

Lev Szentkirályi Teaching Philosophy

The changes to teaching and learning that the COVID-19 pandemic and CU's shift to remote learning have required have been as substantial as they were abrupt. Faculty have had to swiftly reinvent themselves as educators, revise their curricula and learning objectives and measures of success, develop working knowledge of emerging classroom technologies, and respond with compassion and leniency to the parallel adjustments their students have had to make, as well as the distractions and hardships that they face.

For instance, whereas my teaching style usually leans heavily on discussion-based lectures and multimedia PowerPoint presentations, I have now shifted to bi-weekly Zoom webinars with breakout rooms that allow for more interactive small-group discussions to augment the less-dynamic virtual discussions my students and I can now have. And to mitigate the potential monotony students may experience with synchronous classes and sitting before a computer all day, I offer my students a respite in the middle of the week with a brief screencast lecture instead of a real-time Zoom webinar, which I record with Snagit software and post on Canvas for them to review at their convenience.

Beyond altering the way I deliver course content, since switching to remote learning, I have also been scheduling more regular office hours to accommodate the different time zones in which students are now attending my classes, I have (reluctantly) reduced the required weekly readings, I have eliminated late penalties for major assignments, and I have fundamentally revised the multiple measures of success with which I evaluate the performance of my students.

We are all keenly aware of the broad impacts that our new teaching and learning environments many have on enrollment numbers, retention and graduation rates, placement, and the overall academic experience of our students. Indeed, significant potential barriers to success exist—for both faculty and student alike. And the unique challenges of these last weeks have impressed on me the importance of student-centered pedagogy—of which I am a strong proponent, and which parallels my commitment to inclusive excellence, interdisciplinary teaching, and experiential learning. Together, this pedagogical approach, in my experience, affords students meaningful, personalized academic experiences that help them to develop essential transferrable skills that will serve them well beyond the classroom.

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 seminar-style, discussion-based lecturing style 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, for example, 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 Google Drive or MIT's *Nota Bene* program or to critique each other's posts on our class discussion boards.

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, allowing students to set personalized deadlines for major course assignments, 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 and Embracing the Diversity in My Classroom

Most of the classes I teach, whether content-based or thematic writing courses, have a diverse groups of students with widely varying majors, who also 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.

Environmental Health Science, Policy, and Ethics. For instance, my Environmental Health Science, Policy, and Ethics course combines toxicological sciences with environmental policy and applied ethics. With each issue area—such as pesticides in foods, infectious diseases and emerging pandemics, climate change, antibiotic resistance, and microplastics—students first explore scientific approaches to understand the nature and scope, as well as the causes and effects, of the diverse environmental health hazards we engage. (Moreover, students quickly learn the significant limitations of the research methods that define scientific and social scientific research, and the influence that corporate special interests can have on scientific research.) Students then study existing public policies and environmental laws that aim to address these different health hazards—learning how scientific knowledge shapes the policies and regulations we implement. Finally, students examine diverse ethical implications of these contemporary environmental health hazards—developing a working understanding of broad moral theories and principles to enable students to identify key stakeholders and their interests and moral responsibilities, to critique policy alternatives, and to articulate the role that science should have in creating public policy. Accordingly, whether my students are majoring in the natural sciences, social sciences, or humanities, and regardless of what subfield my Political Science and Environmental Studies majors have chosen, by introducing students to a host of issue-areas in different disciplines of study, this interdisciplinary 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.

Inclusive Excellence in My Curriculum Design and 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 (for example, the moral merits of development aid, or the effects of greenwashing, or the feasibility of standards of corporate social responsibility), 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 an author uses to justify 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.

Commitment to experiential learning. Beyond helping my students to refine their critical-reading and critical-thinking skills, to develop a working understanding of the standards of research, analysis, and writing that they are held to as undergraduates and to which they will be held in their future professional careers, and to improve their abilities to successfully complete independent and collaborative research projects and to articulate their ideas with greater clarity and confidence, as an educator I believe one of my principal obligations is to provide students opportunities to apply abstract course material in tangible and meaningful ways outside of the classroom. As my teaching and research record demonstrate, I take the value of experiential learning quite seriously. I have designed and taught five different service-learning classes in the last three years. For instance, my Fall 2019 *Policy and Ethics of Local Food Insecurity* class worked with the Boulder Valley School District's School Food Program on three different projects to help BVSD promote sustainable food choices, to reduce food waste in our schools, and to mitigate food insecurity in our local community. Also, my Fall 2018 *Climate Change, Environmental Health, and Resilience* class worked with the Foothills United Way and Boulder County on two separate projects to explore how CU can better safeguard its resilience-vulnerable student populations against the effects of environmental disasters (like Boulder's historic 2013 floods), and how the University can help to improve local emergency response planning to make local communities in Boulder County more resilient when environmental disasters do strike.

I also designed a three-week intensive summer global seminar—an interdisciplinary course that blends the empirical study of revolutionary violence with the normative study of just war theory—and I was scheduled to lead a group of 14 undergraduates to Budapest, Hungary this May until Education Abroad preventatively canceled the course due to the COVID-19 pandemic. (I expect to organize this seminar again for Spring 2021.) Further testifying to my commitment to experiential learning, I have received teaching grants to design new service-learning curricula, and I have conducted IRB-approved pedagogical research in my classrooms and presented my findings at premier national research and teaching-and-learning conference on the empirical effects of service-learning opportunities on various metrics of academic success.