concludes with suggestions for remedying the “we” problem, and offers advice for instructors who have encountered it in their own classroom.

Keywords: international studies education, objectivity, student interaction

What is to be done when undergraduates in college-level international studies courses frame their discussions of international studies from the perspective of the first person plural? Whether in terms of “we,” “us,” or “our,” many college students choose to adopt a personal perspective in discussions of international affairs. Why is this a problem? What is wrong with undergraduates using the first person plural to discuss international events that affect them collectively and as citizens of the country in which they reside? I shall suggest that students’ impulse to think in terms of the first person plural reflects larger trends in education and society that hamper their ability to grasp abstract concepts. As students, undergraduates are prone to be unfamiliar with abstract theory. As citizens, they are prone to limit their knowledge of global affairs to the experiences of their own country. They appear to have difficulty conceptualizing economics, politics, culture, and society in general, and in a comparative context, and therefore lack the necessary tools to make sense of the range of topics included in international affairs. Students who are incapable of approaching international studies without personalizing the subject are not equipped to enter the world as fully trained scholars. The remedy is to encourage scholarly detachment and a third person perspective in the teaching of international studies.

The Problem

I have encountered the “we” problem in most of the courses I teach. The problem arises most frequently in my American Foreign Policy course. From the moment students walk into the classroom their point of reference is the first
person plural. The following are typical of student comments offered in class: “The Persian Gulf War is something we fought”; “The members of NATO are our allies”; “Terrorist attacks issued toward the United States are aimed at us”; “We are responsible for environmental degradation in the Third World.” Given that the majority of students in the classroom are, in fact, American citizens, it seems reasonable, as far as they are concerned, to speak collectively, and from the first person, about the foreign policies of the country in which they reside. Of course, this is not a phenomenon unique to international studies education in the United States. Arie Kacowicz (1993) reports that in Israel students expect international studies courses to be relevant to current events, while Hughes, Chan, and Kegley (1994) observe that in China, students have a hard time distinguishing between “empirical observation and normative preference.” Moreover, this is not a problem limited to international studies. In the politics courses I teach that do not have an international focus, students still personalize the subject matter and discuss how it affects “us” as members of a political community.

Part of the problem is that most American undergraduates have scant knowledge of politics or foreign policy apart from the United States. With little or no exposure in their high school social studies classes to history, society, or culture anywhere else in the world, students draw upon their personal knowledge of events they experience in their own lives. This is not a phenomenon unique to college students. As public opinion polls show, Americans in general tend to be fairly unaware of the world around them. The problem is compounded by the fact that most texts employed in college-level international studies courses discuss international themes from a U.S.-centric perspective. “As a result, propositions, assumptions, and theories about U.S. behavior have been conferred universal and scientific status” (Robles, 1993:526; see also Hoffmann, 1977). With limited knowledge of other countries, it is perhaps only natural that that which is known is framed within collective personal experience.

Given the lack of understanding many Americans have about international affairs, one could make the claim that a first person identification with foreign policy issues is in fact a virtue, as it can prove useful in cultivating greater public engagement in the political process. This approach has been widely adopted in the media. Commentators on television and radio frequently refer to domestic and international politics in the first person plural. It is not at all uncommon to hear discussions on television of “our” foreign policy, or how “we” as Americans are affected by events around the world, or how this or that foreign policy affects “us.” Certainly, there is no question that people demand information that provides a personal perspective that allows them to identify with matters of politics and society that affect their lives.

Nonetheless, there are unmistakable drawbacks to this sort of personalization of news and current events. In an era of globalized mass communication, when

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1 Furthermore, once removed from the confines of their own college campuses, students’ tendency to adopt a narrow view of the world diminishes. Anna Ortiz (2000:75) observes that American students on study-abroad programs are more prone to adopt a third person perspective toward American politics and society, as well as toward the culture in which they are living abroad, than when they are on their home campuses.

2 The lack of knowledge of world affairs among contemporary American undergraduates can be contrasted starkly with the immediate post–World War II era, when it was customary for elementary school children to be educated about international understanding as early as the fourth grade (see Preston, 1955:191–194).

3 James Lindsay (2000:3–4) summarizes recent polling data indicating Americans’ ignorance of foreign policy and world affairs. From a policy standpoint, Lindsay asserts that an apathetic and uninformed public encourages parochialism and drift in American foreign policy. On statistics indicating lack of student knowledge of international and current events see also Hembroff et al. (1992:10); Reitano and Elfenbein (1997:540); Patterson (2000:817); and Schodt (2000:65).

4 In addition, it should not be surprising that American undergraduates internalize an American perspective on specialized areas such as foreign policy analysis, since specialization at the graduate level in the field has led to a bifurcation of American and non-American perspectives in those fields (Hobs, 1990).
all-news cable channels are broadcast via satellite all around the globe, it can be especially baffling to the consumers of mass media that news programs produced in the United States, but intended for a global audience, do not take the global audience’s perspective into account. A viewer in Saudi Arabia, or Malaysia, or Finland, or even Canada for that matter might find it odd that a seemingly objective discussion of international terrorism, for example, is framed by Americans in terms of “our” country or threats to “us,” when the issue affects people all around the world. The producers and personalities who appear on news-chat shows understand that members of their viewing audience in the United States want to know how events in the headlines affect them personally, yet fail to realize that such first person perspectives are increasingly antiquated in an era of global communication. Understandably, college students weaned on a steady diet of television absorb a first person discourse and adopt it as their own. Nonetheless, as I suggest, the first person plural perspective can have a stifling effect on the learning process once those students reach the college classroom and beyond. 

More important, I argue that this first person perspective is antithetical to the goals of college education. Among the aims of college teaching is fostering critical thinking skills in undergraduate students. Part of this involves encouraging students to think beyond their own personal experiences. As Chet Meyers (1986:26) observes: “The abilities to make sense of new experiences and to envision possibilities outside one’s own immediate experience are important ingredients of critical thinking.” Yet as a variety of studies have shown, the ability to develop critical thinking skills can come slowly, even among late adolescents and early adults. Furthermore, many undergraduates see the world from a personal standpoint, and are unfamiliar with the terminology of traditional academic disciplines, which some observers maintain is essential for fostering critical thinking skills (see, e.g., McPeck, 1990:40). As long as students cling to personal perspectives and remain unsocialized in the proper way to assess course materials, their critical thinking skills will be impaired. Finally, as Stephen Brookfield (1987:162–183) asserts, individuals are incapable of participating fully in a democracy unless they develop the kinds of critical thinking skills typically fostered in higher education environments.

In summary, the purpose of college-level education in international studies is to teach students how to use reason and logic to analyze and interpret theories and facts, not to render opinionated judgment on the basis of personal experience. This can be a difficult lesson in any discipline. Students, and perhaps especially college students, can be so enamored of their own perspectives that dogma crowds out dispassionate learning. While students who adopt a first person perspective in their approach to international studies do not necessarily all possess an illogically intense attachment to that perspective, the mere appro-

5 Furthermore, there can be a certain merit in using international studies classes to promote a commitment to civic values which comes with personal identification with pressing social, economic, and political problems of the day.

6 I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for International Studies Perspectives for bringing this to my attention.

7 On the development of critical thinking skills see, e.g., Fischer (1980); King and Kitchener (1994); Pragat (1974); and Sternberg (1990).

8 “While there is no substitute for experience in acquiring the relevant bodies of knowledge, past experience can interfere with current thinking by causing rigidity in thinking” (Yinger, 1980:16).

9 On the intellectual purposes of college education see Bateman (1990); Brookfield (1990); Dressel and Marcus (1982); and Ignelzi (2000).

10 “Some students confuse proof with intensity of belief. They preface statements with ‘I feel very strongly that …’ and trust that their sincerity will carry the day. Like students who think that grades should be based on effort alone, the partisans of personal conviction must learn to test their ideas against a more stringent standard” (Wilkinson and Dubrow, 1991:258).
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The appropriation of the first person makes it difficult to assume a detached position that situates international studies as a scholarly endeavor, as opposed to a field governed solely by personal opinion. While a “we” perspective, in which students view international affairs from their own personal experiences, may have an appeal from the standpoint of promoting student engagement in the subject matter, its drawbacks outweigh the benefits of such a classroom approach. Therefore, eliminating opinion and substituting it with analysis should be a main goal of an international studies education.

The Importance of Scholarly Detachment in International Studies

Perhaps the most important reason to avoid the “we” perspective is that it hinders the unbiased pursuit of knowledge. The emphasis on scholarly detachment certainly can be debated. For example, it is fairly common for scholars who adopt participant-observer methods to identify in a first person manner with the object of their research. Furthermore, it could be argued that one can be aware of one’s own bias and recognize that it makes it nearly impossible to adopt a completely neutral perspective when undertaking social science research (Taylor, 1967:57). Nevertheless, it almost goes without saying that even where a personal bias can be detected, the goal of social science research still should be to employ as neutral methodologies as possible so as to minimize contamination of the subject matter (Becker, 1974:118; Cunningham, 1973:99). As Kenneth Hoover (1992:6) points out:

Because society is interesting for the drama it contains, there is a tendency to dispense with systematic understanding and get on with the descriptions, stories, and personal judgements. Although these can be illuminating, they often have limited usefulness, because highly subjective accounts of life form a poor basis for the development of common understanding and common action. The intricate task of getting people to bridge the differences that arise from the singularity of their experience requires a more disciplined approach to knowledge.

Discouraging a first person perspective in classroom discussions is a small yet significant step toward inculcating proper methodological strategies even among undergraduate students.

Still, one could argue that there is some merit for making academic research and scholarship relevant in the practical world. According to this argument, first person identification with the subject matter is to be encouraged to the extent that it helps solve pressing problems of the day. Yet even the most adamant of proponents for the practical relevancy of academic research will attest that their investigations are legitimate only to the extent they reflect good social science. No one is suggesting that because someone has a personal stake in a subject matter they cannot undertake valid research and analysis. By the same token, however, it is fairly obvious that personal interest and scholarly neutrality, while able to coexist, are distinct concepts. As Frank Cunningham (1973:6) points out, “objectivity is not detachment from the extra-scientific demands of social, political, and personal life. The question which confronts the objectivist is not whether scientists do (or should) have extra-scientific interests in the outcome of their work . . . but whether it is possible, regardless of other interests, for a scientist to carry on that work objectively” (emphasis in the original). Researchers can have a personal stake in a subject and, to the best of their ability, employ accepted analytical methods.

The danger arises when scholars or students assume they cannot analyze an issue unless they personally identify with it. This seems to be the implicit assumption made, for example, by many students in introductory American foreign
policy courses. Students enroll in these courses because they already possess subjective ideas about how the formation of foreign policy in the United States works. Therefore, by personalizing American politics from the very start, students lose the objectivity necessary to determine whether their personal convictions are borne out by an analysis of the facts. In addition, the use of the first person, whether singular or plural, encourages value judgments. Since students view the world through their own eyes, their own observations are presumed to provide sufficient evidence on which to render judgments. In my own observations in my American Foreign Policy course, student bias cuts in a variety of directions. Some students assume a “my country, right or wrong” attitude; others are more inclined to adopt the position of “America can only do wrong.” There are also students for whom “our” actions as Americans are characterized by the positions advanced by the current administration. Still another group assumes the position that American politics somehow are the standard against which the politics of all other countries must be measured.

What is shared by all these perspectives is the assumption that foreign policy can only be viewed through the prism of the participant-observer since students assume they are incapable of viewing the world in an unbiased or neutral fashion. They may adopt a “my country, right or wrong” or “America can only do wrong” position not because they are “biased,” but because that is the way they think the world is, and they “know” that is the case because they have experienced politics only as Americans. Thus, they reason that while detachment might be perfectly fine for studying chemical reactions or rock formations, for example, it is untenable for the study of something to which they are intimately tied.

My argument here is that use of the first person plural may create a situation in which students cannot see beyond their own experience to imagine other, perfectly legitimate ways of engaging in international politics. This is not an idle question, and indeed it arises in other academic disciplines as well. One could imagine a biology or anatomy course in which the human organism is studied from the perspective of “we”: “We are bipedal hominids”; “We experience regular sleep cycles”; “We have a lifespan of 70 to 80 years”; “We have two kidneys.” While all these statements undoubtedly are true, there is no valid reason for using the first person plural when the third person would suffice. To say that “humans” (or, better yet, “homo sapiens”) are biologically composed in this or that way eliminates the unnecessary need to identify with the object of scientific research. It also eliminates the natural tendency to look for answers in ways that suit our own predispositions (Kaplan, 1964:385). If scientists have no personal stake in the outcome of their research other than the quality of their work, they are less likely to engage in methodological or analytical errors. This is even more true with regard to the social sciences. As Kenneth Boulding (1970:105) observes:

In social systems . . . the habit of generalizing from personal experience is so widespread that contradictions between “common sense” and the more sophisticated image of the world that comes out of scientific inquiry are not easy to resolve. Nevertheless, it is the principal task of formal education in schools and colleges to expand the student’s image of the world beyond his personal experience and to give him an image which encompasses the total system of the earth or even the universe.

If we can impress upon our students that their own experience with world affairs is not shared universally by everyone, then we can show them that what they experience and what they study, although interrelated, are not one and the same.
A second reason the first person plural is inappropriate in international studies courses is the simple fact that typically not all students in the classroom will be citizens of the same country. Diversity in the classroom is more prevalent on some campuses than others. At big city public universities it might be the case that more than half the students in any given international studies or foreign policy course are either foreign nationals or naturalized American citizens. On the other hand, at suburban or rural small liberal arts colleges it is not uncommon for these courses to have no foreign students at all. And yet, in the prophesied “virtual classroom” of the future, “international classrooms can be formed on a moment’s notice, with students from varied socioeconomic backgrounds and geographical locations communicating as equal partners, teachers, and learners” (Halpern, 1994:4).

The “we” problem manifests itself in different ways depending on the composition of the class. For example, in a classroom with many students from foreign countries (or in the types of “virtual classrooms” alluded to above), the use of the first person plural by students of U.S. citizenship quite simply is inaccurate. To talk about why “we” choose “our” foreign policymakers in a certain way, when “we” comprises Chinese, Turkish, Salvadoran, Polish, and Kenyan students, is to ignore the composition of the class. A different sort of problem occurs in a classroom where all but only one or two students are U.S. nationals. In this instance, the few foreign students in attendance may experience a sense of alienation. When an American student declares that “our” foreign policy promotes human rights abroad, a student from another country may wonder what that means, when the definition of human rights in their country is not taken into account. As Hugh Miller (1993:234) points out, “statements that exclude others from the debate or denigrate them on the basis of ethnicity, gender, or religion cannot be allowed to stand” in classroom discussion. Of course, when a student declares something along the lines of “free trade helps our economy,” the point obviously is not to denigrate individuals who come from countries (including the United States) in which many people view free trade with suspicion. Nonetheless, such an utterance does exclude those who disagree with that statement from the debate.

Another type of problem occurs in a classroom where all the students are American citizens. This is the case fairly often, even in an era in which classrooms represent an increasingly diverse student body. To be sure, classrooms are self-contained learning communities, in which a shared goal constitutes the search for knowledge (Hooks, 1994:40). Students should be encouraged to think of themselves as embarked on a common journey. However, when the subject matter involves topics they have experienced personally, there is a tendency to assume a familiarity with the objects of inquiry in an unspoken fashion. This assumed identification with the subject matter can then color its interpretation. In the case of international studies, the “we” perspective reinforces the notion that international affairs and foreign policy can be viewed from a uniquely American perspective. When students declare that the globalized economy affects “us,” they are setting up a scenario in which the United States is viewed in isolation from the rest of the world. As mentioned earlier, this could occur with the analysis of international studies in any country. In this sense, the “we problem” is not a symptom of the American system of education, but of any environment in which students are not adept at seeing the world beyond their own experiences.

The point is not to adhere slavishly to some “politically correct” conception of diversity that dictates that student feelings not be hurt. In fact, as I discuss later in this essay, in certain settings—for example, in-class simulations, role-playing
exercise, debates, etc.—selective use of the first person plural can spark a lively debate. In this situation, allowing both U.S. and foreign students to experiment with adopting the personae of American and other foreign policymakers allows students to think about their attachment to national identity. However, in normal classroom discussions, the inclusion of just one student from another country renders a collective first person perspective erroneous when framed with terms like “we,” “us,” or “our.”

Are All Citizens in a Democracy in Agreement?

Just as any given classroom comprises students who, by virtue of their nationality, will not all see the world in the same way, so too is it the case that not all citizens in a democracy see world affairs from the same perspective. Even if one accepts that most people of the same country embrace certain common principles, to speak of a citizenry united in its view of international affairs clearly is a fallacy. Obviously, when most people use the first person plural to sum up the foreign policy convictions of their country they do so out of convenience, not because they fail to recognize the diversity of views that exist within it. For example, when a television news anchor declares that “public opinion polls show that we name international terrorism as the biggest problem facing the United States today,” or when a politician asserts that “we all agree that our human rights policy is broken,” naturally they know they are using linguistic shorthand in which “we” and “our” translate as the majority of the people in question. So discursive convenience should not be confused with an inability of most educated observers to recognize diversity of foreign policy opinion in the United States, or any other country for that matter.

The problem arises when the first person plural is repeatedly used not simply as an efficient way to describe what the statistical majority of the citizens of a country think, but as a linguistic weapon to obscure fundamental political disagreements. Here the politician usually is more guilty than the anchor of the evening news. Strategic deployment of all-encompassing pronouns that manufactures unanimity out of dissent is a common propaganda ploy. For example, the political situation in apartheid-era South Africa was “democratic” almost as if by magic so long as white South Africans guaranteed that “we” included everyone by way of speech, but not at the ballot box. What exists as a numerical fiction becomes political reality by virtue of deliberate manipulation of words.

This is not to say that undergraduates contemplate such possibilities when they opt for the first person plural. More often than not, they are like the television news anchors for whom encompassing pronouns are a function of economical use of words or grammatical laziness. However, it behooves us to remind students that what might appear on the surface to be cohesiveness of opinion in the democratic states actually masks a wide range of foreign policy views. This is especially important in a classroom environment where politics is the subject matter. As Stephen Brookfield and Stephen Preskill (1999:130) point out, “it is ill-advised and insulting to treat individual students from a particular group as if they automatically embody the tastes, ideological affiliations, and learning styles supposedly characteristic of that group." Brookfield and Preskill are referring to students from traditionally underrepresented groups among college undergraduates, but their comments apply equally to students who represent the majority of students who typically occupy college classrooms at any given time. Furthermore, Brookfield and Preskill’s admonition applies not only to instructors, but also to students, who should not assume that just because they and their fellow students are citizens of the same country, it is logical to infer that they all share the same perspective on world affairs or foreign policy issues,
or share that perspective with all of their fellow citizens simply by virtue of the fact that they are all citizens of that country.

The principle of diversity of political views among the citizens of the same country often is lost on students who typically enter international studies classes with the idea that democracy can be equated with majority rule. For instance, to the extent that U.S. students do learn about the political system in high school, notions such as “government of, by, and for the people” presume that “the people” are reflected in what the majority expresses. It is only at the college level that students come to understand the full ramifications of concepts such as interest group representation, democratic contestation, and political dissent. Continual invocation of personalized expressions such as “we,” “us,” and “our” mask this reality. To be sure, the third person plural can give this effect as well. It is just as inaccurate to assume a cohesive “people” as it is to refer to “them” as “us.” In classroom discussions the first person plural should be used as an opportunity to ask students to consider the various interests at stake in any given issue under investigation. Students should be asked to think of which groups in the foreign policymaking process might advance a different position than the one shared by the majority. Students also should be asked to think of a range of countries in which the domestic political situation yields entirely different modes of foreign policymaking.

Appropriation of the first person plural can also allow the speaker to act as an authority who is in a privileged position to speak on behalf of others who are grouped together within a collective circle. The discourse of “we” thus has a normalizing effect insofar as the speaker is authorized to specify a default set of assumptions that are shared by all except dissenters duly designated by those with the authority voice. Those who do not share this set of assumptions are marginalized, and their positions become deviant by definition. From a practical standpoint, the “we” position has the potential to become a bullying tactic by students who seek to delimit what is “normal” in the realm of politics. This bullying tactic is also found with great frequency within the practice of politics as well. Partisan news commentators in the media often cite public opinion polls to find majority positions that support their positions. These commentators then use poll-generated majorities to define what “the people” want, think, believe, etc., and by the strategic deployment of such linguistic devices standardize these positions as the norm. Those who depart from these views thus are linguistically trapped by a discourse that makes their positions aberrant. This shuts off discussion, and renders the topic unproblematic from the perspective of competing points of view.

The United States in the World

The “we” mentality about international studies also clouds perceptions about the relationship between the United States and the rest of the world. This is not the place to engage in an extended debate over the proposition of American exceptionalism. U.S. foreign policy may, in fact, be unique. However, when students adopt a linguistic position that places American politics apart from other countries, they are engaging in speech that assumes that U.S. politics and government can be isolated from other countries without actually testing out that proposition. This has implications for how they conceptualize basic elements of American politics. For example, we could imagine a student declaring, “in our democratic system, interest groups have a direct say in foreign policy.” While this statement

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11 Some educators have explicitly endeavored to challenge the notion of American exceptionalism by placing the study of American government and politics in comparative perspective (see, e.g., Green, 1992; Reitano and Elfenbein, 1997; and Wilson, 1998).
may be true, the way it is framed does not make it obvious that in similar
democratic systems, the role of interest groups in shaping foreign policy may be
more limited. Relinquishing linguistic ownership of a concept like interest group
participation in foreign policymaking creates a greater ability to think about
similarities among comparable cases.

In the second place, the “we” perspective limits the ability to conceptualize a
range of political practices in the world. I have noticed this in my course on
comparative politics of the advanced industrial world. Throughout the course, I
ask students for examples of concepts such as government structures and institu-
tions, political parties, and public policies. When instances of American polit-
ics make up the majority of examples students use to illustrate thematic subjects,
it overemphasizes the illustrative value of the U.S. case. Of course, this does not
mean that U.S.-specific examples should be excluded from discussion, but rather
that an explicit acknowledgment should be made that the American experience
should be viewed in comparative context (Hauss, 1995). Moreover, when these
examples are asserted from the perspective of the first person plural, it gives the
impression that this is the definitive political pattern in the world. When the
answer is framed in terms of what “we” do or what “our” political system is like,
not only is the respondent privileging one country’s perspective over another, he
or she is taking possession of the answer and making all other answers seem
secondary by nature.

Third, repeated use of the first person plural in the classroom may needlessly
reinforce sentiments of American nationalism. It is widely accepted that identity
formation is a function, in part, of the creation of in-groups and out-groups,
where in-groups share a common “we-feeling.” Certainly, the formation of Amer-
ican political identity occurs through this constitution of a we-feeling. The ques-
tion is whether this should be reiterated in the classroom. While it may be
perfectly acceptable, even anticipated, that students who are American citizens
experience a sense of nationalism in their everyday lives, one can make a strong
case that classroom discussions of national identity should be bias-free.

Finally, the use of the first person plural makes it tempting to create an
adversarial relationship between the United States and the rest of the world.
When international studies is approached from the first person perspective,
some students may find it easy to fall into a mode of thinking in which the
American style of politics is the standard position, and therefore anything else is
of lesser merit. If students conclude that “we” have addressed the problem of
free trade in a globalized economy, then other countries that do things differ-
ently haven’t “seen the light.” More pointedly, in international studies or com-
parative politics courses, the contrasts between “us” and “them” may take on a
pernicious tone. If case studies are examined from the perspective that the
United States is who “we” are, and if “we” are the basis for comparison, then
there may be the temptation to place all other countries in a subordinate posi-
tion. In any case, by sticking to the third person, there is one less opportunity for
seeing the rest of the world as somehow different and therefore less worthy
because it is not like “us.”

Counterpoint

Some readers might disagree with the entire premise of this essay, arguing
instead that there is not enough first person engagement in the area of inter-
national studies. In an era when public apathy about world affairs appears to be
at an all-time high, one could make a persuasive case that college-level inter-
national studies classes have a part in promoting student participation in politics.
In this sense, the first person plural would play a constructive role in drawing
upon the interest students have in world affairs and offering them an opportu-
nity to think of themselves as active members of the political process (Dressel and Marcus, 1982:35–36, 45, 51–53). A number of arguments along these lines could be imagined.

First, one could make the case that one goal of international studies courses is to train students for an active life in politics, either as practitioners or simply as involved members of a politically engaged populace. According to this thesis, the purpose of international studies courses is to generate interest in world affairs by giving students a stake in the subject matter at hand. Unlike the civics courses of the past, those who favor using college-level international studies classes to encourage participation in the political process do so not to foster boosterism about the U.S. role in the world, but to get students to think critically about world politics so they may engage in positive change. Particularly in courses that incorporate a service learning component, a first person relationship with the subject matter encourages students to become involved with important issues that touch students personally.12 Having students discuss not “how can foreign policy foster more international harmony?” but “how can we promote better relations with our fellow citizens around the world?” allows them to think about both what causes international discord and what they can do about it. Students then are motivated to become more engaged in the project of learning because they see practical applications for what they discover in hands-on service learning activities.

On the other hand, as salutary as it may be to encourage first person engagement in the political process, if activities such as service learning are successful, they should eliminate the need to use linguistic devices to accomplish the same goal. Passion for a subject such as politics or world affairs not only can be practiced through the requisite scholarly detachment, but should be, since “only by putting aside one’s own convictions can one be open to learning what others have to say” (Gardner, 1998:802).13 Yet rather than reinforcing a service learning component, passion for the object of service learning often translates into an inability to see beyond the student’s own stake in the subject at hand. Similarly, many undergraduates who invoke the first person plural do so not in connection with course initiatives that link students to practical applications of course themes, but as a knee-jerk reaction to their presumed familiarity with international studies before the semester ever begins. As Gregory Raymond (1992:20) astutely observes:

Consciousness-raising may stimulate greater awareness, and constituency-building may engender more participation, but neither equips one with skills needed to evaluate foreign policy outcomes. Our learning from experience will remain haphazard and our capacity to make informed choice among alternative courses of action will not improve unless we conduct foreign policy evaluations and teach others how to base such assessments on empirical evidence rather than on appeals to authority, personal ideology, or popular sentiment.14

Therefore, even in classes with a service learning component, there is the danger that a first person perspective does not act as a mechanism to translate analytical

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13 On the virtues of tempering one’s enthusiasm for the subject matter of social science study in favor of objective detachment see also Boulding (1970) and Weaver (1998).
14 These observations are echoed by Harry Boyte (1993:764), who argues that in some service learning settings, “students may become ‘politicized’ about the larger social problems and policies of the issues, but their resulting activism tends to be highly moralistic, personalized, and anti-institutional, not informed by any deep understanding of the complexity of problems.” On the virtues of civic disengagement more generally see Edelman (1988) and Ginsberg (1982).
materials into practical application, but simply to reinforce whatever biases students held prior to enrolling in the class.

Furthermore, even if one were to accept the proposition that the purpose of international studies education is to promote active student involvement in the world around them, globalizing trends in the post–Cold War era militate against a “we” perspective that sustains traditional state-centric affinities (Keohane, 1990; McGowan, 1993). But most important, encouragement of active student involvement in politics and world affairs should be the result not of active promotion of personal civics in the classroom, but simply of allowing the sheer power of learning to spark students’ interest in the world around them. As Kenneth Eble (1983:146) argues, “If we succeed as teachers, we should expect our students to take on the duties of citizens—to use the qualities of mind, the access to knowledge and acquisition of skills, the breadth of outlook, resistance to dogma, and compassion for others that our teaching has embraced, in behalf of the public weal.” In other words, a detached, scholarly perspective is not incompatible with the promotion of civic involvement. Quite the contrary; the avoidance of dogma, and the embrace of learning for learning’s sake, is what brings about active engagement in politics and society. A classroom environment in which every issue is discussed in terms of “we” works against this principle.

Second, one could argue that it is unreasonable to expect students to think too abstractly, that without some personal stake in the subject matter students will become uninterested and bored. As Stephen Brookfield (1990:98–99) observes, “attempts to foster discussion of broad themes may well founder as a result of participants perceiving such themes to be unrelated to their own individual lives. This is particularly the case where the discussion of social and political issues is concerned.” However, the purpose of this article is not to argue that international studies classes should be cleansed of any and all subject matter that is relevant to the lived experiences of undergraduate students. Rather, there are means other than claiming ownership over topics of global affairs by which students can learn to understand the world around them. Indeed, as Brookfield (1990:99) goes on to argue, “if points of connection can be uncovered between students’ experiences and broader themes or if students can be encouraged to imagine themselves in hypothetical situations and dilemmas and describe the reasons for these actions, then the exploration of broad themes becomes more immediate and charged with significance” (emphasis added). In other words, the goal should be the search for pedagogical tools that allow students to see how larger issues of international studies relate to their own lives, rather than using their own lives to interpret the wider world.

Finally, one could argue that scholarly neutrality in the social sciences is itself a fiction. It could be asserted that epistemological choices inevitably and necessarily reflect built-in biases reflective of the dominant discourses in which academic research takes place (Myrdal, 1969; Nisbet, 1970; Ortiz, 2000). Therefore, the categories scholars choose to study a particular subject reproduce the institutional context of the society that those scholars constitute. Faced with this realization, researchers either can pretend their epistemological assumptions and methodological tools are bias-free, or they can admit up-front that their analysis is constrained by its social context. By following the latter strategy, the use of the first person plural no longer stands for linguistic sloppiness, but represents intellectual honesty in that scholarly research can never be divorced from the surroundings in which it exists. From this perspective, use of the terms “we,” “us,” or “our” is simply an admission that social scientists are at one with the object of their inquiry.

There is certainly some merit to this case. The choice to study a particular topic is based on the assumption that it is worthy of explanation, and what is worthy of explanation is based not on a neutral standard, but on what is intel-
lectually curious. Topics are considered “problems” worth explaining not because of some characteristic intrinsic to the issue, but because issues are framed in terms of their problematic relationship to the social context in which scholarly investigation takes place (Surkin, 1970). In this sense, adoption of the first person plural is an admission that social scientists are fully embedded within the object of their study. So when a foreign policy analyst asks, for instance, “why do we experience trade disputes with other countries?” he or she is confessing that the question of disputed trade is interesting only because (a) “we” Americans decided that trade disruption is a valid concept, and (b) it is a problem or issue worth explaining. In a fundamental sense, then, the argument could be made that the first person plural not only is to be tolerated in foreign policy analysis, but is absolutely necessary in the name of academic integrity.

If undergraduates in international studies classes were employing the first person plural in this sense, it would be hard to register an objection. It would be a marvelous thing if college students were so aware of epistemological debates that they self-consciously and with foresight adopt a self-critical posture as they approach international studies. However, the opposite seems to be true. Rather than assuming a principled position that they must own up to their value biases, most undergraduates appear to be wholly unaware that the elements that constitute social science research are in fact remnants of embedded social and political practices. Most students approach international studies not with the question, “why do we engage in global interactions in a way that takes our own country as a point of departure?” but with the assertion that world affairs are constituted from the perspective of their country because that is the way things are. In other words, what could be an opening for disentangling seemingly neutral categories from existent political practices instead becomes an opportunity for students to unwittingly reinforce prevailing assumptions about world affairs.

Furthermore, the mere existence of a natural bias does not mean that a detached, neutral perspective cannot remain the goal of social science inquiry (Hoover, 1992:144). As Abraham Kaplan (1964:376) points out, “Fortunately, science does not demand that bias be eliminated but only that our judgement take it into account. It can be treated as we are accustomed to deal with errors of observation: we insulate ourselves from them where we can, and otherwise try to cancel their effects or at any rate to discount them.” Students at once can be reassured that they need not pretend they do not have a propensity to see international affairs from the perspective of their own country and, as budding scholars, can still do their best to frame their inquiry from the perspective of the third person, just as they would do in any area of scholarly inquiry, whether in the social sciences, natural or physical sciences, humanities, or fine arts.

Recommendations

What, if anything, can and should instructors do to discourage students from invoking the first person plural in discussions of international studies? There are a variety of means for stressing the importance of proper language in investigat-

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15 It will not be lost on the observant reader that Kaplan as well as Raymond and Eble quoted earlier in this article employ the first person plural to refer to members of the scholarly community who are engaged in discussions of pedagogy. The obvious question that arises is, “why are scholars permitted to use the first person plural, while it is to be discouraged among undergraduates?” One important answer is that academics who write from the first person plural do so as members of a scholarly community actively engaged in a discussion of the craft of teaching, and utilize the accepted discourse of that community. By contrast, undergraduates typically misuse the first person plural when referring to the actions of entities (e.g., countries) in which they are not active decision makers. I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer at International Studies Perspectives for alerting me to this point.
ing international studies and foreign policy analysis. Some educators have taken to integrating international studies and foreign policy courses with comparative politics classes, and assigning more texts by non-American authors (Holsti, 1990). Offering introductory courses that expose students to a wide range of paradigms and theories for understanding global interactions is another way educators can stress the multiple perspectives by which world affairs can be understood and explained (Quester, 1990; Thompson, 1990). Many instructors, at the beginning of the semester, incorporate discussions of methodology in courses devoted to thematic issues, while others find it useful to combine weekly discussions with lessons on the craft of writing. These and other strategies serve as mechanisms for painting a broad picture of how scholars and researchers go about their work. Learning how to use proper terminology is not merely an exercise in picking up disciplinary jargon. It is part of a larger process of understanding the nature of a field that has as its subject the foreign policy mechanisms of the country in which many scholars and students live.

Since the phenomenon seems to be so widespread among the students I encounter in my own classes, I have adopted a number of strategies for dealing with it. In general, I have taken to pointing out at the beginning of the semester in all my courses that while “we” might identify with the object of our study, at the same time, “we” also should identify with scholars and students who maintain a healthy detachment from their research. For example, just as it would sound rather silly for biologists who study the human species to say that “we” procreate by means of sexual reproduction, it should sound equally silly for foreign policy analysts to say that “we” provide weapons to “our” allies overseas. Both statements are true; but since instructors and students are neither procreating nor engaging in arms dealing in the classroom, it is far better to maintain a scholarly distance from the subject matter. Furthermore, instructors should include as many examples as possible of how countries interact with one another, so as to situate them within a broader context of the full range of political, economic, and cultural interactions around the world.

Another simple strategy I have adopted in my introductory international politics course is to designate each student as a “student expert” for one of the course readings. Each of the student experts assists in facilitating discussion of these course texts. The purpose of this exercise is to encourage students to think like scholars whose only interest is to explain some theory of global relations, as opposed to a citizen who has a personal stake in the subject matter. As I discuss above, the first person approach to the analysis of international studies is pernicious in part because it confounds attempts at scholarly objectivity. I have found in all my classes that anything that places the student in the position of scholar or researcher helps ease them out of a mode of thinking in which everything must be seen from the perspective of their own personal opinions or feelings. Thus, even something as small as encouraging students in their written assignments to substitute expressions such as “I believe . . .” with expressions such as “I argue . . .,” “I maintain . . .,” “I propose . . .,” “I posit . . .,” or “I contend . . .” helps move students out of an opinionated approach to world affairs, and into a position where social-scientific thinking is sustained.

Discouraging students’ knee-jerk “we” approach to world affairs does not mean instructors must completely rule out first person perspectives in international studies classes. Case studies are one way for teachers to balance the scholarly neutrality of the third person and give students the opportunity to see world affairs from the first person as well (Mingst, 1994). In my American Foreign Policy course, the main mode of analysis involves inductive reasoning using case study analysis. Students read nine case studies over the course of the semester, and engage in a variety of role-playing exercises, debates, and in-class simulations in order to derive lessons from selected instances of American foreign
policy. In these exercises students are assigned roles or debate positions and then are instructed to adopt the personae of political actors (e.g., administration officials, lobbyists, members of Congress, social movement leaders, etc.) in order to articulate a range of interests. Students also maintain a writing journal in which they adopt the voice of one of the historical characters included in each case study, and are asked to write down their reflections on the lessons learned in the case from the perspective of the individuals involved. In this way, students are permitted to use the first person from the perspective of historical figures to experience what it is like to have a stake in issues fundamental to the political process.

In addition, Harold Guetzkow (1962) suggests that simulations focus on fictional countries and cases, thereby greatly reducing students’ temptations to inject their own views into the simulation’s lessons. One such example of a fictional case I have adopted in my International Security and Cooperation class is a simulation exercise utilizing the popular board game Risk (Marks, 1998). Students are divided into teams representing four fictional countries and play the game periodically throughout the course of the semester. The goal is to apply abstract concepts discussed in theoretical materials, and see how they apply to made-up instances of war and peace. By choosing a fictional environment in which to test out the claims of international relations theories, students are encouraged to divorce themselves from their preconceived notions about how countries respond to international crises, and instead imagine new ways of thinking about world affairs. Model United Nations simulations also help students gain new perspectives on how people in various countries view world affairs. In all types of simulation exercises, when students step out of their roles and resume the perspective of student-scholar, they can contrast the first person perspective of political actors with the third person orientation of someone who takes a detached scholarly perspective on the subject of international studies broadly conceived.

Another strategy I have adopted in several of my classes to give students a larger worldview is to require them to maintain a newspaper clippings journal throughout the semester. Students collect articles on issues related to the international themes of the classes and then write one or two essays (depending on the class) based on these article clippings. The purpose is to supplement assigned course texts with examples of international occurrences in order to illustrate the fact that world affairs affect people all over the globe. I have found that by engaging in this exercise, students learn to identify the way that countries, governments, and individuals in different parts of the world experience global interactions in various ways. This makes it much harder for students to sustain a perspective in which “we” engage in world affairs, in the sense that there is no way that world affairs affects “us” equally, if “we” are construed as everyone in the world who has some stake in global relations, either as participants or as students of those world affairs.

Finally, there are fairly obvious strategies for encouraging students to relinquish their first person attachment when approaching international studies. Undergraduates can be encouraged to participate in overseas studies programs, which expose them to experiences outside of their own. A particularly novel approach

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16 The cases I use in my American Foreign Policy course are published as part of the series Pew Case Studies in International Affairs by the Institute for the Study of Diplomacy at Georgetown University. These cases are available online at http://data.georgetown.edu/sfs/ecase/. Additional case studies produced by the Student Case Program at the School of International Relations at the University of Southern California are available online at http://www.usc.edu/dept/LAS/ir/research/cases.htm.

17 More details on the Risk game simulation can be obtained from the course Web page at http://www.willamette.edu/~mmarks/poli-373.htm.

is to teach a course about politics or world affairs in a foreign language, which alone helps put students in a new frame of mind about topics they might have previously thought they knew well (Morris, 1993). Diverse perspectives can also be highlighted by the inclusion of field trips, on-campus lectures, or even foreign films in the curricular content of courses. All these elements serve as gentle reminders to students that global relations influences people all around the world in ways that are not captured when they are viewed exclusively from the perspective of “us.”

**Conclusion: What’s the Big Deal?**

To conclude, we can ask, who cares if undergraduates in international studies courses take their own country as their point of reference and do so in terms of “we,” “us,” or “our”? What is the damage done as long as students learn something about international affairs? In fact, the question of language is not an idle matter in the analysis of international studies of any kind. The purpose of international studies courses is not to provide a forum for students to air their casual beliefs or opinions about the foreign relations of their own country. For that they have dining hall conversations and late-night arguments in dormitory lounges, in which the first person plural not only is acceptable, but allows students to engage themselves in the political world around them. But in the classroom, use of an all-encompassing pronoun may stifle the learning process by cowing dissenters into submission. It may also produce a groupthink mentality in which agreement among students is prized over the mission of exploring different ways of analyzing the foreign relations of all countries. Students may then reason that since they have already reached certain conclusions about relations among countries, they can give up the effort of learning anything new. Thus, in order that their personal convictions not simply be casual beliefs without substance, students must first approach international studies in a scholarly manner.

In sum, the “we” problem in teaching international studies has lasting effects. What might seem like an innocent artifact of high school civics and the vernacular of the modern media in fact has rather serious implications for college-level instruction in international studies. To be sure, many undergraduates who tackle international studies and foreign policy analysis go on to make valuable contributions in government, business, public service, and the media. In those positions, these individuals may help find solutions for pressing problems around the world. In that process, they likely will follow through on their passion for international studies and their personal connection to the foreign policy process. When they speak of “us” as international actors, it is because they are trying to be part of the solution. But before solutions can be found, problems must be identified. For this, the tried and tested tools of unbiased social science are required. The dictates of the discipline demand that responsible educators ensure that students first understand in a detached, neutral, scholarly, and unbiased manner, free of personal stakes in the subject, the nature of international affairs.

**References**


The “We” Problem in Teaching International Studies


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