

Lev Szentkirályi Teaching Philosophy

Imagining my students hunkering down in their various study spaces to tackle readings on cosmopolitan justice and rights of undocumented migrants, or neorealist IR theory and protectionist trade policies, or evidence-based academic writing or revision as part of a non-linear writing process, I can sense their distraction growing, and that with a shrewd calculus their reading turns into skimming—a habit that eventually motivates their disregard of inconvenient reading assignments altogether. After all, students know full well that the next time their class meets their instructor will clarify all that they *should* have gained from the readings, and will identify what they should know *for the exam*.

From my years of observations as a teaching assistant, and my experience as an instructor of the inevitable lulls in the engagement of my students, this trend is altogether common: an unconstructive cycle of teachers anticipating that their students will arrive to class ill prepared—or worse, that they will not even have tried to engage the material—and of students expecting that their mere presence in class will sufficiently earn them a respectable grade. What is most discouraging about such dynamics is that many students come to believe that loose understandings and marginal efforts are the hallmark of a successful college career, and that educators whose responsibility it is to establish the benchmark of achievement all too often acquiesce and simply lecture on. In my estimation, however, there is no better way to breed apathy for the subject matter among students, and no more effective means by which to inculcate low standards (for student and teacher alike), than to ignore this problem.

And so it is with these concerns that I approach each semester with the primary objective of getting my students engaged—a goal that I believe is best accomplished by a student-centered approach toward teaching and learning, which parallels a commitment to inclusive excellence. In concert with this student-centered pedagogical approach, I am also committed to providing my students a well-rounded, liberal—and ultimately interdisciplinary—education that helps them to develop essential life skills.

Student-Centered Pedagogy and Inclusive Excellence

I have found that making abstract and technical course material resonate with my students, and enhancing student engagement, depends in large measure on conscientiously adapting to students' diverse needs, teaching to their different strengths, and designing creative and engaging curricula. For instance, I rely heavily on a discussion-based lecturing style (which resembles a tempered version of the Socratic method) to push my students to reconstruct the central arguments in assigned readings—as a precursor to critically evaluating their meaning and merit. While this approach may appeal to students who excel at critical thinking, abstract reasoning, and impromptu class discussions, I try to accommodate those who may be more reserved or introspective by consistently allowing time for quiet, critical reflection on specific aspects of course material via brief in-class writing assignments. I commonly ask students, e.g., to think of a problematic implication of the truth of an author's central claim, or to draw on their personal experiences to identify a weakness in the author's argument. In giving students the chance to formulate their thoughts by responding to a specific question prompt, I have found that they are much more likely to share their perspectives with the class. Similarly, I regularly use classroom technologies to help students prepare for subsequent class discussions, such as having them collaboratively annotate assigned readings with MIT's *Nota Bene* program or to critique each other's posts on our class discussion board.

Whether it is accommodating my experiential learners who process information by applying course material to concrete examples and real-world states of affairs, or my technologically-savvy students and visual learners whose interest and success depends on dynamic and interactive multimedia lectures, or my students who are unfamiliar with the subject matter or have learning disabilities who thrive in slower-paced learning environments, the goal is the same: to recognize and adapt to the unique needs of each

of my students. This student-centered approach to teaching and learning often requires scheduling private review sessions with students who find that class meetings and regular office hours fail to afford them sufficient opportunity to ask questions about course material, adjusting the content and pace of my lectures, and revising the focus and stringency of class assignments and measures of success.

In my experience, by creating a dialogue with students about their needs and expectations and goals, and by constantly reevaluating how I can better promote their individual academic success, students come to trust that they have an advocate in me—which, in turn, enhances their sense of purpose and self-worth, and creates a safe learning environment that invariably motivates greater student engagement. And this is to say that it is my firm belief that the achievement of inclusive excellence parallels a commitment to student-centered pedagogy and, thus, must begin in our classrooms and our design of course curricula.

Interdisciplinary Curriculum Design

Most of my students are non-political-science majors who have varying degrees of proficiency with the subjects I teach; and their life experiences, pre-existing beliefs, and discipline-specific studies have shaped distinct perspectives that they inherently bring to bear on any given class discussion or course assignment. Yet, rather than view this diversity as an impediment to student learning and a burden on curriculum design, I embrace it as a unique opportunity for pedagogical growth and student success. For interdisciplinary courses not only appeal to the sundry academic interests and backgrounds of any given class of students, and thus better enable me to teach to my students' different strengths, but they also foster a greater diversity of ideas, and thus promote a more inclusive and dynamic learning environment that enriches our collective learning process. Motivated no doubt by my diverse teaching record and interdisciplinary research interests, I take seriously the importance of a well-rounded, liberal education that motivates students to think critically about a broad range of subjects.

Government and Capitalism in the U.S. For instance, my Government and Capitalism course combines American political economy with international relations and normative political theory. Students first explore historical domestic policy decisions that established our contemporary capitalist institutions, and the political influence that economic special interests have had on these developments. Students then study how these domestic policies have shaped and continue to influence economic foreign policy decisions and the promotion of liberal capitalist principles abroad—examining, e.g., the influence of American MNCs on U.S. foreign direct investment or the globalization of liberal trade policies. Finally, students examine various normative problems with the effects of contemporary domestic and global capitalism. Accordingly, whether my students are majoring in history, economics, business, international affairs, philosophy, or political science; and regardless of what subfield my political science majors have chosen; by introducing students to a host of issue-areas in different areas of study, this class strives to be relevant to their discipline-specific studies.

Global Justice. With similar aims, my Global Justice course blends instruction in principles of academic argumentation and writing with the study of diverse normative problems of international politics, such as the exodus of Syrian refugees and the rights of migrants, alleviating global poverty, and distributing the costs of global climate change. This university-wide course offering encourages students to bring their discipline-specific studies and interests to bear on the ethical issues the class explores, and to integrate the principles of academic writing they learn in my class with their knowledge of the conventions of writing in their particular fields of study. Yet, beyond helping students to develop transferrable skills of rhetorical analysis, information literacy, reading comprehension, critical thinking, and academic argumentation, this course also challenges students to think about the broader ethical implications of their discipline-specific studies, their civic responsibilities as writers and educated citizens, and their obligations to improve the welfare of underprivileged and marginalized groups.

Developing Transferable Life Skills

Communicating across lines of difference. The success of my efforts to validate the existing knowledge of my students and to create an inclusive learning space in which students—regardless of their academic background or familiarity with the subject matter—feel comfortable to engage in class discussions, depends on their mutual respect for each other and their tolerance of conflicting beliefs. In this vein, I strive to impart on my students the importance of questioning even our most fundamental beliefs and considering the reasonableness of antithetical perspectives, as prerequisites to successfully communicating across lines of difference. For instance, I consistently have students write comparative argumentative papers, in which they are required to explain two opposing arguments on a given issue (e.g., the moral merits of development aid, or the plausibility of the democratic peace), and to defend the argument they *disagree* with against possible objections. This is challenging for many students, but is a crucial skill to develop to be able to confidently articulate one’s ideas in the face of opposition and to respectfully engage audiences with divergent convictions.

Thinking critically and writing persuasively. The foregoing skills are themselves, however, predicated on a battery of effective critical-thinking skills, which in my estimation are best refined by having students engage in argumentative academic writing and intensive peer-reviews. My experience teaching introductory and advanced college writing courses with the Program for Writing and Rhetoric (PWR) at CU-Boulder, and my recent research on teaching and learning in political science, have underscored for me that we all too often mistakenly assume that our students have the wherewithal to infer principles of good argumentation, analysis, and writing from their course readings, and to apply these principles in their own coursework. To the contrary, even in my content-based political science courses (as opposed to my dedicated writing courses), I strive to incorporate formal training in various analytical skills, such as deductive and inductive reasoning, understanding cause-and-effect relationships, avoiding logical fallacies, discriminating premises in a text that relate to an author’s central argument from those that constitute subsequent claims (which themselves require justification), identifying and scrutinizing an author’s starting assumptions, and evaluating the evidence with which an author justifies her central claim.

For instance, I routinely assign short writing assignments that ask students to reconstruct the central argument in an assigned reading, in order to identify the author’s starting premises and the various explicit and implicit assumptions the argument makes. Students are then asked to scrutinize the plausibility of these premises and assumptions, which requires them to justify whether or not it is reasonable for the author to posit their truth. Similarly, my blog post assignments require half of the class to critique the position papers that their classmates write in response to a particular question prompt I post. These critiques are themselves position papers, which critically analyze the reasoning and evidence a classmate uses to support her claim and the potentially problematic implications of the truth of her argument.

Valuing constructive criticism. Augmenting these independent writing assignments, I also require my students to review the drafts of each other’s major writing assignments, to provide specific and constructive comments on the strengths and weaknesses of their classmates’ writing projects, and to critically reflect on and respond to the feedback they receive. Further, I require students to demonstrate *how* they incorporate the comments they receive from their peers into their subsequent revisions. Beyond underscoring the value of developing strong analytical and writing skills, the aim of these intensive peer-review workshops is twofold. The first is for students to learn that quality final products generally require several iterations of substantive revision: that success has no quick solution. The second is for students to understand that they should neither be discouraged nor humbled by constructive criticism, but should embrace it as an opportunity to improve their work.