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Consciousness Raising in the Politics and International Relations Classroom

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Abstract: This paper contributes to critical scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) in politics and international relations by introducing the use of consciousness-raising techniques in a UK undergraduate teaching setting. Traditionally associated with second-wave feminism, consciousness raising seeks to foreground connections between personal lived experience and socio-political context. While UK undergraduates may not suffer from sources of collective oppression to which such practices have traditionally responded, consciousness raising can viscerally expose students to the everyday effects of the international and their diverse relations within it. As such, deployed as a pedagogic tool, consciousness-raising techniques transcend epistemological approaches to knowledge transmission traditionally associated with the field, and contribute instead to a model of education conceived as a process of collective political becoming.

Resumen: Este artículo contribuye a la investigación crítica en materia de enseñanza y aprendizaje en los campos de la Política y las Relaciones Internacionales dado que introduce el uso de técnicas de concienciación en un entorno de enseñanza universitaria en el Reino Unido. La concienciación, la cual tradicionalmente se ha asociado con la segunda ola del feminismo, busca poner de relieve las conexiones entre la experiencia personal vivida y el contexto sociopolítico. Si bien es cierto que los estudiantes universitarios del Reino Unido no suelen sufrir por estar bajo las fuentes de opresión colectiva, a las que han respondido tradicionalmente tales prácticas, la concienciación puede exponer a los estudiantes a los efectos cotidianos de lo internacional y a sus diversas relaciones dentro de él de una forma más emotiva. Por lo tanto, las técnicas de concienciación, desplegadas como una herramienta pedagógica, trascienden los enfoques epistemológicos de transmisión del conocimiento tradicionalmente asociados con el campo y contribuyen, por el contrario, a conformar un modelo de educación concebido como un proceso de devenir político colectivo.

Résumé: Cet article contribue à la recherche critique sur l'enseignement et l'apprentissage en politique et relations internationales en introduisant l'utilisation de techniques de conscientisation dans l'enseignement en licence au Royaume-Uni. Associé traditionnellement à la deuxième vague du féminisme, le *consciousness-raising* (ou conscientisation) vise à mettre en avant les liens entre l'expérience vécue personnellement et le contexte sociopolitique. Bien que les étudiants britanniques en licence ne souffrent peut-être pas des sources d'oppression collective auxquelles ces pratiques répondent traditionnellement, la conscientisation peut exposer viscéralement les étudiants aux effets quotidiens de l'international et à leurs diverses relations en son sein. Aussi, employées comme outils péda-

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gogiques, les techniques de conscientisation transcendent les approches épistémologiques de la transmission du savoir associées traditionnellement au domaine, et contribuent plutôt à un modèle pédagogique entendu comme un processus de transformation politique collective.

Key words: pedagogy, critical pedagogy, consciousness raising, feminism, gender, security

Palabras clave: pedagogía, pedagogía crítica, concienciación, feminismo, género, seguridad

Mots clés: pédagogie, pédagogie critique, conscientisation, féminisme, genre, sécurité

Introduction

This article contributes to a growing focus among politics and international relations (PIR) scholars on the pedagogic aspects of their work and discipline.[1] While analysis of teaching practices in this field is not new, a commitment to scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) has grown in recent years. Since Kehl (2002) reviewed pedagogic literatures in political science in the 1990s, scholars have documented continued diversification (Craig 2014; Murphy et al. 2023). Indicators of growth include a burgeoning PIR pedagogy textbook market (Crossley 2024) and the emergence of issue-specific sub-literatures, on topics, including simulations (Levin-Banchik 2025), assessment and feedback (Zwolski 2021), employability (Jones and Lishman 2023; Moulton, 2023), decolonization (Clarke 2025), and AI (Rivetti et al. 2025).

This article offers reflections on using consciousness-raising (CR) techniques in undergraduate PIR teaching sessions at a mid-table UK university. CR is a method of political organization in which individuals in small groups collectively develop understandings of a topic based on their own personal lives and experiences and—as transpires through the process—by identifying the patterned political structures that underpin them. The practice is best known for its role in the women's liberation movement of the late 1960s and 1970s (see Sarachild 1978) but also featured in gay and Black liberation movements active at that time (Gay Liberation Front 1971, 15; Kirkby 2011, 26). In PIR teaching contexts, the method involves students in small groups responding to structured questions that probe the connections between their personal experiences and a chosen topic, ideally during several consecutive sessions. The iterative nature of this exercise, its deliberately slow pace, and the emphasis placed on personal experience and reflection distinguish its format from regular group-based discussion exercises that form the bedrock of many undergraduate seminars.

This technique can have powerful effects on participants. Bringing students' own personal lives and lived experiences into dialogue with core PIR topics challenges the perceived remoteness and abstract detachment that is often associated not only with PIR teaching and learning (Drainville 2003, 231), but also with politics itself, particularly among young people (Uberoi and Johnstone 2022). Employing a discursive format that removes the hierarchical positionality common to traditional teaching contexts, wherein a knowledge broker (the lecturer) transmits rarefied knowledge of a topic (the lecture) to passive recipients (the learners), students bring their own varied experiences to bear on topics that meaningfully structure their daily life-worlds. On the topic of gender and security, for example, these are experiences of

[1] While politics and international relations are distinct disciplines and research specialisms commonly sit within one field or the other, scholars are commonly required to teach across both. The article follows the QAA (2023) convention of treating "Politics and International Relations" as a single pedagogic subject.

living and aspiring as gendered subjects of state institutions under conditions of relative peace and security, in a more broadly violent and insecure world. Recognizing the implicit assumptions of this rarefying depiction—that the United Kingdom is peaceful and secure relative to the violence and insecurity found "outside"—is one example of the powerful insights students can generate by sharing gendered testimonies of their citizen or migrant subjectivities.

The approach is inspired and informed by two broad pedagogic agendas. The first relates to the teaching–research nexus, a concept that signals the strength of connections between teaching and research components of academic work. Such connections are perceived to be lacking in PIR specifically (Lightfoot and Piotukh 2014, 104) and across the higher education sector more broadly (Dandridge 2023, 12–4). Concomitant with this teaching practice, the author led the wider knowledge exchange project, *Finding Commons*, which explored the utility of CR techniques for trust and relationship building in local activist contexts (Bath Spa University 2025). *Finding Commons* was approved by the Bath Spa University School of Writing, Publishing, and Humanities Ethics Committee (reference: 260124RA) on 20/03/2024. Students connected with this project in an iterative fashion, as techniques developed for the project were applied in teaching contexts, while some students attended one of two public-facing CR workshops held within communities in local cities, which formed the core of the wider project.

The second source of inspiration relates to the body of work commonly termed critical pedagogy, and its specific application to PIR (Timperley and Schick 2022; Nicosen et al. 2024). My approach to critical pedagogy responds to the compelling case advanced in Hagmann and Biersteker's (2012, 1) "call to arms" for IR scholars to enact a critical pedagogy of international studies. In addition to the necessary step advocated in that paper of expanding the epistemic base of PIR learning materials to include a "critical cosmopolitan selection" of literature in undergraduate reading lists (Hagmann and Biersteker 2014, 4), my approach foregrounds the *praxis of teaching* itself (Freire 1998), contributing CR to the growing repertoire of practice-based methods available to educators in PIR and more widely. These include techniques such as role-play (Maertens and Cheli 2024), relational and place-based learning (Schick 2024), and trauma-informed pedagogy (Anderson 2026).

Next, I discuss each agenda in more detail before identifying pedagogic insights that emerge from the history of CR in social movement building. Then, I describe the pedagogic technique in more detail and evaluate its effects, before exploring the potential for wider applications of this approach to critical pedagogy in PIR and beyond.

The Teaching–Research Nexus

The British Academy (2022, 4) defines the teaching–research nexus as involving "an extensive, visible, and institutionally supported series of productive, interlocking, and often bidirectional connections between teaching and research." As most contracted PIR scholars would testify and as recent research demonstrates, the concept is more aspirational than descriptive of empirical reality in the current UK higher education sector. Indeed, several factors suggest that the opposite trend, toward a widening disconnect between teaching and research, is more prevalent. The steady year-on-year increase of teaching-only contracts, for example, which in 2023/2024 accounted for 36 percent of UK academic staff compared to 26 percent in 2015/2016 (HESA 2025), suggests a growing bifurcation between teaching and research at UK universities. While the number of research-only and teaching and research contracts increased by 32 and 9 percent, respectively, between 2007 and 2019, the number of teaching-only contracts increased by 70 percent during the same period (UCU 2019, 4). This trend is not confined to the United Kingdom; commonly characterized as

the "adjunctification" of higher education in US contexts, the same pattern has been apparent in America (Colby 2025) and Europe (Cairns 2025) for some time.

While most institutions market themselves on the strength of what is variably termed research-connected, research-informed, or research-led teaching, some universities are known to actively invite their permanent academic staff to self-release from the research component of their contracts.[2] Not only do such terms diminishingly reflect reality, therefore, they also belie the "bidirectional" ideal articulated in the British Academy's definition, according to which research should inform teaching, but teaching practices should also inform or contribute to academic research agendas. Yet, very few institutions appear to market themselves on the strength of their teaching-informed research.[3]

Dandridge (2023) reveals a disjuncture between the views of students, the university sector, and governments on the value of maintaining connections between teaching and research. Students generally report positively about being exposed to teaching staff's research activities, while sector representatives support strengthening connections, at least in principle. Yet the effect of recent government policy has been to consistently sever connections between university teaching and research, "either directly through the separation of funding and regulatory oversight, or indirectly as a result of policies such as the expansion of student numbers and research concentration" (Dandridge 2023, 33–4). The sector is tending toward a future where most teaching and research are entirely disconnected. Dandridge concludes that the costs of such a scenario range from diverse impacts on the prospective careers of academic staff to the loss of many benefits that research-informed teaching can offer students, with wider implications for the prospects of social mobility and the dynamism of the future academic workforce.

While unpacking this agenda in more detail is tangential to the goals of this article, the growing disconnect between these two poles of academic work was a key motivation for the teaching practices it describes. The design of *Finding Commons* was based on a model of co-creation between students and myself, as lecturer and project lead. Through their participation in both the classroom and a public-facing event in the local community, students were embedded within the wider research project in the bidirectional and reciprocal manner that is lacking across PIR pedagogy and the wider university sector. Pedagogic techniques were research-led—their design informed by my own knowledge and experience of facilitating CR sessions in different contexts—and crucially, the wider research project was meaningfully teaching-led, as the experiences and outcomes of teaching experiences fed into the design and conduct of the subsequent public-facing workshop. Attended by twenty-five local political campaigners and activists, in addition to several students seeking political engagement beyond the classroom, the workshop was the culmination of this process of co-creation.

Critical Pedagogy beyond Reading Lists

Hagmann and Biersteker (2014) deploy a version of the sociology of IR literature to challenge the convention of judging the success of academic careers by quantifying scholars' published research, which attracts relatively small and niche readerships, while paying little to no attention to their contributions to the taught discipline. While the authors importantly suggest several factors that explain the uneven distribution of opportunities this convention affords scholars in different national contexts, they do not explain the durability of the convention itself. Reasons established elsewhere include the relative simplicity, comparability, and low assessment

[2] This practice has occurred at the author's home institution.

[3] Liverpool John Moores University's (2025) teaching-informed research project is an outlier in this context; see also Willcoxson et al. (2011).

cost of publishing metrics, as opposed to those related to teaching, and an institutional prestige economy that creates incentives for high-impact publications as visible markers of institutional excellence (Kwiek 2021). It would be difficult to reliably measure, but with annual PIR undergraduate cohorts averaging hundreds per institution and growing (British Academy 2025), several contact hours with students per week and 24–30 teaching weeks per year, academics' teaching contributions are arguably more impactful on a greater number of people—particularly when that teaching is effective and memorable—than are the modest research outputs that most scholars are able to produce each year within the workload constraints of their contracts.

Hagmann and Biersteker (2014) further evidence and challenge the widespread selection of parochial, gendered, Anglo-centric, and paradigmatically rationalist texts as mandatory readings in core modules across their sample of IR courses at European and North American universities. This empirical work is important and has inspired follow-up research that continues to shape sociological perspectives in/of the taught discipline of IR (see Phull et al. 2018; Tripathi 2021). Crucially, Hagmann and Biersteker (2014, 4) mobilize their findings to advocate for the development of what they term "a critical pedagogy of international studies based on pluralistic theory teaching and a critical cosmopolitan selection of scholarly sources." As IR scholarship has itself become more critical and reflexive since at least the 1990s, they argue, the intellectual parochialisms of taught programs should be cast off in turn.

The logic of this argument and the framing of the notion of critical pedagogy it advances, however, are limited to factors internal to the discipline of IR and its historical development. Similarly, prominent calls to decolonize universities often limit the proposed means of doing so to decolonizing curricula and reading lists (see Bird and Pitman 2020). That popular understandings of what critical PIR pedagogy should look like align with a core demand of the decolonizing curricula agenda is unsurprising, given the degree to which colonial history is implicated in both the real-world power structures that characterize world politics today, *and* the epistemological tools and inheritances scholars have at their disposal to research, theorize, and articulate those structures in their teaching. These inheritances are particularly stark within the "white world order" of IR (Vitalis 2015), with its explicitly Eurocentric framing of world history through a realism-liberalism tension that neatly mirrors the successes and failures of US-European power projection through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Such colonial inheritances are clearly not limited to IR epistemologies, however, as documented by scholars in relation to politics (Shilliam 2021), political economy (de Oliveira and Kvangraven 2023), development studies (Kapoor 2023), and of course, anthropology (Venkatesan 2024). It is not just IR reading lists that must be reimagined to pursue a meaningful decolonial agenda, therefore, but the full gamut of epistemological capital that forms the intellectual foundations of the European and North American human and social sciences.

The techniques described here are shaped by a commitment to critical pedagogy that moves beyond equating teaching practice with the selection of mandatory readings, a metric that Hagmann and Biersteker (2014, 8) accept "has its limitations." Rather, my intention is to foreground the role and importance of teaching *practices*—of what is said and done, how and in what discursive format, by whom, and for what goals—within the classroom context. This work builds on existing applications of practice theory to questions of pedagogy and education (Grootenboer et al. 2017). Techniques derived from historic CR practices in diverse, emancipatory social movements—from feminism to Black and gay liberation—provide the foundations for pedagogic methods that are meaningfully critical and resolutely focused on the development of effective, creative teaching practice.

While my approach is inspired by the visions of education as a co-produced, transformatory practice provided by Freire (2000) and Giroux (1983, 2011), there is a tendency in the expansive critical pedagogy literature for self-aggrandizing nar-

ratives of emancipation and resistance that are clearly less apposite to UK university settings as they are to the favelas of Sao Paolo. While it is undoubtedly true that contemporary university students—and Generation Z more broadly—occupy a particular social position that is consistently and detrimentally structured by short-term political decision-making, neither group resembles the oppressed subjects of Freire's pedagogical programs, or of Giroux's pedagogies of repression. Yet, the need for education to serve the interests of young people facing bleakly uncertain futures is clear (World Economic Forum 2025).

Pedagogical Insights from the History of CR

While CR is best known for its association with radical feminists of the late 1960s and 1970s, its significance as a method of political organizing is not limited to feminism. Several key proponents from that period of women's liberation describe how they drew inspiration from practices they had witnessed first-hand in different political contexts, or from certain key texts that circulated US activist communities prior to the emergence of feminism's second-wave, with which CR would become indelibly associated.[4]

Sarachild (1978, 145) traces the practice that she helped pioneer to her experiences of small group analysis sessions several years prior, while volunteering for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in Mississippi: "We were applying to women and to ourselves as women's liberation organizers the practice a number of us had learned as organizers in the civil rights movement in the South in the early 1960s." Sarachild cites Hinton's (1966) *Fanshen*, which recounts the Chinese Communist Party's attempts to build a revolutionary consciousness among rural peasants during the Chinese Civil War in the 1940s, as a text that was widely circulated among left activists organizing for civil rights at that time.

Historiographical vignettes like this are important, yet they remain patchy and incomplete, even in the reflections and memoirs of progenitors such as Sarachild. While it is common for contemporary feminist scholars to cite Maoist conceptions of revolutionary consciousness, Hinton's *Fanshen* and early civil rights activism as precursors to the feminist CR groups of the late 1960s, there is little in the voluminous histories of the women's movement that traces the roots of feminist practice to these prior political contexts in any more detail than Sarachild herself and a small handful of others have provided (Ferguson 2022, 300). Feminist CR quickly amassed its own origin myths, as the practice spread rapidly across North America and large parts of the European continent during the 1970s (Echols 2019).

In the contemporary historical imagination, the discovery of CR became synonymous with the second-wave and its unsettling assertion that "the personal is political" (Hanisch 1970). The practical erasure of the historical precursors of feminist CR from conventional histories of the second-wave helps to explain why subsequent challenges facing the movement were so damaging, most notably regarding its perceived lack of diversity and its blindness toward the intersecting implications of race for women living under patriarchy. Subsequent attempts to formalize the movement and dictate the form and format that CR groups should take, a move described by Hanisch (1978) as "the liberal takeover of women's liberation," served to detract from the radical impulse of Maoist cultural politics and anti-racist civil rights advocacy that animated the movement's early pioneers, but has since largely faded from their histories.

Establishing a revisionist history of the second-wave's adoption of CR techniques was a wider research objective of *Finding Commons*. In that context, deploying these

[4]The application of the "wave" metaphor to the history of feminism has deservedly faced criticism (see Evans and Chamberlain 2015). I use "second-wave" as a useful shorthand for the period spanning from the late 1960s to the mid-1970s, rather than to suggest that feminism or feminists were dormant before or after this period.

techniques in the classroom serves a dual purpose. As well as enabling students to forge connections between their own lives, each other, and the topic under discussion, it offers an opportunity to teach the history of CR itself, and the seminal role it has played in a diversity of social movements and periods of social change. In the context of the subsequent mainstreaming of feminism, it can be difficult for students to grasp how such an ostensibly simple practice—women physically meeting in groups to discuss their life experiences and struggles—could ever have been considered politically radical or groundbreaking. Active engagement with the practice in a classroom setting can produce a light-bulb moment for students, who come to realize the degree to which societal norms and the self-understandings of men and women have changed since the 1960s. When applied to contemporary movements that deploy techniques of political organizing indebted to CR—at some level, the very concepts of movement and change are synonymous with raised collective consciousness—students can viscerally and somatically grasp how collective political change may look and feel.

Whether or not it is labeled CR, McCarthy and Grosser (2023, 2) summarize the practice as "learning about oneself within structures of society, and building connections with others' experience, to break isolation and foster a critical position." Any practice with such fundamental political goals must be worthy of experimentation with students of politics. The method provides an opportunity to co-produce knowledge of a topic both for and with students, and to facilitate collective experience of how human sociality is indelibly structured and patterned, within social conditions that are commonly characterized as atomized, individualistic and shaped by self-understandings of personal identity (Putnam 2000). McCarthy and Grosser (2023, 2) recognize how CR practices achieve this in a way that "complements a trend of individualism," with their focus on the "inner" lived experience of each individual participant. This is perhaps one reason why Gen Z students are particularly amenable to the practice, since many are already culturally primed to begin thinking about the world from the perspective of their own lives and experiences. The subsequent collective products of CR—building empathy and identifying connections between micro and macro, inner and outer—build from these individualized starting points to foment a powerful sense of shared and collective identity.

The basic practice is simple to facilitate in a seminar setting and can be flexibly applied to the range of topics that commonly constitute undergraduate PIR modules. In small to medium sized groups of up to around twenty students, participants take turns to respond to questions that probe their personal experiences relating to the topic. The questions can be devised by the instructor (either in advance, or as the discussion unfolds, or some combination thereof), or by the student groups themselves. Both approaches have advantages and disadvantages that I discuss below. The discussion can be organic and free-flowing, or students can be asked to respond to each question in turn, in consecutive go-rounds. The group can be physically arranged in the classroom in a manner that facilitates this format, such as facing each other in a circle or semi-circle. Ideally, group discussions are sandwiched between an explanatory introduction to the history of CR as a radical political practice, and a reflective session that allows students to evaluate the practice after their discussions have ended.

Classroom Reflections

In what follows, I provide an ideal type model that amalgamates my experience of developing this method across several years with different student groups. As with CR for movement building, the method invites experimentation and is adaptable to the practical constraints of university teaching, including unpredictable levels of student attendance, mixed group sizes, and unfavorable timetabling. Though single, one-off sessions can produce meaningful outcomes, the technique is most effective

when applied across successive weekly sessions. Here, I describe an optimal compromise between practicality and longevity, wherein three 1-h sessions take place across successive weekly seminars on the topic of gender and security during a first year Introduction to IR module.[5] The group comprises twelve to fifteen students, and the CR sessions are held halfway through the module's 13-week teaching schedule. Though still new to IR and to undergraduate life more broadly, by this point in the module, the group has covered some of the subject's basic foundations. Following Clarke's (2025, 1) call to "decenter the discipline," this includes several introductory sessions designed to situate IR as an academic discipline within its historical and cultural context (of empire, colonialism and the current state-based world system), before exploring the nature of theory and engaging with realism, liberalism, and constructivism as the foundational theoretical architecture of Western-IR.

The topic of gender and security works well for several reasons. First, a focus on gender offers a natural fit with CR and a way into teaching about feminism as both a critical paradigm and community of practice in IR (Sondarjee 2022). Second, for a student body comprised solely of Gen Z, for whom political questions relating to gender and identity are germane (Ipsos 2025), the topic promises fertile discursive terrain. Third, thinking through questions of gender in relation to personal feelings of safety and security is likely to produce interesting discussion within a mixed group of male- and female-identifying students (Tickner 2004, 47). Finally, the concept of security can fruitfully connect the remote world of IR theory to students' perceptions of their own lives. Posing questions such as "How secure do you feel on a daily basis?" and "What does security mean to you?" can help students to grapple with this otherwise reified, abstract concept, which sits at the core of IR and the study of politics more broadly (Brown 2020, 422).

To orient the method to learning objectives, intended learning outcomes (ILOs) for this section of the module are designed to foreground the feminist emphasis on locating politics in the personal, private, and everyday.[6] Cynthia Enloe's work has been seminal in this regard, and her work can be used to prepare students with some basic insights that help to guide their thinking(and discussion. In one example, the sessions were framed by two required readings of extracts from *Bananas*, *Beaches and Bases* (Enloe 2014) and *Nimo's War, Emma's War* (Enloe, 2010), and two short video excerpts of Enloe explaining her distinction between "the personal is international" and "the international is personal," which are viewed together in class before the first session begins. Enloe's play on(the famous feminist slogan provides an ideal bridge between the profound insight of the second-wave and the world of international politics, which, as Enloe consistently demonstrates, risks striking IR students as indelibly distant and remote from the lived conditions and concerns of their own lives (see Enloe 1996). For a solely British/European cohort, this distancing is politically and ideologically pernicious. Part of Enloe's activist goal in *Bananas* and other works is to break this sense of distance, by foregrounding how the international and the world system of states function at micro-personal scales of lived experience, with particular discriminatory effects on women and other marginalized groups.

The three 1-h sessions comprise the first half of each week's scheduled 2-h seminar. This cumulative 3-week structure helps to instil a sense of group purpose that develops as the process unfolds (see Firth and Robinson 2016, 3–4). It is important to avoid the impression that this is regular group-work, of the kind that seminar

[5]Devoting 3 weeks to the topic of gender in a first-year Introduction to IR module is self-consciously unorthodox and designed to challenge the problematic "week on gender" norm (see Phull et al. 2018, 399–400; Sondarjee 2022, 230).

[6]ILO 1: Explain how feminist approaches to security challenge traditional state-centric and public-private distinctions in IR, foregrounding the political significance of personal and everyday experiences. ILO 2: Analyse how everyday forms of (in)security are connected to broader international political and security structures. ILO 3: Critically evaluate the practical and conceptual implications of incorporating marginalized lived experiences into security analysis and IR theory more broadly.

students are used to. Rather than a single group discussion, repetition over 3 weeks allows the process to evolve and gives students the chance to acclimatize to what is a relatively alien experience to most. On different occasions, by the end of the third session, some students have expressed interest in continuing the process beyond the confines of the module (see the "Conclusion" section).

After viewing Enloe's interview excerpts, students are given a brief explanatory introduction to the history of CR in historical social movements. Commonly, a few students are already aware of some connection between CR and feminism, but most have never heard of the practice. In our case, the introduction draws on details of the wider *Finding Commons* project, sharing images of women's CR groups of the late 1960s and quotes from some canonical feminist texts of that era. Anticipating their own practice, students commonly take keen interest in this introduction and have questions regarding the format of those early women's group meetings, and how the practice evolved as the second-wave gained momentum. Participants note how the introduction helps to ground and orient their subsequent practice, and for some, affords the experience some of the qualities of role play (see Maertens and Cheli 2024). This helps to cement learning about the form of the practice itself, as well as foment a collective sense that the group is engaging with something of historical and cultural significance.

Students are free to choose their own physical arrangement in the room and on most occasions form an open circle, with tables and other furniture moved to the sides. Students are invited to choose between a free-flowing discussion, with everyone free to speak when they like, or one structured as a go-round, with each participant speaking in turn. If there is disagreement on this question before the first session, a vote can determine the structure to be adopted. A turn-taking structure ensures that all students will meaningfully contribute, while a free-flowing structure can effectively exclude a group's quieter members.[7]

The instructor's role and positionality are crucial factors that require careful thought. Both my role as instructor and my intersectional characteristics bring significant power relations to bear on the dynamics of discussions. Yet, an instructor needs to be present, at least during the first session, to facilitate the process while students become more comfortable with it. Aligned with the workshop facilitation model of *Finding Commons*, wherein participants would both respond to questions pre-conceived by facilitators, and devise their own questions for wider group discussion, the following compromise is suggested. The instructor joins the discussion during the first session, sitting in the group circle and providing their own pre-conceived questions as cues (see Box A). For the second session, the instructor removes themself from the room altogether and students devise their own questions for discussion. For the third session, the instructor returns to the room but does not join the circle, which this time is split into two separate groups organized by gender-identification. If the seminar group comprises roughly proportional numbers of female-identifying and male-identifying students, this split can work well.[8] For this session, the instructor joins neither group but instead sits in a far corner of the room while the discussions take place. This time, each group's discussion is structured by questions posed by the other group, which are collectively devised before the start of the session. After these separate discussions have finished, the two groups come back together and the instructor joins the circle for a final half-hour evaluation, cued by their own reflective questions about the process. Box A provides a sample of indicative questions that can be used during each session.

[7] See Kaba et al. (2017) for a discussion of this aspect of the group method. Other approaches include the use of a rotating chair, and the use of tokens that participants "spend" each time they speak.

[8] The author is aware of the risk of essentializing gender and conditioning students to reproduce heteronormative binaries by dividing the group in this way. The approach is designed to replicate the "women-only" nature of feminist CR groups, and students are free to join which group they like. For further discussion of this issue, see the "Evaluation" section.

Box A. Indicative discussion questions for each session.

Session 1 (instructor present; questions devised by instructor)	
What does your gender enable you to do?	
Do you ever forget your gender?	
Does the state make you feel safe?	
Does your future feel secure?	
Session 2 (instructor absent; questions devised by students)	
What is your experience of masculinity?	
Do you ever second guess what you are wearing?	
Does your perceived gender make you feel secure?	
Have you ever felt like you had to perform in a certain way due to your gender?	
Session 3 (instructor present but removed; questions devised by students)	
Questions for female group	*Questions for male group*
How does masculinity affect you?	Did you ever feel sexualized at school?
How do you think men think about women in general?	Do you feel strong?
What are the goals of feminism in your view?	Do you think you are affected by toxic masculinity and could you be affected by misogyny?
How does violence make you feel?	Do you worry about being alone?

Given the nature of topics discussed and the invitation for students to reveal aspects of their personal lives and experiences, these techniques provoke clear ethical considerations. I consider these in the next section, before evaluating the method and its outcomes.

Ethics

Until recently, PIR-specific SoTL research has lacked ostensive commentary and debate regarding the ethics of involving students in research. Moulton and Tapscott (2025) provide a welcome exception with their dedicated research on ethical considerations for SoTL research. In this section, I draw on the outcomes of that research and the specific recommendations its authors propose, to assess the ethical issues raised by using CR techniques in the classroom in this way, and to evaluate the ethical compliance of pedagogic research that does so.

The authors' first two recommendations relate to the recognition and treatment of power dynamics, relating to the role of students as potentially "vulnerable" or "captive" in a research context, and to the student–instructor relationship and the social context of classroom dynamics (Moulton and Tapscott 2025, 3–4). These concerns continue the discussion in the previous section regarding the instructor's role and positionality during each discussion session. Asking students to share personal experiences of life issues relating to gender in the presence of both peers and lecturer implies clear ethical questions that should be addressed as follows.

First, students are informed about the use of these techniques at the start of the module and given time to consider their willingness to participate, ask questions in advance, and share concerns. Each student is free to opt out of any session or join in the group work but remain silent. While in practice, all students commonly choose to actively participate, none are therefore "captive" to the process. Since the sessions comprise just the first half of each consecutive seminar in the model outlined here, non-participants can still attend and work independently (either in the same classroom or elsewhere) during the discussion if they wish.

The three different session formats are an attempt to mitigate or control for the power dynamics of the student–instructor relationship, with effects that often become clear during each reflection session (see the "Evaluation" section). While classroom social dynamics are routinely productive and supportive throughout each session and in my experience of deploying these techniques, there have been no known issues to report, I recognize how contingent this is on the context in which I teach. With different student groups, in more sharply polarized political contexts, the approach carries a clear risk of less sanguine outcomes. As Moulton and Tapscott (2025, 4) recognize, "educators often observe only a small sliver of the student experience." Perhaps, the likelihood of conflict arising is diminished by scheduling the sessions in the first semester of a degree program, when most interpersonal relationships are still new and in formation.

Relating to issues of voluntarism, recruitment, and pedagogic impacts, Moulton and Tapscott (2025, 4–5) emphasize that the benefits of SoTL research should be accessible to current participants, rather than just future cohorts, and that any pedagogic costs should be minimized. The authors deem the use of class time for research purposes permissible only when it is "appropriately limited," or "if it is associated directly with learning goals." With their emphasis on *experience* and *doing*, CR techniques can more accurately be conceived as a form of active learning than a traditional research intervention (see Felder and Brent 2009). By its nature, therefore, the benefits of the process directly accrue to those participating, as opposed to a future cohort that stands to benefit from knowledge produced. Moreover, if we follow Timperley and Schick (2025) in adopting a more capacious understanding of active learning than is conventionally found in the literature, wherein learning is viewed not as a means to an end but as a "process of being and becoming" in its own right, then the inherent value of the exercise for participating students becomes clear. When tied explicitly to session ILOs like those cited earlier in this paper, which foreground the everyday, experiential focus of feminist analysis in IR, the sessions instantiate precisely the perspective and analytical techniques that seminars on this topic are more broadly designed to illuminate.

Evaluation

Assessing the value of deploying CR techniques in the classroom requires us to engage with the foundational questions raised by Timperley and Schick's (2025) intervention, concerning the nature and goals of learning in higher education. Before returning to these in the final section, the following observations are contingent on the specific conditions of the model outlined here. These outcomes are captured anecdotally during final evaluation sessions and, more formally, via subsequent student surveys and through the university's module evaluation process. It is worth stressing the contingency of these outcomes on the make-up and positionality of our specific student groups; they would undoubtedly be different with different cohorts, or with the same groups focused on different topics. There is a clear UK anchoring of most of our group discussions, for example, with areas of common ground and difference oriented by recent UK-relevant political events and their representation across mainstream and social media. While such considerations suggest the scope conditions of this evaluation, which is limited to the most generalizable of our outcomes to date, the adaptability of the method to the needs and orientations of different groups and topics should be considered a key strength.

The first outcome relates to the effects of these techniques on group dynamics, and the positive effects this had for one cohort's subsequent engagement with the public-facing *Finding Commons* workshop. Feedback reveals how the process felt qualitatively different from routine seminar group-work to most participants. Several express surprise at how diligently the group engages for the duration of each session, without veering off-topic, while others note the permissive space created

for quieter voices, citing the go-round structure as the main reason for these outcomes. The process gives confidence to those voices, whose readiness to contribute is not constrained by factors commonly cited as barriers to speaking in group settings, such as shyness or social anxiety deriving from students' perceived lack of factual knowledge of the topic, or confusion about the material or the instructor's expectations (Crozier 2005, 27; Reda 2009). Several students who subsequently attended the public workshop cited the classroom experiment as a key enabling factor for their participation, owing to the exposure it gave them to CR techniques, and the confidence it gave them to share personal testimonies in a public group setting. These student contributions to the wider *Finding Commons* research project provide an example of what Willcoxson et al. (2011, 1) have called the "unusual two-way relationship" of the teaching–research nexus.

The second category of outcomes concerns how the three approaches to structuring each group session in the model outlined above relate to our prior discussion of risk and ethics. Students commonly stress the relevance of the varied dynamics produced by each week's group structure. The first session, at which the instructor is present, functions as a kind of induction as participants explore the process and format. Students report feeling constrained both by my presence at this session and by the questions I bring to it. This reflects both the inevitable power dynamic my presence implies, and the group's preference for discussing their own questions at subsequent sessions. The instructor's absence from the room during the second session, and from the two gender-structured groups during the third session, foments a sense of progression between these 2 weeks, as the questions posed by each group to the other during the final week are nearly always derived from tensions that emerged at the previous session, relating to differences of perspective that commonly align with each participant's gender identification.

The third week's gendered group structure affords participants certain insights regarding the implications of gender identity for their own views on the role of gender and its relation to security in world politics. Several students describe how the process has given them experiential insight into what adopting a gender lens implies in practice, particularly when addressing questions that appear superficially non-gendered. This instils one of Enloe's core insights: how the fact of being a man or a woman is the starting point for how we relate to politics and feelings of safety. The questions posed by each group to the other during the third session are indicative of these gendered effects and are clearly perceived as such by each group's participants. For many, experiencing this dynamic becomes one of the experiment's enduring outcomes.

While students are left feeling more empathetic about the role of gender on lived experiences, it is worth clarifying the risks of structuring groups in this way. By setting up a discussion on the topic of gender and security by dividing groups on the basis of gender identity, the experiment risks conditioning students to think and reason in binary terms. Clearly, while the task here is not to entirely disrupt heteronormativity, and group membership during the third session is a function of student choice and self-identification as opposed to biological distinction, there is no third (or fourth) group that gender fluid or transitioning students may wish to join. For our student groups, such an affordance has not been required to date, at least insofar as participants' stated preferences on this question are reliable. Yet, if in some cases they are not, there would of course be no way to tell.

Such considerations invite further reflection by fellow instructors wishing to adapt these techniques to the needs of different student groups. Ideally, of course, CR practices of this kind within a university setting would emerge organically from the student body, as a method of political organizing that is free to establish and adaptable to the diversity of issues collectively faced by students and young people today. The constitution of groups would then emerge from students' own interactions, initiatives, and goals. At a minimum, therefore, these experiences have ex-

posed participating students to the political potential of addressing such challenges collectively, by building solidarity and trust with others similarly affected by patterned sources of political disadvantage and anxiety, rather than as atomized and isolated individuals (see Fisher 2017). Further, in a context where lamentably, students are thought to forget most of what they learn (Gregory and Gregory 2013), the exercise will hopefully prove unusually memorable for some.

Conclusion

McCarthy and Grosser (2023, 1) have argued that "one way to combat the depressing creep of the neoliberal university is to recuperate and re-use consciousness raising (CR) in teaching, administration, research, and engagement." This article has documented one way in which this goal might be pursued. While the practices it describes are conducted in a classroom setting for ostensibly pedagogic purposes, our wider research project has sought to mobilize the collectively empowering ethos of CR for wider political ends. Taken together, this unification between teaching and research offers a response to the perceived decline in both educational engagement (Otte 2024; Woon 2024) and political engagement (Uberoi and Johnstone 2022) among young people today.

Establishing the pedagogic value of CR techniques raises fundamental questions regarding the nature of learning in higher education and the purpose of a university degree. The arrival of generative AI and its rapid uptake by university students (Freeman 2025, 1) have posed similarly existential questions across the higher education sector (Dickinson 2025). As curricula designers grapple with this challenge, the consensus view is shifting from a tendency to police AI-misuse in student assessments (Shaw 2025, 5821), to a wholesale re-evaluation of the nature and purpose of assessment, and thus of outcome- and performance-based metrics that commonly inform the awarding of university degrees (Sejdiu and Sejdiu 2025, 3).

"What, again, is education?," asks Burnett (2025), reflecting in *The New Yorker* on the implications of AI for the humanities and cognate disciplines. The reply is expansive and thought-provoking: "The *non-coercive* rearranging of desire" (emphasis original). Perhaps more glaringly than most disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, PIR has been shaped for decades by the rising prestige of the sciences. Abundant knowledge has been produced and conveyed to students through work that has sought to mimic scientific inquiry. Yet that model of education, argues Burnett—as an accumulation of facts, as factory-style knowledge production—has, in effect, been automated. The trend is not new, but what began with the commercialization of the internet has been radically amplified and accelerated by AI. Burnett makes a compelling case that this is liberation, not curse, since "we can return to what was always the heart of the matter—the lived experience of existence. Being itself." The argument aligns with Timperley and Schick's (2025, 1) depiction of learning as, first and foremost, a "process of being and becoming," a framing that appears particularly apposite to the arts of politics and political education.

Current assessment-based modular formats and performance-indexed degree structures are poorly conducive to the reimagining of PIR education demanded by the arrival of AI. They present similar barriers to the meaningful deployment of CR techniques in the classroom. These require patience, repetition across time, and are not oriented toward testable outcomes or factual knowledge production. Rather, they are focused on facilitating the personal growth and civic development of those who engage with them. As such, as degree structures are forced to adapt to new technology, they offer a further suite of pedagogic techniques that are already adapted to the future.

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