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Teaching Southeast Asian Regional Dynamics: Reflections on Simulations and Policy Briefs as Signature Pedagogies

Bama Andika Putra 

Abstract

Background/purpose. This study argues the prospects of simulations and policy briefs as signature international relations (IR) pedagogies by examining their potential benefits in region-focused case study subjects such as the Southeast Asian Regional Dynamics course. In doing so, it looks back to the need for creativity and student-centered learning in IR teaching and provides a guideline of how simulations and policy brief assessments can be adopted in furthering students' understanding of the intra-dynamics within the Southeast Asian region, how the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and its extra-regional forums operate, and the relevance of various IR concepts and theories in deciphering regional dynamics in the region.

Materials/methods. Qualitative empirical case study inquiry that discursively situates simulations and policy brief assessments as signature pedagogies in the study of Southeast Asian Regional Dynamics course, drawing upon existing studies on alternative pedagogical methods within social sciences.

Results. In simulations, instructors provide background context on IR themes related to Southeast Asia, determine an ASEAN-centered forum for the simulation, renegotiate the curriculum by facilitating students' voices on their preferred theme, and adopt the 'immerse theater' approach to expose students to a sense of formality throughout the simulation. Meanwhile, the emphasis in policy briefs as an assessment tool in IR emphasizes student-centered, problem-based learning, where students are given the independence to explore different forms of solutions for a given case.

Conclusion. The potential positive outcomes of the methods redefine what Shulman mentioned as 'signature pedagogies' due to the methods' aims of preparing students for their professional careers.

1. Introduction

How best to transfer knowledge in the field of IR? With the complex developments in world affairs, it has never been more demanding for students to be equipped with negotiation, concise writing, teamwork, creativity, and problem-solving skills. Unfortunately, it has been difficult for IR academics to ensure that the multiple skills expected of IR graduates are developed within the classroom. As past scholars have noted, there is a significant deficiency in critical thinking, problem-solving, and creativity among IR students in the current status quo (Cropley, 2014; Alencar, Fleith, and Pereira, 2016; Campillo, Hernandez, and Cantano, 2021). What causes such a concern?

The diagnosis presented in this article is that the signature pedagogy of IR teaching is ineffective in fostering the development of the skills mentioned earlier. Signature pedagogy, defined per Lee Shulman's assessment as being "[...] forms of instruction that leap to mind when we first think about the preparation of members of particular professions" (Shulman, 2005, p.2), is rather traditional in IR and the social sciences. As Clause mentioned, IR pedagogy tends to adopt a system where the Professor is the "star performer," and the students listen (Clausen, 2021). Paulo Freire described such traditional teaching pedagogies as the 'banking model of education,' whereby students simply await the knowledge bestowed upon them by their lecturers (Freire, 1970). The problem with such a teaching model is that students' voices are stunted, leading to deficiencies in creativity and oral communication skills. This study problematizes the existing signature pedagogy and calls upon reconsidering alternative student-centered learning methods to enhance the skills required to become successful IR graduates. In doing so, this study is grounded by the assumption that signature pedagogies are discursively constructed based on practices, and by engaging in alternative teaching methods, IR's signature pedagogies can slowly explore alternative methods that are consistent with their learning outcomes.

This article argues the importance of simulations and policy briefs as IR's signature pedagogies. Taking the example of the possible implementation in the Southeast Asian Regional Dynamics course (undergraduate program), it argues that such a method provides a unique learning platform for IR students to develop the essential skills expected of IR graduates while avoiding the expense of knowledge transfer. In recent years, IR scholars have called upon a 'new thinking' for creativity in IR. To avoid stagnation in IR, new thinking is concerned with "devising ways of accounting for the novelties in the world order," which have tended to be Eurocentric in the past few decades (Blaney & Tickner, 2017; Putra, 2024a; Tickner, 2003). In past studies, scholars have addressed the concern from an IR teaching substantive point of view, focusing on introducing more critical paradigms and incorporating more perspectives from the South (Acharya, 2014; Acharya & Buzan, 2010; Mansour, 2017). Nevertheless, in alignment with Kodabux's opinion in 2019, reflections must be made on the teaching method, not only on what is being taught in IR (Kodabux, 2019). Doing so explores ways to enhance creativity among students and address the issue of stagnation within the study.

Therefore, considering the stagnation in teaching IR, signature pedagogies should comprise methods that place students not as passive agents within the class. In the context of simulations, this empirical explanatory study examines the potential of simulations to enhance students' creativity by addressing various topics of concern in the Southeast Asian region. Taking the form of simulations that mimic Model United Nations (MUN), this study suggests that such a method helps students find their voice and confidence, enabling them to develop the essential skills required to succeed as an IR graduate. Furthermore, intending to enhance creativity, this study provides instructions on adopting policy brief methods within the class. Unlike other disciplines, the study of IR is closely tied to the expectation that graduates will eventually undertake diplomatic roles in their professional careers. However, there has been little exploration of how students can enhance their creativity in writing, especially in devising policy-relevant solutions to pressing international relations matters. As writing skills are essential in the social sciences, the instructions proposed for the study case of the Southeast

Asian Regional Dynamics course aim to inspire instructors on alternative means of teaching writing skills to students, an alternative to the essay task usually used as an assessment tool for IR students.

The conceptual framework of signature pedagogies is bridged from Shulman's study on signature pedagogy. For Shulman, education is about professional preparation, and an inquiry into signature pedagogies reveals the most common instruction method within a given academic discipline (Shulman, 2005). Unlike the common debates among IR academics on the new thinking in IR (a non-Western dominated curriculum), signature pedagogy is more concerned with how an academic discipline is taught, with the aim of students acquiring the skills required to excel in their future professions. Shulman argues that signature pedagogies encompass three dimensions (Shulman, 2005). First, 'surface structure' is defined as the act of teaching and learning, which examines an instructor's practical actions in the teaching and learning process. Second, 'deep structure' refers to the assumption about the best course of action that needs to be undertaken to transfer knowledge within a given academic discipline. Third, 'implicit values' concern the beliefs/ morality of the teaching and learning method adopted. Within IR teaching, the traditional teaching method has been the signature pedagogy for centuries, a dominant one-way approach that places students in a passive learning position. However, signature pedagogies are not fixed concepts that cannot evolve with time. This study intends to argue the relevance of simulations and policy briefs as IR's alternative signature pedagogies, building up the narrative found in past discourses that discuss the unique creativity generated from the utilization of such teaching methods.

2. Creativity and Signature Pedagogy: New Alternatives in International Relations Teaching

Within the existing literature, there is an acknowledgment of the importance of imposing creative methods to enhance creativity in IR teaching. Through means such as simulations, the intention aligns with the logic of active learning, in which students actively engage in the learning process by becoming creators of knowledge (Hunter et al., 2008). Past studies have concluded that creativity is significant within the education sphere, with the potential to generate new meanings and novelty (Kaufman & Baer, 2004; Lundin, 2009) and how it helps counter contemporary challenges (Florida, 2004; Nakano & Weschsler, 2018). The question, therefore, is, in IR teaching, how can we develop creativity? Past studies have explored role-playing and simulations as new alternatives in IR teaching (Arnold, 2015; Asal, 2005; Mikalayeva, 2016; Simpson & Kaussler, 2009). In a similar study, Lüdert and Steward found that simulations and other creative teaching methods, such as debates and one-minute papers, effectively explore new case studies within IR teaching (Lüdert & Stewart, 2017).

Introducing new teaching methods within IR has become an everyday discourse; therefore, simulations have developed into one of IR's favored active learning teaching methods. Through simulations, the emphasis is on problem-based learning, ensuring active student participation and maintaining collaborative efforts (Lamy, 2007; Sharan, 2010). As a signature pedagogy of IR, past studies have explored the use of MUN and short simulations in IR courses (Horn, Rubin, and Schouenborg, 2016; Engel, Pallas, and Lambert, 2017; Hammond & Albert, 2020; Leib & Ruppel, 2020). Therefore, this study aims to support the claim of the effectiveness of simulations in IR teaching, looking at a specific course that would benefit from this unique method.

A prominent discourse on simulations as a potential signature IR pedagogy highlights the unique benefits of its implementation in classrooms. In 2005, Asal highlighted the potential of simulations to enhance the understanding of the complex nature of IR theories and concepts (Asal, 2005). Meanwhile, other studies have focused on highlighting how students would be exposed to understanding the complexities associated with policymaking and negotiations, as they are given the responsibility to role-play as political actors that construct new arguments, build mechanisms,

agenda-setting, and discuss ways out of international crisis (Lüdert & Stewart, 2017; She, 2021). As Sasley's study concluded, simulations enable students to understand the complex process behind global politics, including the concepts of misunderstanding and misperception, which are difficult to grasp in a traditional teaching format (Sasley, 2010). Ultimately, through simulations, there is a common opinion that the teaching method helps students step out of their comfort zone and undertake collaborative learning on different topics (Baker & Clark, 2010; Sharan, 2010). This article fully embraces those benefits and argues that the signature pedagogy of simulations can be effectively implemented in case study-focused IR courses, such as the Southeast Asia Regional Dynamics course, which is introduced in many universities in Asia and beyond.

Meanwhile, the academic discourse on policy briefs has mainly highlighted the benefits of the assessment tool. Academics have noted that policy briefs generally have great potential to transfer knowledge to audiences efficiently and effectively, highlighting the brief's substantive content and the use of language that resonates with policymakers. The first discourse related to this study is the general benefits of policy briefs. A study highlighted that there is a "[...] significant gap between researchers' production of evidence and its use by policymakers" (Arnautu & Dagenais, 2021, p. 1); therefore, policy briefs have the potential to bridge this gap. Scholars have also noted how policy briefs facilitate the co-creation of knowledge, as evidenced by a four-day online workshop that led to the collaboration of academics and youths in creating a policy brief (Dunlop et al., 2023). In a recent study, Masset, Gaarder, Beynon, and Chapoy found that the benefits of writing policy briefs also impact the opinions of the readers, arguing that the simplicity of policy briefs results in the assistance of understanding a given topic and the potential solutions to an issue (Masset et al., 2013). With the positive perception of policy briefs for researchers, are the same benefits shared in the context of IR teaching?

Past studies on policy briefs in IR teaching have explored the unique benefits generated. The main argument presented is that policy briefs enable students to develop their research and writing skills, which are highly sought-after practical skills in IR-relevant professions (Judge, 2021; Lightfoot, 2020). For Macmillan, policy briefs enable students to "[...] see how policymakers employ international relations theories" (McMillan, 2014, p. 109), providing an alternative way of thinking and understanding the vast concepts and theories introduced within the discipline. In recent years, some studies have highlighted that, despite the benefits offered in policy brief assessments, pedagogical considerations are necessary to develop active learning of topics among students (Judge, 2021). The concern is that policy briefs, as a student assessment tool, take many forms that could easily cause confusion among instructors. Consequently, it is essential to adopt the "flexible assessment technique(s)" mentioned by Chagas-Bastos and Burges in their 2017 article (Chagas-Bastos & Burges, 2019, p. 237), which allows instructors to focus on enhancing active and problem-based learning. Therefore, the academic discourse on adopting policy briefs as an alternative teaching method has been praised by scholars in the past, citing its relevance to enhancing writing and research skills, placing the students' activeness in researching a given topic at the heart of the method.

The novelty of this study lies in its assessment of how simulations and policy briefs are applicable to the course related to Southeast Asian regional dynamics, marking the first such study in this area. The course itself, as will be discussed in the discussion section, is demanding, as students are expected to adopt different perspectives, theories, and concepts that specifically cater to the region's dynamics. In consideration of past literature examining the benefits and methods of both simulations and policy briefs, these discussions will be adopted in the prospect of applying these methods to further understanding of Southeast Asia's regional dynamics. To further explore the topic of simulations and policy briefs as signature IR pedagogies, this study continues by examining how those

two methods can be adopted within the Southeast Asian Regional Dynamic course, with step-by-step instructions for lecturers.

3. Discussion 1: Teaching Southeast Asian Regional Dynamic Course: Substantive Coverage and Potential Concepts to Consider

In many Asian higher education institutions, a Southeast Asian Regional Dynamic course focuses on the region's unique challenges. Within the context of Southeast Asia, for example, it is expected that students would be introduced to the diversity of political systems of the eleven states in the region. Furthermore, Southeast Asian states share a unique history of being colonized and victims of external interference, which has contributed to the unique democratic values they have imposed (Acharya, 2021; Harper, 2015). Perhaps, against that backdrop, a primary topic within the discourse is the regional organization of ASEAN. Founded in 1967, the organization was established by five Southeast Asian states that envisioned a region free from foreign intervention and interference (Anwar, 1994, 2020). As years pass, courses tend to cover the development of ASEAN's norms in relation to intra- and inter-regional challenges.

Discussions relevant to ASEAN are vast. In the security realm, there is an expectation that instructors would provide some background context to the pressing security challenges faced within the region. Intra-ASEAN concerns stem from the extensive border tensions among Southeast Asian states, both past and present, such as the ongoing dispute between Cambodia and Thailand in the vicinity of the Preah Vihear Temple, the South China Sea dispute, and numerous other issues. Meanwhile, the lingering concern over maritime borders affects both ASEAN member states and their relations with other regional powers (Edwards & Bradford, 2023; Till, 2022). For the smaller and developing states of Southeast Asia, non-traditional security threats continue to dominate the discussion agendas of ASEAN (Caballero-Anthony, 2018; Kausikan, 2008; Mubarak & Hamid, 2018). This includes the concern over illegal fishing, transnational crimes, and terrorism. However, security is one of the many regional challenges. Issues such as haze pollution, climate change mitigation efforts, and countering the impact of industrialization are consistent themes often discussed within ASEAN's platforms (Putra, 2024b; Varkkey, 2024; Yu, 2024). For a regional grouping comprising ten member states that share many differences, maintaining efficiency in policy implementation is always challenging, as the regional organization struggles to navigate the diverse interests held among its member states.

However, the complexity of teaching Southeast Asian studies is further exacerbated by the diverse range of IR theories and concepts relevant to the region. In covering ASEAN, one is expected to cover the concepts of sovereignty and norms. Furthermore, the area is also exposed to great power influences, primarily from East Asian countries and the US (Goh, 2007; Kuik & Rozman, 2015). Therefore, concepts such as hedging, alignment, and great power struggles help clarify some empirical anomalies in the region. The rise of China and the generous funding introduced under its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) also add to the layers of complexities within the region (WB, 2018; Yu, 2024). Against these backdrops, many IR programs in Indonesia, such as the Southeast Asian Regional Dynamic course, were introduced in a later phase of one's IR undergraduate study after students had been exposed to IR theory and foreign policy courses. How can we approach this study most effectively from a pedagogical perspective?

Before delving into the specific steps to adopt simulations in the Southeast Asian Regional Dynamic course, two elements are considered vital for the discussion. First, the relevance of 'contrapuntal reading' and 'ignorant schoolmaster' ideas in IR teaching. Contrapuntal reading bridged to IR teaching refers to the idea that multiple histories are interconnected, and no single narrative stands alone as having the capacity to encompass the story of world or regional politics (Bilgin, 2016; Ettinger, 2024). Embracing this logic helps the teaching process to perceive that there is no single

'right' concept or theory, and the focus is on co-constitution. The second element, ignorant schoolmaster, borrows the term introduced by Ettinger, meaning "[...] decentering the subject matter expertise of the professor" (Ettinger, 2024). Doing so allows the understanding that it is no longer the knowledge barriers of the Professor that apply in the learning process, as students are expected to explore further the knowledge being pursued.

The second element vital in IR teaching is bridging English language teaching pedagogy to IR. At the center of English language teaching is the idea that teachers take a step back and allow students to take an active role in the learning process (Ariza et al., 2015; Clausen, 2021; Richards, 2008). In alignment with the historic article written by Alan McLean in 1980, "Destroying the Teacher: The Need for a Learner-Centered Teaching," some of his opinions become relevant for the discussion of simulations as an IR signature pedagogy, which is active learning and the value of silence (McLean, 2012). Decentralizing the role of the teachers allows students to build up the courage and develop their creativity to engage in live-learning simulations in IR courses.

Another method worthy of bridging into IR teaching is the negotiated curriculum. Such a pedagogy involves continuously asking the students what they prefer to learn. This is by no means eliminating the core of a course's curriculum. However, this option can be implemented when the option for empirical case studies is available. For example, when discussing conflicts in the Southeast Asian region, students can choose to elect either the Sipadan Ligitan case between Indonesia and Malaysia or the Preah Vihear Temple disputes between Cambodia and Thailand. Doing so allows students to make meaningful choices, as scholars have mentioned, which helps maintain high motivation and continued engagement in the learning process (Clausen, 2021; Nunan, 2013).

4. Discussion 2: Steps in Adopting Simulations in Southeast Asian Regional Dynamic Course

The first step in adopting simulations in a Southeast Asian Regional Dynamic course focuses on what is being taught in the first few weeks of the course. This process would include a more traditional IR pedagogy of teaching, which is slightly modified to provide background content for the simulation that will take place in a later phase of the course. Instructors should provide the materials for research and the technical procedures related to the simulation. Substantively, it is expected that the curriculum does not deviate much from what is currently taught, including intra-Southeast Asian dynamics, inter-ASEAN relations, and the relevance of certain IR concepts and theories in explaining the region's uniqueness.

An important substantive to be addressed is the differences in mandates, membership, and final resolutions within ASEAN. Besides the ASEAN Summit involving the ten member states, lecturers would need to incorporate discussions on the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the East Asia Summit (EAS), ASEAN+3 (comprising ASEAN, Japan, South Korea, and China), and other ASEAN extra-regional forums. This would enable students to grasp Southeast Asian dynamics more effectively and understand how specific resolutions could impact the governance of other regional platforms. Furthermore, concepts such as the ASEAN Way and the level of binding generated from those forums will also need to be addressed. These can be introduced in forms such as that introduced by Xiayoe She in 2021, which are case studies and the adoption of mock simulations.

Approaching the simulation, students will be divided into teams that they will represent during the role-playing. Beforehand, it would be ideal to get the students involved by choosing which ASEAN forum suits the student's interests. For example, if the simulation were an ASEAN Summit, it would require the participation of ten teams acting as the member states of ASEAN and an additional observer team representing Timor-Leste. Meanwhile, if students choose a topic-specific forum such as the ASEAN Ministers' Meeting on the Environment, a group of students would be expected to represent state observers and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). In any case, there would be

individuals elected as ASEAN Secretariat members and a chairperson, allowing the lecturer to take a step-back position and let the simulation's dynamics run without much intervention. In determining which forum to simulate, it is crucial to consider the class size. In classes with larger numbers, it would be ideal to undertake a simulation on the ARF or EAS, as this also allows students to gain a deeper understanding of the role of great power influences in regional platforms hosted by ASEAN. In smaller classes, an ASEAN Summit simulation could help strengthen students' understanding of how the ASEAN Way is respected among member states and the consequences it poses in the final resolution negotiations.

Students can also be given an active voice in determining the theme of the simulation. Depending on the chosen simulation forum, various themes could be used regarding Southeast Asian dynamics within ASEAN. Examples for the ARF (for larger classes) or the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) (for smaller classes) could include the South China Sea issue or non-traditional security concerns within the region. On the latter, discussions could vary from terrorism and illegal fishing to other transnational crimes. Students can vote from these themes based on the classes' interests by ranking their favorite topic in an online survey. In determining the theme, choosing topics already discussed within the relevant ASEAN forum would ensure that students have abundant research material to start from.

Ensuring that students receive a different experience from the learning process is pivotal during the simulation. In doing so, this article agrees on the importance of adopting the idea of 'immerse theater,' which emphasizes establishing a formal simulation atmosphere (Dacombe & Morrow, 2017). This begins with the use of formal clothing for the students, classroom seating rearranged to follow the shapes used in the actual ASEAN forum, the use of formal language, and an opening speech presented by all delegates (excluding observer teams). Doing so puts students in the shoes of diplomats, simulating real-life negotiations as closely as possible. After the opening speech, the instructor will make minimal interventions. The focus would be on the chairperson, who would facilitate different motions and sub-themes for discussion among the participating delegates. This enhances the students' creativity as they debate with one another, representing the unique political interests they have researched before the simulation. At the end of the simulation, delegates are expected to pass a resolution. For the ASEAN Summit, for example, the joint statement would require the agreement of all member states to be formally adopted by the forum. Throughout the process, students are exposed to the complexities of ASEAN diplomacy and negotiations and attain a deeper understanding of the values imposed by regional organizations, such as consensus-based decision-making.

There is no doubt that simulations are one of IR's signature pedagogies. Students navigate between different interests and enhance their negotiation skills by taking the role of countries and actors in actual regional forums (Campillo, Hernandez, and Cantano, 2021). It enables students to explore the conflicting interests that may arise in relation to a given theme, the complexities of achieving consensus, and the legal limitations on what an organization can undertake. Doing so provides what Stanzel mentions as a renewed understanding of what diplomacy is capable of offering (Stanzel, 2018). In the context of Southeast Asian studies, the use of simulations enables students to grasp more unique IR concepts and theories used to explain the dynamics within the region (Clausen, 2021; Lüdert, 2016; She, 2021), along with problem-based cases, to understand the complexities of empirical dynamics within the region. Doing so achieves what Kodabux mentioned as 'new thinking' by advancing creativity for inclusive learning within the classroom (Kodabux, 2019). The case presented in this perspective article focuses on the benefits of ASEAN-centered simulations for IR students, which complement the traditional teaching method of the subject. Complex concepts such as great power rivalries in the region, alignment dilemmas, and other relevant IR theories can be

understood in a more creative approach that places student-centered learning with great importance.

5. Discussion 3: The Alternative to Essays: Instructions on Policy Briefs

Writing a policy brief can present its own challenges. Depending on the given topic, writing a policy brief requires students to put themselves in the shoes of different actors, which, in the case of IR-related issues, would include public officers, political advisors, or NGOs. In real life, a policy brief is what Campillo, Hernandez, and Cantano mentioned as “one of the most in-demand pieces of writing for politicians, lobbyists, NGO, community leaders, and public initiative” (Campillo, Hernandez, and Cantano, 2021). From the students' perspective, the task requires a radical shift in their thinking. When IR students are accustomed to writing academic essays, policy briefs require them to think of structuring a short piece of writing to inform decision-makers (Dunlop et al., 2023; Lightfoot, 2020). Consequently, the structure is dense, aiming to present key points of information intuitively. Furthermore, it is also vital for students to understand the technical jargon in a given field, requiring them to step out of their comfort zone and independently research different terms and their meanings.

Building on the study of the Southeast Asian Regional Dynamics course, several technical measures can be employed. The most common approach is to ask students to write a policy brief on a specific topic for a country or the ASEAN region. In the former, instructors can choose between issues related to one of ASEAN's forums (intra- or extra-regional) and ask students to carve a policy brief for one of the ten ASEAN member states. In the latter, instructors can choose a theme that focuses on providing the ASEAN Chairman that year with recommendations on resolving one of Southeast Asia's pressing matters. Both forms of policy briefs come with their distinct benefits and challenges. In writing for ASEAN, for example, the key for students is to research how ASEAN has managed a regional issue and understand the vast recommendations given by different stakeholders to resolve it. Meanwhile, suppose the focus is on a state's position for one of ASEAN's forums. In that case, the benefits can be understood by a student delving deeper into that country's political system, examining its past foreign policy and the direction it is heading.

The advantage of policy briefs is that the instructor can tailor the topic of the policy brief to students' interests or choices. If instructors are to choose the theme, one can look at how active the class dynamics are when introducing empirical case studies on Southeast Asia. If the student dynamic is active in environment-related issues, the policy brief topic option can focus on countering haze pollution or regional climate change mitigation efforts. Meanwhile, if their interests are in human rights, they can focus on regional efforts in human rights promotion and protection measures. In security matters, regional issues such as North Korean instability, the South China Sea, non-traditional security threats, and border disputes are pertinent topics that can be addressed in policy briefs.

Due to the numerous themes available, the preparation phase is crucial to ensure that students avoid mistakes in their attempt to write a policy brief. First, similar to the simulation preparation phase, students will need to be given introductory courses on IR, specifically on how regional organizations such as ASEAN, along with its vast forums, work. Specifically in the context of policy briefs, ASEAN and several relevant think tanks and NGOs regularly publish policy briefs, which the instructors can introduce as examples of how to write a policy brief in this field. Instructors will need to choose a preferred structure.

A typical policy brief shouldn't exceed three pages, containing an introduction, a discussion of the status quo policies, and recommendations on the topic. Take, for example, the topic of the South China Sea, where students are asked to write a policy brief for ASEAN on how to manage regional tensions best. The first few paragraphs will examine the background issue of the South China Sea, highlighting the different claimant and non-claimant states in the disputed waters of Southeast Asia

explicitly. In this, students should show the complexity of the disputes, which have trickled down into other sectors (Fravel, 2011; Putra, 2023; Storey, 2014). The following paragraph should focus on the status quo policies. This includes any initiatives that ASEAN has undertaken to manage the tensions, as well as the success or failure they have generated. Students can explore the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea, the currently negotiated Code of Conduct (Hu, 2021; Storey, 2018), and other peaceful documents and resolutions published under ASEAN, such as the ASEAN Indo-Pacific Outlook (Acharya, 2019; Anwar, 2020). The final structure requires students to provide innovative recommendations on how ASEAN can address the South China Sea dispute. For this, students will need to examine the deficiencies of current policies and think creatively about how best to manage disputes with China.

The structure of policy briefs demands students' creativity, which is not limited to the process of thinking of creative recommendations. In the first two structures, the introduction and status quo policies, students must use their own words to explain a dispute that has lasted for decades in several dense paragraphs. They are also required to conclude past approaches, which need to be researched before writing a policy brief. The structure of a policy brief is straightforward but can be challenging for students who lack prior knowledge of a given topic. It is, therefore, pivotal for instructors to provide students with several weeks to master the structure of a policy brief. Before writing their policy brief, students should already be given several examples of ASEAN-related policy briefs to help them reorient their thinking and prepare them to write a policy-relevant piece.

The assessment of policy briefs is relatively straightforward. Two options are available. The first would be a traditional essay-like assessment of the policy brief. Students are assessed based on criteria similar to marking essays, including clarity, substantive cover, language, and other technical criteria. However, the focus should be on the recommendations offered, as this section is the bulk of one's independent research. A second form of marking can be in the form of a presentation. Doing so requires students to prepare a written policy brief, which is then presented to the instructor (no PowerPoint presentation is required). As mentioned in multiple studies, the use of generative AI has been a concerning development for lecturers (Francis et al., 2024; Lee et al., 2024; O'Dea, 2024; Yusuf et al., 2024). Although tools exist to identify this, the task of recognizing the use of generative AI in student writing has become increasingly complex due to the intricacies of the technologies employed (Bobula, 2024; Chan & Hu, 2023). To counter this difficulty, lecturers can ask students to deliver a 5–10-minute presentation of the policy brief to assess how well they understand the content of their policy brief.

Another assessment point relates to whether the system adopted is an individual or team policy brief. When determining whether a single individual or a team is responsible for creating a policy brief, one needs to consider the class size. Ideally, in a class consisting of more than 30–40 students, it would be ideal to task the policy brief in groups. Meanwhile, in smaller classes, individual policy briefs can ensure that each student invests the time needed to complete the project through independent research.

To enhance creativity, one possible change could be the introduction of figures or mind maps within the policy brief. These pictures are not typically included in more traditional policy briefs. However, as policy briefs aim to spark creative thinking, it would be ideal to allow students to incorporate figures that help explain their ideas. Past studies have argued that there are positive perceptions of using images to disseminate ideas in academia (Hensley, 2013; Campillo, Hernandez, and Cantano, 2021). Typically used methods include graphic novels and academic posters. The key takeaway is that students express ideas in different ways. Allowing them to use specific images helps them generate the words for storytelling their ideas, which makes the process of constructing a policy brief easier for students while simultaneously enhancing their creativity.

6. Conclusion

Teaching the Southeast Asian Regional Dynamic course comes with its challenges. Substantively, the coverage of the different empirical cases can be difficult for students to keep up with. Empirically, the course explores the vast dynamics and diversities within the region, resulting in the emergence of various challenges. In the security realm, instructors are expected to explain cases involving intra-ASEAN members and tensions with regional powers in the region (Fravel, 2011; Wagener, 2011; Yahuda, 2013). In other areas, the issues of sustainability, climate change, and economic needs are pressing concerns that prevail in Southeast Asia. Linked to IR concepts and theories, teaching the Southeast Asian Regional Dynamic course requires students to understand and implement concepts such as regionalism, hedging, alignment, and great power struggles, which all challenge the regional norms of non-interference, non-intervention, and pacific settlement of disputes (Beeson, 2009; Cuyvers, 2019; Tekunan, 2015).

Unfortunately, the signature pedagogy of IR teaching has predominantly been the traditional one-way lecturing from the instructor to students. Examining the concept of signature pedagogies, the surface structure, deep structure, and implicit values (Shulman, 2005) reveal a problematic trend in IR teaching, which prioritizes active and student-centered learning as a sidelined aspect. Consequently, this leads to stagnation in teaching IR, with students acting as passive recipients within the class. In the case of Southeast Asia, this poses difficulties for students in truly understanding the region's dynamics, which can lead to confusion and a lack of skills relevant to their potential future professional careers.

As a means to counter this possibility, this article examines the rethinking of what signature pedagogies mean in IR teaching. Specifically, it appears from simulations and policy briefs that those teaching methods and assessments can evolve as IR's signature pedagogies with the correct instructions. This avoids the tendency for repetitive tasks in students and counters the dull and mechanical assessment methods commonly used in the social sciences. IR students want to be active participants in education and be involved in practicing the theories given by their instructors. New ways need to be explored in which lecturers can gradually diminish their ego in teaching and learning, helping students find their own voice (Bhardwaj et al., 2025; O'Neill & McMahon, 2005). Therefore, the trend of 'new thinking' in IR should address the concern over the Western-dominated nature of IR substantive and cover new ways of enhancing creativity in the learning process and utilizing different approaches in the classroom. Doing so allows a two-way exchange of ideas between the lecturers and students, making the subject more inclusive and allowing students to take an active role in the learning process.

As future diplomats, IR students taking the course on Southeast Asian Regional Dynamics are recommended to learn the topic through two methods: simulations and policy briefs. The aim for both is to enhance creativity and the necessary skills relevant to the student's future profession. In the case of simulations, the choices of forums to simulate can be an ASEAN Summit simulation or ASEAN's extra-regional forums such as the EAS, ARF, and the regional organizations' 'Plus' forums. Doing so exposes students to the vast themes that define the region's challenges, which often incorporate the national interests of Southeast Asia's regional neighbors. Meanwhile, in policy briefs, the emphasis is on enhancing creativity in writing and students' research skills. Students must face the unease of creating words densely divided into the background, status quo policies, and recommended solutions to a given problem. Using simulations and policy briefs allows students to step out of their comfort zones and implement the IR concepts and theories relevant to the case of Southeast Asia.

7. Recommendations

The traditional teaching method adopted in many IR courses should be reconsidered. As a signature pedagogy, the one-way teaching method hinders the development of the skills essential for an IR graduate. Alternatively, lecturers should consider adopting simulations and policy briefs as alternative learning methods that have the capacity to enhance IR students' creativity, negotiation, and writing skills. First, it is recommended that IR departments discuss and evaluate the possibility of revising the signature pedagogy used in IR courses (such as those in the course Regional Dynamics in Southeast Asia) and weigh the possibility of using simulations and policy briefs.

Following those discussions, lecturers can begin evaluating how simulations and policy briefs can be integrated into their classes. One needs to consider at what level these alternative methods should be introduced within the class and under what expectations. For relatively new students to an IR program, the expectation is that these alternative signature pedagogies are adopted in a relatively light manner and cases are introduced at an earlier stage of the program (such as United Nations-related topics). At a later stage of an IR program, lecturers can explore different empirical cases related to the IR course and specialization that students have elected. Therefore, the applicability of simulations and policy briefs extends beyond relevance in the Regional Dynamics of Southeast Asia course, as it can be adapted to further IR students' understanding of different IR theories under various empirical assessments.

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