

Learning and teaching in critical international relations through the use of audio-visual assessment.

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I was awarded the BISA/HEA Teaching Excellence Prize for introducing an audio-visual assessment on a postgraduate security studies course. Students, working in groups, were asked to record a 15 minute video or audio podcast, in which they dealt with issues of security. The key aim was to provide students with the opportunity to explore their own insights on security through aesthetic and non-written formats, and thus engage with emergent debates in critical international relations.

This idea was inspired partly by previous student feedback, in which students requested fewer written assignments in the MA programme as a whole, and partly by the module content which has an emphasis on critical approaches to international relations. The course also engages with debates about visual images and security, as well as narrative and other non-traditional means of approaching and presenting research in security. The audio-visual projects were thus intended to allow students to create a continuity between their theoretical and academic investigations in class, and onwards to their assignments, where they could be directly involved in producing knowledge through non-traditional assessment formats.

The audio-visual projects aimed to remove linear and structural constraints and allow presentational experimentation and active learning. The non-written nature of the projects allowed the students to examine questions of representation, construction of security, narrative and critical use of images.

Student feedback on this assignment was positive and enthusiastic. This is an optional module, taken by 26 students from a broad range of backgrounds. The outcome of the projects was that students engaged in active learning and produced work which engaged not only with the broader themes of the course but also with their surroundings – a large number of projects dealt, in some way, with our home city of Birmingham. Most of the students engaged in primary data gathering, carried out fieldwork and many approached their projects as an investigation. What was immediately apparent is that the level of engagement was much deeper than with traditional essays and presentations, and that students were much more confident in their work. Another major departure from traditional essays is that students departed from formalities of academic writing, at times choosing satire or humour to make their point. Likewise, students were much more reflexive about their role as social scientists and researchers throughout the projects, and appreciated the freedom and creativity they allowed.

An important point to highlight is that it is not just the novelty of the assignment which appealed to student but also it's fit with the module content and learning objectives. The non-linear and unstructured format (as compared to a traditional essay) of the projects worked because it connected so well to the key points raised by the critical schools in security studies, such as the departure from positivism, and a focus on how meanings are made and security constructed.