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Pedagogy and the Textbook in Political Science

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ABSTRACT

What makes a useful textbook, and can the use of textbooks boost active learning and student satisfaction in political science higher education? Drawing on the author's own experience of writing a textbook and a student survey, this article articulates some propositions on effective textbook-assisted teaching practice. In seeking to develop a theory of effective textbook use, the article explores the features of textbooks and textbook-supported teaching that work to promote student engagement and the achievement of course-specific learning outcomes. A three-dimensional theory of effective textbook-supported teaching in political science is outlined, contributing to the wider literature on higher education pedagogy. The article shows why textbooks are valuable for teaching and learning, elucidating how they can be used effectively to support student learning. The article concludes that common perceptions of textbooks as "dumbing down" or "lowest common denominator" teaching are misplaced. Rather, textbooks can work as useful primers that leverage student learning and facilitate learners' access into advanced, specialist scholarship in the field of political science.

Introduction

At research-intensive higher education institutions, the use of textbooks on political science modules is typically perfunctory at best. Educators may regard textbooks as bland teaching instruments that may not be able to capture complex ideas and engage with the latest research in the field. Textbooks may be perceived as teaching tools that "provide bite-size chunks of information to cement student learning" (Knight 2015, 1). Yet, at the same time, a survey of the textbook and its role in the history of education shows that its presence in the classroom has always been as ubiquitous as the "chalkboard and writing materials" (Heider, Laverick, and Bethany 2009). Textbooks have been described as the "oldest technology" in education (Altbach 1991). Attitudes of educators within higher education institutions toward textbooks are thus manifold and ambivalent, and educators need to balance their inclination to recommend

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textbooks that they find useful with their desire to be seen as research-informed educators wary of making use of pre-fabricated teaching materials.

This ambivalence toward textbooks is also reflected in the way they are viewed in the profession in comparison with other types of scholarship. The production of textbooks has perhaps not been valued by the profession on par with peer-reviewed research articles and research monographs. A recent call for appropriate acknowledgement of the contribution to the field and its pedagogy (Blair 2023) may suggest that there is now greater preparedness to consider the pedagogical benefits provided by textbooks, the extent of their value in the profession, and their contribution to the discipline. Although some within the discipline may still believe that textbooks are nothing more than repositories of "bite-size chunks of information", it seems there is greater receptiveness today for the idea that the intellectual challenge of producing a textbook in political science easily matches that of producing a peer-reviewed article; and that the ability to write for students, rather than peers, is a particular kind of skill requiring not only understanding of the subject matter, but also an ability to see this subject matter through the eyes of those who are new to the field.

There is a growing body of literature now exploring what is covered within textbooks and what is left out: on the groups that are underrepresented, and topics that are marginalized. For example, Olivo (2012) finds that women's experiences are underrepresented in American Government and Politics textbooks. Cassese and Bos' (2013) work on gender and authorship in American Politics textbooks finds scarce coverage of women in American politics textbooks; findings that are echoed by Atchison's (2017) survey of introductory political science textbooks and Scola et al.'s research (Scola, Bucci, and Baglione 2021) exploring the "companion readers" textbooks are paired with. Evans and Lindrum (2013) discuss the variation in content, emphasis, and perspective in American politics texts. Takeda's (2016) study discusses the underrepresentation of Asian Pacific Americans in college-level introductory American government textbooks. Questions around inclusion/exclusion extend to visual representations within textbooks. For example, Allen and Wallace (2010) examine visualizations of African Americans in American government/politics textbooks.

Building on this research, this article explores the role of the textbook in contemporary political science education and the ways in which textbooks can be used effectively to support teaching. In seeking to show what makes a useful textbook and how it can be deployed successfully to enhance teaching practice, this article contributes to the wider field of pedagogy in political science. Providing a rebuttal to the skepticism surrounding textbooks in political science higher education, this article argues that textbooks can and do have a place in research-led teaching if they are used in a smart kind of way. Textbooks can make a dense subject matter more accessible to students, they can promote student engagement and active learning, and for policy-related subjects, they can help students see how academic scholarship is both informed by and informs, policy and practice.

This article will proceed as follows. The first section provides some background on the history and present use of the textbook in political science. This is followed by a discussion of the author's own experience of writing a textbook and then using it for teaching a new module in the field of international security and conflict studies. The

aim is to reflect on the conditions under which textbook-supported teaching can be effective in promoting active learning and meeting course-specific learning outcomes. Drawing on this experience, a survey, and a discussion of the extant literature on active learning and student engagement, a theory of successful textbook-supported teaching practice in political science is proposed. Finally, the concluding section summarizes the argument, suggests fruitful avenues for further pedagogical research in this area, and points to some general recommendations for textbook-supported teaching practice in political science.

The use of textbooks in political science

A "textbook" is a published monograph that is targeted primarily at students, and occasionally at practitioners or novice researchers in a field. Within higher education settings, textbooks are often targeted at undergraduates. Textbooks are frequently edited and/or coauthored, but occasionally they are single-authored. Textbooks may include supplementary materials such as a glossary, and in this way act as general reference works. What all politics textbooks have in common, irrespective of their specialism, is that they seek to bring an eclectic, yet related, group of questions and themes under a common umbrella in a way that is both accessible and engaging.

Given that political science consolidated as a distinct academic discipline during the 1900s, and in the absence of formal textbooks, classic works, such as Morgenthau's "Politics Among Nations" (1985), John Rawls' "A Theory of Justice" (2005), or Bull's "Anarchical Society" (2012) were book-format texts that were available to educators, inspiring lectures and classroom discussions. Although these monographs did not display the pedagogical features we associate with textbooks today, they may have served a similar kind of purpose to present-day textbooks. Early political science *text*books, i.e., books that expressly presented themselves as textbooks and were marketed as such, did not emerge until the latter half of the twentieth century. Throughout the 1990s and against the backdrop of dramatically transformed world politics, textbook-publishing really began to take off. Examples of texts published in this era include Helena Catt's "Democracy in Practice" (1999) and Bealey et al.'s "Elements in Political Science" (1999).

Textbook theorising and the politics textbook

What are textbooks actually for? "Textbook theorizing" is the reflection on the purpose of textbooks and the conditions under which textbooks serve this purpose well. Thomas Kuhn (Kuhn 1970, quoted in Tanner 1999, 127) suggests that the purpose of the textbook is to describe accepted theory and to illustrate its applications. Transcribed for political science, this suggests the purpose of a textbook is to present a range of theories, perspectives, and (methodological) approaches, and to show how these can be applied to political phenomena and policy problems. Textbook producers, in turn, say textbooks should provide a coherent and comprehensible structure for a subject matter and link it to the modes of instruction and classroom activities (Boostrom 2001). Thus, the textbook is intrinsically tied to what happens outside and beyond the bounds of the text.

Given the theoretical utility of the textbook, it is interesting to note that textbooks have been met with considerable skepticism by education scholars and practitioners. This skepticism typically falls into one of two categories. The first type of skepticism revolves around its intrinsic scholarly value; the second, about its role as a pedagogical tool. The former stems from "academia's disregard for textbooks and textbook writing, a disregard founded on the belief that textbooks are merely derivative and not original contributions to scholarship" (Boostrom 2001, 230).

The second relates to the "dumbing down" thesis. The effectiveness of textbook-assisted teaching has engaged education scholars in the United States at least since the early 1990s, when educators feared that textbooks might be "designed for the lowest common denominator" and risked "dumbing down" the subject matter (Altbach 1991, 1). On the other hand, Smith (1988, 28) suggests that "more difficult does not always mean better", discussing a "smartening up" agenda for textbooks in secondary school teaching following the emergence of a widespread perception that textbooks had promoted mediocrity in education by making the subject matter accessible to "less able" students. The idea, Smith notes, was that more intellectually demanding texts would serve to raise the bar. Smith (1988) notes this approach risks leaving some learners behind, which runs counter to the purpose of the textbook as a tool for the uncomplicated acquisition of concepts and analytical skills that allow all students to build confidence.

The textbook industry is itself a political terrain. For example, Atchison (2017, 187–188) explores the role of textbooks as "normalising texts" that "shape not just *what* students think about a subject but *how* they think about it". This speaks directly to the "dumbing down" thesis: another reason for the widespread perception of textbooks as vehicles of "dumbing down" may be rooted in the experience of the North American secondary school context in the 1990s, where the censorship of controversial material was regarded as a principal reason for greater blandness within textbooks, and reduced exposure to intellectually stimulating questions (Tanner 1999). Exploring the political economy of the textbook industry, Wong and Loveless (1991) and Keith (1991) find that textbooks need to be financially viable and that publishers play a gatekeeping role in this regard: "Textbooks are significant economically, as well as ideologically and pedagogically" (Keith 1991, 43). In the United States, textbooks account for at a minimum three quarters of pupils' exposure, in school, to written text. Not only does this mean that there is a huge market for textbooks at the elementary and secondary levels, but also that the politics surrounding textbooks are particularly salient. While the stakes are not as high within higher education given that textbooks do not make up such a large proportion of set texts, it is worth bearing in mind that similar socio-political dynamics may be at play in determining which textbooks get commissioned, published, and incorporated within course syllabi.

Using a politics textbook: a case study

The discussion below draws on the author's experience writing a textbook and then designing and delivering a module based on the textbook. The textbook was published in 2022 and the first group of students taking the course were enrolled in the academic year 2022–23. A student survey, designed for the purposes of this research, was

conducted in the academic year 2023–24.[1] The module is an elective that is open to undergraduate students enrolled in the Department of Political Science at University College London (UCL) as well as affiliate students and students from other departments at UCL. In 2022–23 the cohort consisted of three seminar groups, with 63 students enrolled in the module overall. UCL receives a high volume of applications relative to its annual intake. For example, the BSc in Politics and International Relations requires a triple A at A-Level for entry into the programme. Consequently, the cohort was largely made up of very ambitious, talented students who were eager to learn. Students in our department tend to choose their modules very carefully, meaning that students typically arrive in the classroom well informed and with a genuine interest in the subject matter.

In many ways, therefore, the deployment of a textbook was certainly no requirement for successful module delivery. Nevertheless, the case still lends itself well for probing the causal mechanism at play, the "leveraging effect" of textbooks. The case study below describes the way in which textbook-assisted teaching contributed to student learning, focusing on how the text assisted teaching and learning. Given that the deployment of the textbook leveraged student learning in this case it is plausible that the leveraging effect may be even greater in other settings. The below section reflects on the author's experience using the text for a complete teaching cycle in 2022–23, including course delivery and student assessment, and course delivery (with assessment in progress at the time of writing) in 2023–24. The excerpts from the student survey discussed below are summarized in Table 1.

The features of the text

The textbook referred to in the discussion below is titled "Understanding Humanitarian Protection". The book was commissioned with a view to filling a gap in the market for textbooks in security and conflict studies. The textbook is structured in three parts: the origins of humanitarianism and the human rights regime; key actors; and the responsibilities of these actors in the humanitarian domain. The parts build on each other, in that they explore similar topics from different perspectives. For example, students encounter the principle of neutrality and humanitarianism in the chapters on the history of humanitarianism (part one), humanitarian actors (part two), and international responses to conflict and humanitarian emergencies (part three). In this way, students encounter similar problems and dilemmas from various angles within each of the three parts and across all of the chapters, allowing them to revisit ideas and concepts and gradually build on their knowledge – learning through "spiralling upwards".[2]

The book uses textboxes that explore individual concepts or cases of humanitarian crisis in more detail. The textboxes in chapter one discuss core concepts, for example "humanitarian intervention". The textboxes in subsequent chapters discuss cases. For example, a textbox for chapter four on states and regional organizations discusses historical peacekeeping efforts in Somalia and the role of the African Union, while a textbox contained within chapter seven discusses international efforts to avert a deeper crisis in Kenya following the post-elections violence of 2007–2008. The examples are drawn from different parts of the world to expose students to a variety of cases.

Table 1. Excerpts from the student survey.

Please describe your engagement with the textbook over the course of the term, for example:
  a. Did you use the textbook a little, sometimes, or all the time?
  b. Did you read the chapters in full or in part?
  c. Did you read the chapters in chronological order?
  d. Did you read the chapters prior the class or later on?
  e. Are you planning to use the book in preparation for your essay?
	I found it very helpful as a first resource to use when planning my essay because it provided a good summary of the main arguments
	I used the book as a point of reference for the course and will be using it in preparation for the essay. I did not read the chapters in chronological order but I did read it prior to class.
	I engaged with the textbook some of the time, mostly to get a general overview of the topic before diving into the specific readings. I read the chapters in order, usually in full, prior to the class and the other readings.
	The textbook became particularly handy when trying to gain further understanding of seminar and lectures. When there is something in particular that I hadn't grasped completely in the seminar or the lecture, I find myself resorting to the textbook as the most reliable source.

Please describe the features of the textbook you found useful, and explain why you found them useful, for example:
  a. The pedagogical features of the book (the glossary, the summary points, the questions for reflection, the textboxes);
  b. The way in which the textbook discussed the subject matter.
	I liked that each chapter provided with the necessary context and knowledge to have a general understanding of its topic while allowing to go more in depth through other readings
	The textbook covers the topics extremely well without going too in depth, but still not in a simplistic manner. I felt like I was getting the information I needed so then I could make my own judgements.
	I found the summary points useful (makes a lot of content easier to interpret) … The textbook discusses the subject matter in a nuanced, yet easier to understand manner, making it ideal for students, I particularly liked how the chapters were broken down into different sections
	the textbook discusses the subject matter from all points of view which I like
	the concepts and theories, ideas were very foreign and so reading a clear summary made all the blurry technical middle more clear

Please describe the way in which your engagement with the textbook interacted with your learning journey on this module:
  a. Your level of interest in the subject matter;
  b. Your level of interest in the core and additional readings;
  c. Your level of understanding of the subject matter;
  d. Your level of understanding of the core and additional readings;
  e. Your confidence with regard to the assessment on this module;
  f. Your career goals and aspirations.
	It improved my confidence in regard to the assessment because it provided a good overview of the debate surrounding my question and also pointed to further readings which I completed
	I'm highly interested in the subject matter and the textbook matters [sic] reinforced that
	the textbook was at times more beneficial than the other readings
	made the core and additional readings easier to understand … peaked [sic] my interest in potentially pursuing a career dealing with subject matter discussed during the course (e.g., working for the UN)'
	This textbook engaged me more in the subject matter, and better helped me in understanding the course better, but most importantly it helped me with the assessment.
	The textbook definitely helped my confidence in the module and better understanding of the other readings. It also helped me read other works more productively, acting as a kind of guide for approaching the broader literature.

In acknowledging that learning also means acquiring a new vocabulary, the textbook also includes a glossary explaining key terms. A good understanding of key terms is particularly important in political science given that key terms may have contested meanings. For example, the term "intervention" can be understood as military intervention by a state

for purposes that may or may not involve humanitarian objectives, or it can be understood as action by third parties, which may include nonmilitary measures such as sanctions or diplomacy, for the purposes of protecting civilians. It is important for students to know that the meaning of "intervention" can vary, if they are to appreciate the politically charged, contested nature of the language surrounding the central ethical, security, and policy debates in this field.

The textbook is committed to diversity and inclusiveness in all its forms. This meant paying attention to the representativeness of the voices included in the discussion within the chapters. The textbook draws on non-Western and critical perspectives. It refers to historical cases form different parts of the world and it explores the ways that regional politics shape international responses to crises against a backdrop of colonial history and historically unequal power relationships.

Course delivery and textbook-assisted teaching

The course engages with the origins of the international humanitarian protection regime, its central actors, and the main responsibilities of those actors. The module aims to familiarize students with protection practices and to allow them to evaluate normative arguments and assess international policy.[3] The course is designed in a way that reflects a constructivist pedagogy (Tenenbaum et al 2001) in that it emphasizes arguments, discussion, and debates; explores conceptual conflicts and dilemmas; and prioritizes meaning-making through the application of abstract ideas to practical cases.

The course is structured in a way that mirrors the structure of the book, with each chapter of the book corresponding to a weekly lecture and seminar. The reading is divided into "recommended", "essential", and "further" reading. The week's chapter from the textbook is the "recommended" reading for each week. This is followed by two "essential" readings each week. The list of additional, "recommended" texts is longer, in the region of 30–40 texts. In this way, students are free to engage with each week's textbook chapter, but are also encouraged to engage with other texts. The literature includes a mix of conceptual/background texts, texts advancing empirical arguments, texts engaging with normative questions, and case studies. Students are provided with written or verbal instructions for accessing readings electronically through the university library.

The classroom activities are mixed, and include group presentations, a classroom debate, and a simulation. The assessment is a take-home essay. Students are provided with a selection of essay questions drawn from the textbook, ensuring congruence between course design, the literature, classroom activities, and assessment.

Teaching effectiveness and textbook-assisted teaching and learning

The UK's Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) describes "teaching quality" as "teaching that provides an appropriate level of contact, stimulation and challenge, and which encourages student engagement and effort" (Department for Education 2017). The TEF uses quantitative data to assess teaching quality and other aspects of teaching that make up "teaching excellence" within that framework. The quantification of teaching quality in this way is however contentious, not least because it may create

unintended incentives (Kallio, Kallio, and Grossi 2017) and stifle innovation by creating an environment where educators and institutions are focused solely on meeting criteria, rather than taking responsibility for their teaching outcomes in a reflective, holistic kind of way (Gunn 2018).

Although it is useful to think about whether textbook supported teaching can help yield better results in line with indicators established by the TEF, it is interesting therefore to consider whether textbook-assisted teaching also boosts teaching effectiveness defined in more general terms. Typically, teaching that is of a high standard is perceived to encompass high levels of student support, pedagogic innovation, strong course design, and to result in positive student outcomes in terms of further study and employability (Gunn 2018, 134). To this list one might add the extent to which teaching and learning activities contribute to the achievement of course-specific learning outcomes. In more general terms, one could consider the extent to which a textbook promotes learning, defined as "change in knowledge, understanding, skills and attitudes brought about by experience and reflection upon that experience" (Brown, Bull, and Pendlebury 1997, 21). Learning can thus be conceptualized as a "qualitative change in a person's view of reality" (Ramsden 2003, 7).

Although disentangling the discrete effects of the textbook from other dimensions of course design and delivery known to positively affect teaching effectiveness may be difficult, it is worth considering how textbook-assisting teaching can complement good teaching practice. Other factors known to positively influence course design and delivery include the use of active learning techniques such as simulations or debates that increase student interest, excitement, and self-efficacy (Hendrickson 2019), within-course review of the module and flexible accommodation around student requirements (Lau 2022), and an assessment framework that is conducive to critical thinking by keeping summative assessment to a minimum (Phillips 2017).

Student engagement with the textbook and the leveraging effect

Student survey responses suggested that students' use of the textbook varied; while one student replied they used the text "*all the time*", another student used it "*sometimes*", and another stated they engaged with the text "*occasionally*". The survey suggested that the way in which students used the text also varied. While some students read the text prior to the class, others read it later on, or both. One student, using the textbook as preparation for engagement with the core readings, suggested: "*I engaged with the textbook some of the time, mostly to get a general overview of the topic before diving into the specific readings. I read the chapters in order, usually in full, prior to the class and the other readings.*" Another student preferred using the text to support their learning following on from seminars and lectures: "*The textbook became particularly handy when trying to gain further understanding of seminar and lectures. When there is something in particular that I hadn't grasped completely in the seminar or the lecture, I find myself resorting to the textbook as the most reliable source.*" While most students read the chapters in full, some students preferred to read them in part. Finally, while some students read them in chronological order, others did not.

By mapping out a complex subject matter to students prior to their engagement with core texts drawn from peer-reviewed journal or academic monographs, students developed the confidence required to engage meaningfully with a complex subject matter. For example, Week 7 discusses mediation, diplomacy, and sanctions. The textbook chapter for that week discusses international approaches to conflict management ranging from persuasion and quiet diplomacy to coercive diplomacy and sanctions. By mapping out social practices around conflict prevention and mediation, the chapter allows students to engage with two research articles, on regional responses to the crisis in Gambia following the elections of 2016 (Ateku 2020) and a quantitative study of the effectiveness of smart sanctions in general (Park and Choi 2020). The linking role of the textbook was evidenced by the survey, with one student suggesting: "*I liked that each chapter provided with the necessary context and knowledge to have a general understanding of its topic while allowing to go more in depth through other readings*". Leveraging thus works through several pathways:

1. First, the engagement with the chapter provides students with a rationale for engaging with the specialist literature (why is preventive diplomacy important? What is the link between diplomacy, mediation, and sanctions?). One of the students stated that: "*The textbook definitely helped my confidence in the module and better understanding of the other readings. It also helped me read other works more productively, acting as a kind of guide for approaching the broader literature.*" With the textbook chapter as a primer, students are much more likely to understand how the various elements hang together and why they are being asked to think about the efficacy of sanctions or the role of regional organizations with regard to preventive diplomacy. This understanding, in turn, contributes to a cognitive disposition where students become more interested in the subject matter; they have been provided with a rough map of the topography of the field, and understand what a "case" is an instance of, and why it matters to study it.

2. Second, the textbook also provides students with the vocabulary they require to engage with the literature. For example, the chapter defines key terms including preventive diplomacy, coercive diplomacy, and humanitarian diplomacy, and explains variations and types of sanctions, including comprehensive sanctions and targeted sanctions, as well as variations thereof (such as asset freezes, travel bans, or embargos). Again, this was supported by the survey. One of the students suggested that: "*The textbook covers the topics extremely well without going too in depth, but still not in a simplistic manner. I felt like I was getting the information I needed so then I could make my own judgements.*"

3. Third, the thematic organization of the chapters and the inclusion of pedagogical features provide a coherent framework for the students, allowing them to orientate themselves in the subject matter. Ample signposting and markers promote comprehension of a new subject matter. The survey suggested that students found the summary points a particularly helpful feature of the textbook: "*I found the summary points helpful … I think [the textbook] explained the week's topic in a clear and concise manner, before giving precise examples in the text box.*"

Echoing this, another student stated: "*I found the summary points very useful as well as the textboxes that provides empirical examples of the theory*". Another stated that: "*I found the summary points useful (makes a lot of content easier to interpret)*". The chapters provide students with valuable clues as to how to treat the subject matter they are being asked to engage with (how should texts be read? What role does the academic literature play in informing the discussion? What are the key ideas to look out for?). One of the students completing the survey noted further that: "*The textbook discusses the subject matter in a nuanced, yet easier to understand manner, making it ideal for students, I particularly liked how the chapters were broken down into different sections*". After having read the textbook chapter, students understand the role that the academic literature plays because the chapter explicitly points out to them what the key debates are. Again, this was evidenced by the survey, with one of the students stating that the textbook "*made the core and additional readings easier to understand*". One of the students stated: " *… the textbook discusses the subject matter from all points of view which I like*".

The textbook was of utility to different groups of students and worked as a primer across the board. One of the students noted that "*the textbook was at times more beneficial than the other readings*", suggesting that the text did work as a primer, as intended. For students with prior knowledge of the subject matter or the resources in terms of time to engage closely with all of the core texts, the chapters allowed them to more effectively engage with the additional literature listed on the module syllabus. For example, one student who stated they "*could grasp the subject matter quite well*" also noted that "*I'm highly interested in the subject matter and the textbook matters reinforced that*".

For students who were struggling, the chapter provided a succinct overview of the central issue, allowing them to fully participate in the classroom activities. For example, one student suggested that because their degree subject was not politics, the module was challenging to them. Noting that the summary points "*were particularly helpful*" the student suggested that given that "*the concepts and theories, ideas were very foreign and so reading a clear summary made all the blurry technical middle more clear*". In this way, the use of the textbook catered to different student groups, both to students with the prerequisite knowledge as well as students who – for varied reasons perhaps including disability or caring responsibilities – may not have been able to engage with the additional literature to the same extent. Thus, the use of the textbook also supports inclusiveness in a way that imposes no costs on other groups of students or the instructor.

Textbook-assisted teaching and classroom dynamics

Teaching using the textbook resulted in strong student engagement and visibly high student satisfaction with the module. "*I'm highly interested in the subject matter and the textbook matters reinforced that*", one of the students suggested. Given that existing studies (see Schapper and Mayson 2010) suggest that research-active educators are able

to convey their excitement in the classroom, it may be that a textbook authored by their instructor holds more appeal for students. However, the bridging mechanisms outlined above (interest – vocabulary – signposting) should work in other contexts provided instructors can capture the interest of their students in other ways.

Students actively participated in the classroom activities and appeared genuinely interested in the subject matter, factors known to be conducive to learning through meaning-making as espoused by constructivist approaches (Biggs and Tang 2011; O'Connor 2022). For example, a formal group debate exploring the question of whether humanitarian relief organizations should maintain neutrality throughout a conflict was a popular classroom activity that sparked much interest among students and also fostered peer-to-peer learning through small group preparation for the debate. The preparation for the debate and the activity itself encouraged students to engage with key concepts around core principles of humanitarian relief aid and to acquire and develop a new vocabulary allowing them to express their ideas. In applying those ideas to a range of arguments and engaging with the rebuttals generated by their peers, students were able to add layer onto layer of learning through meaning-making. The classroom debates that unfolded were of an exceptionally high standard and demonstrated that students were now able to critically engage at depth with the subject matter. The textbook had provided the students with a resource allowing them to acquire the language they required to comprehend, reason, and then articulate their thoughts. The textbook reading for that week was Chapter 6, "Humanitarian Organizations and Civil Society". The chapter provides simple definitions for the four humanitarian principles – humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence – before discussing how these principles have been interpreted by relief organizations including the International Committee of the Red Cross and Red Crescent (ICRC) and Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF). By providing an on-ramp to the subject matter, the chapter for that week allowed students to engage meaningfully with the assigned readings for that week.[4]

Engagement with the textbook, assessment, and learning outcomes

A significant number of students stated they were using the textbook for essay preparation. "*I found it very helpful as a first resource to use when planning my essay because it provided a good summary of the main arguments*", one of the students suggested. Another student stated: "*It improved my confidence in regard to the assessment because it provided a good overview of the debate surrounding my question and also pointed to further readings which I completed.*" In terms of assessment, the quality of the work submitted in 2022–23 was impressive and reflected the students' close engagement with the subject matter. Students were asked to write an argumentative essay on a question chosen from a list of questions. The questions were either empirical or normative, or both,[5] and aimed to align constructively with the learning outcomes (Biggs 2014). A number of the essays went well beyond the reading list, drawing on their own review of the wider literature.

While it is difficult to disentangle the effects of other course design and delivery features, the availability of the textbook to students provided a means for overcoming the initial barrier to independent learning that exists when students are confronted with

the problem of where to begin. The textbook provided a resource that also acted as a reference work to guide them as they were drafting their essays. At the same time, the use of the textbook did not limit students' engagement with the wider literature or their own curiosity about the subject matter. There was also no evidence to suggest that students were using the textbook strategically (Biggs 1987) as a shortcut to satisfactory assessment completion.

The textbook also appears to have promoted student interest in terms of career goals. One of the students stated that engagement with the textbook "*peaked [sic] my interest in potentially pursuing a career dealing with the subject matter discussed during the course (e.g., working for the UN)*". Interestingly, toward the end of the module students appeared to have developed a much deeper appreciation of the ramifications of armed conflict, the human suffering brought about by complex humanitarian emergencies, and the responsibilities of international actors in that context. Not only had the students acquired more knowledge and better understanding, but there appeared to have been significant shifts in their attitudes, suggesting a deep level of student learning over the course of the module.

Using textbooks effectively in political science

In line with Lijphart's (1971) conceptualization of hypothesis-generating case studies, which "start out with a more or less vague notion of possible hypotheses, and attempt to formulate definite hypotheses to be tested subsequently among a larger number of cases" (Lijphart 1971, 692), this section reflects on the author's experience above in an effort to identify causal relationships that may be generalizable and hold true for textbook-assisted teaching in other pedagogical settings. Innovative pedagogy promotes active learning (Copridge, Uttamchandani, and Birdwell 2021), the development of communication and group collaboration skills, and employability. Importantly, innovative pedagogy prioritizes "deep" rather than "surface" approaches to learning (Ramsden 2003, 80). While learning outcomes vary, many politics courses have in common that they seek not only to familiarize students with the subject matter, but to hone students' critical and analytical thinking skills, develop in students the ability to apply their knowledge to cases, and to develop in students the ability to ask novel questions, identify a gap in the literature, and possibly also to devise plans for further research and scholarship in the field.

Textbooks have the potential to promote the aims outlined above if they display certain pedagogical features and when they are used actively in the classroom setting. Textbooks may not be useful in all circumstances – part of the job of the instructor is to determine when and where using a textbook is appropriate and beneficial. As a rule, textbook-supported teaching is likely to be effective when its use can reasonably promote course-specific learning outcomes; when the textbook aligns well with the module in substantive terms; and when the textbook is used actively by the module leader or seminar tutor (Table 2).

Textbooks should promote inclusion and diversity and these principles should be reflected in the list of texts that form the bibliography and the list of recommended texts. They should also be reflected in the choice of case studies and examples referred

Table 2. A theory of effective textbook-assisted teaching.

Variables 1. Textbook design	
	• The text is organized logically and coherently
	• Clear, accessible language
	• Inclusive, diverse, and representative
	• Discussion of key questions
	• Inclusion of a critical summary of seminal texts
	• Frequent use of examples and cases to illustrate key points
	• Inclusion of pedagogical devices such as summary points and textboxes
2. Textbook alignment with the module	• Scope/methods matches the module
	• Chapters can be used in a way that maps onto individual weeks
3. Textbook integration with the module	• The textbook is used actively for teaching
	• Students receive instruction on how to engage with the text
	• Students understand how the text or chapter applies to the week's topic
	• The textbook is used actively to structure classroom activities
	• There is good alignment with course assessment

to in the text. The inclusion of some reflection about the way language is constitutive of how we think about a certain topic and the power relationships inherent in these choices adds critical depth to a text. Textbooks should make frequent use of examples and case studies to make abstract concepts more tangible as well as to enliven the discussion. Examples and case studies also serve the purpose of providing a prompt for classroom debates and further exploration of an issue, case, or policy problem. Summary points serve as a very effective tool for reinforcing key ideas and arguments.

Teaching will benefit most from the use of a textbook if the subject matter of the textbook is closely aligned with the topics covered in the course for which the use of a textbook is being considered. If the textbook covers a far greater territory than the module, a nonspecific, blanket reference to a textbook may leave students struggling to determine which parts of the textbook are relevant to their studies. For specialist modules it may therefore be preferable to reference individual chapters of the textbook, rather than providing a general book recommendation that is unlikely to be of much practical use to the students. If, by contrast, the textbook's scope is very narrow, then the textbook may not serve to fulfill its role: to provide a thorough grounding in the subject matter. For these reasons, good congruence between the scope and depth of the textbook and of the module is desirable. If textbooks do their job well, they can expedite students' understanding of the way in which theories and methods can be applied to specific issues and problems, thus freeing up classroom time and providing students with greater confidence as they prepare for coursework activities or assignments.

A good way of using a textbook is to tie the weekly topics and classroom discussion directly to the textbook. This allows the textbook to do its work. This way, the instructor can spend more time exploring the application of the concepts, theories, and issues in more detail. This also enables course conveners to place more advanced readings on the reading list, in the knowledge that students will be well-prepared to engage with those readings in a meaningful way. A good way of integrating the textbook with the course content may be to place individual textbook chapters onto the reading list for each week. This way, students can easily see which chapters relate to a give topic, and how these chapters can assist their understanding. This approach is even more

effective if instructors provide topic summaries that also refer to the key readings, including the textbook, and explain how these readings will be engaged with in class.

The sections above have sought to sketch the basic contours of a theory for the successful use of a politics textbook in a higher education setting, identifying several features of textbooks that may be associated with successful textbook-supported teaching and learning. The evidence gathered from the student survey (although limited given the low response rate to the survey) suggests students can make use of a textbook in ways that significantly supports their learning. Preliminary findings, based on a reflection on the author's own experience of writing a textbook and using it in the classroom, suggest that textbooks can do their job best when the text displays certain pedagogical features associated with the ability to draw in and engage students, when the text aligns well with the subject matter, and when the text is used actively throughout the delivery of the course. For some courses, appropriate textbooks may not yet be available – in such cases, it may be preferable to refer to individual chapters of existing textbooks, although care should be taken to ensure that the chosen chapters work effectively to introduce students to that week's topic and that there is a clear thread for students to follow across weeks.

Conclusions

This article has argued that a textbook, if designed and deployed well, can have a profound, positive impact on teaching and learning. For as long as there have been formal educational settings, there have been textbooks. Political science classes have relied on academic monographs not intended principally for the student body for teaching for a long time, and, given a dearth of textbooks in many areas of what can only be described as a young academic discipline, the norm has been to repurpose academic research articles and monographs in this way. This practice has meant that the use of formal textbooks in political science is still a relatively new phenomenon. However, with a growing number of specialist texts now readily available, the fear of "dumbing down" the subject matter may be misplaced. In fact, failing to use quality textbooks where they map on to the subject matter well may be to overlook a powerful tool that can boost the quality of the learning experience for students.

The experience of the case study described above supports the theory of a leveraging effect, allowing for some preliminary insights into the use of textbooks and their impact on teaching. Three main contributing factors to the successful deployment of a textbook were identified. First, the features of the textbook itself: a good textbook should be structured coherently, should make good use of vivid examples and case study illustrations to reinforce central concepts, and should encourage students to engage with a wide variety of sources and to take on board a diverse range of perspectives. Second, when there is a good fit and high congruence between the subject matter of the textbook and the topics covered in the course. Finally, when the textbook is used in an active way, whereby individual chapters are suggested readings for each week and where, ideally, there is some description or explanation of how students should engage with the textbook in the context of the other readings they need to complete for that week. Experience suggests that when a textbook is used in such a way it can increase levels of student engagement, improve the quality of submitted coursework, and boost student satisfaction.

Several implications follow from these findings. First, textbook-assisted teaching does not result in a "dumbing down" of the course or "lowest common denominator teaching". Rather, the active use of a textbook can be an immensely valuable dimension of course delivery and can work as a lever to allow students to engage meaningfully with the secondary literature and difficult-to-grapple-with theories and concepts. Given that the higher education textbook market continues to expand, new and innovative resources are becoming available to educators which, if used appropriately, can work to assist teaching practice in valuable ways. Second, the use of textbooks can allow students to better understand the relationship between scholarship, policy, and practice by describing the ways the scholarship has been shaped by policy problems and, vice versa, by illustrating how epistemic communities shape international norms and policymaking (notwithstanding that this may not be the case for textbooks where the link to policy and practice is more obscure). In a higher education setting in which students consistently demand greater exposure to the ways in which the theories they engage with are applicable to real-world, pressing policy problems, tools that allow educators to bridge the scholarship-practice divide are certainly welcome.

This article described a range of pedagogical opportunities that textbooks may provide and has sought to provide a basis for further research into the possibilities associated with textbook-supported teaching practice in political science higher education. There are ample opportunities for further research on textbooks. For example, future research could explore whether most textbooks actually display the ideal features of a textbook as outlined above. Future research might also explore the way in which technology can be used to further improve textbook-assisted teaching effectiveness. Brandle's (2018, 2022) research suggests there is reason for cautious optimism with regard to Open Educational Resources, a public digital library simulating the role of the traditional textbook. Similarly, Slocum-Schaffer (2021) finds that when textbooks are available in digital format, this impacts student engagement positively. In addition, further research might explore the ways in which virtual learning environments, online repositories, and interactive online tools (potentially supported by artificial intelligence systems) might be deployed in tandem with the textbook. Many possibilities spring to mind – time will tell which direction higher education in political science will take, and what the future holds in store for these technologies and the idea of the textbook itself.

Notes

1. The survey was circulated through the university's virtual learning environment, Moodle, in the academic year 2023–24. All of the students enrolled in the module were invited to submit anonymous responses. Students were informed that by participating in the survey they were consenting to the use of the responses for scholarly purposes. 9 students out of 38 provided responses to the survey (a response rate of 23.68%). Research ethics approval was sought and obtained prior to the start of the survey. The project was approved by UCL Social & Historical Sciences and the approval number for this project was SHSPol-2324-001-1.
2. The author thanks Cathy Elliott for suggesting the term "spiralling up" to describe this form of learning.
3. The key learning outcomes were: "Be able to describe, explain, and assess conflict and its humanitarian consequences and consider, compare, and contrast international response measures"; "Evaluate normative arguments about international responses to conflict and

humanitarian emergency", "Formulate, assess, and evaluate international policy designed to address humanitarian crisis".
4. The author wishes to thank JP Salter for suggesting the term "on-ramp" to describe the role of the textbook in priming students for deeper engagement with the subject matter.
5. For example, "In your view, have norms of protection influenced international responses to recent conflicts and humanitarian emergencies?"; "Should humanitarian relief agencies maintain neutrality throughout a conflict?"; "Are targeted sanctions a good response to conflict and humanitarian emergency?".

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